

ABSTRACT

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 PORTRAYAL OF THE ICELANDIC FAMILY
 IN TWO NOVELS BY HALLDÓR LAXNESS

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Nobel Prize winning author Halldór Laxness enjoyed using the “typical” Icelandic farmer as his protagonist. Always at his side are his family members, with whom interactions are often very limited and rather reserved. Within the dynamic of this stoic family, there are several discourses to be seen, all of which speak to the state of women and the hierarchy of the family in Iceland during this somewhat depressing time in their history. The minimal presence of voice is apparent throughout the majority of Laxness’ works and is especially present in *Independent People* (1946) and *Paradise Reclaimed* (1960). A general silence from all characters, husbands and wives as well as sons and daughters, is an important element and helps to better understand the culturally reserved Scandinavian people, especially Icelanders.

STOIC FARMERS, SILENT WOMEN: THE PORTRAYAL OF THE ICELANDIC
FAMILY IN TWO NOVELS BY HALLDÓR LAXNESS

By

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Preface – A note on Pronunciation

In all of Laxness' novels in translation, and most Icelandic novels published in translation, there is a note on the pronunciation of Modern Icelandic. Modern Icelandic pronunciation is not easy for native speakers of many other languages, and the alphabet contains several symbols that are not common in most versions of the Latin alphabet. Since I have decided not to transliterate names of people and places, rather keep them true to their original Icelandic spelling, I am adding a brief description of how to pronounce them to aid in reading the thesis and understanding its contents.

Both “eth” (Ð, ð) and “thorn” (Þ, þ) still exist in modern Icelandic:

ð is the voiced *th* sound that exists in the English words *breathe* and *the*

þ is the unvoiced *th* sound that exists in the English words *think* and *thought*

The vowel system is also complicated by the accents to be found over the vowels:

a is pronounced as the *a* in the English word *father*

á is pronounced as the *ow* in the English word *owl*

e is pronounced as the *ai* in the English word *air*

é is pronounced as the *ye* in the English word *yet*

i is pronounced as the *i* in the English word *in*

í is pronounced as the *ee* in the English word *meet*

o is pronounced as the *o* in the English word *open*

ó is pronounced as the *o* in the English word *note*

u is pronounced as the *ü* in the German word *müssen*

ú is pronounced as the *oo* in the English word *school*

ö is pronounced as the *ö* in the German word *hören*

æ is pronounced as the *i* in the English word *high*

y and ý are pronounced as *i* and *í*

There are also several diphthongs in Icelandic

au is pronounced as the *oy* in the English word *boy*

ei and *ey* are pronounced as the *ay* in the English word *hay*

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In 1993 Mari Matsuda, et. al. published the book *Words that Wound*, a work that deals with the damaging effects of assaultive speech. In the flyleaf of the book an important quote comes forth to entice the reader. It reads “Words, like sticks and stones, can assault; they can injure; and they can exclude.” (Matsuda 153) It is a well proven fact that speech, especially in the case of Matsuda, hate speech, can have destructive effects on an individual and a community. It creates “oppressors” and a group of “oppressed” in a harsh manner that, at least within the American debate, is complicated by the First Amendment and what can be said and what should be censored. This is a fascinating debate and is something that is still at the forefront of many people’s minds in the United States, but it also leads to very interesting questions that can be applied to other areas of the world. Not only is the question of what speech can do interesting, but more importantly for this thesis, what happens in the absence of hate speech, like what Matsuda her and counterparts look at; or the absence of speech in general? Is it only speech that has a damaging effect or is the concept of silence in its many forms and facets just as dangerous?

With these questions in mind, I plan to look at the phenomenon of silence in two novels by the Icelandic author Halldór Laxness. Up until today most scholarly work done with regards to Laxness has been to look at his connection with the Icelandic Sagas. Nobody has looked deeper into what his characters say about the cultural norms of the inhabitants of Iceland. In the novels, a vivid picture of Icelanders around the turn of the Twentieth century is painted, and I am setting out to

better understand how these characters, in their family settings, are affected by the silence that surrounds them. To do this, however, I will first look at the concepts of family and silence in a larger, broader perspective in Norden before narrowing down my perspective to focus on Iceland. One of my biggest resources for understanding the Nordic mentality and its values in a more general fashion will be the work of Åke Daun, the author of *The Swedish Mentality*. For those living in the areas to be discussed, silence is a way of life. It is, more or less, the norm. “The silent Swede” is not the only person in the north that practices reserve in the public sphere, though. This silence is unquestioned for anyone native to the Scandinavian area with each country having its own standards and Iceland being still strikingly different from its neighbors. From other perspectives, such as mine from the United States, it provides a basis for an interesting study into the mindset of the Nordics.

It can be argued that silence, quietness, reserve, stoicism and the like are just as dangerous as (aggressive) speech. These traits can be debilitating characteristics to people that possess them, even though their possessors are not aware of the extreme to which they are affected by them on a daily basis. To develop my argument I will turn to an area of the world where silence seems ever-present, the north of Europe.

Norden, a term which will be discussed further below, is the home to a long and deep-seated tradition of silence that is still to be found within the mentality of its inhabitants well into today. I will take a historical perspective of the entirety of Norden to help understand the roots of this phenomenon of silence. Within this historical scope I will focus not only on the type of history which is read about in text books, that is a purely political perspective, but also a history of the family. Though

looking at politics of the North is important when understanding silence, it is also imperative to look at the more personal aspect of silence, and this can not be done without looking at the first place that humans begin to interact with each other; the family.

This study will then again narrow down the topic even more to focus on the country of Iceland and how the different phenomena that take place throughout Norden echo in this one country and its literature. In an attempt to move away from the history of text books I will work with one of Iceland's most important authors, the late contemporary Halldór Laxness (1902-1998). Two of his novels, *Independent People* (1946) and *Paradise Reclaimed* (1962), give us an incredibly rich perspective into the life of the "typical" Icelandic farmer around the turn of the Twentieth century. The images of silence and oppression are crucial themes within these books. Though it can be argued that the original intention of Laxness was not to comment on the silence of Icelanders, but its presence despite the fact only helps to prove that this is a normal aspect of Nordic behavior and mentality.

At the onset, it is important to clarify the distinction between the terms Scandinavia and Norden, as they are both important for this paper. Scandinavia is usually what the five northern European countries are called when talked about from the American perspective, but within the north this reference stands only for three of the five countries. Denmark, Norway, and Sweden are the three constituents of the area known as Scandinavia. When the two countries on the periphery are brought into the mix, that is Finland and Iceland, this larger area is referred to as Norden. This concept of center versus periphery comes into play in the development of the

Nordic relations and their connectedness. As Xan Smiley states in the January 1999 issue of the Economist in her article “Happy Family?” at some point all of the Nordic countries were linked together. Sweden and Finland were one entity until the early nineteenth century, Iceland was settled by Norwegians who still felt connected to their homeland and often traveled between the two countries, until Denmark eventually came to rule over both Norway and by proxy Iceland, as well as the Faroe Islands and Greenland. For about 100 years of time Denmark also had a portion of southern Sweden.

With such an intertwined history it is easy to see how it came to be that the Scandinavians speak mutually intelligible languages and tend to share cultural norms. Many phenomena are common across borders, although at the same time it can not be forgotten that differences between the countries do exist are just as important as the similarities. Connections in the past, even in a time when physical mobility was not the norm, were very strong and continue to be strong today, especially in the “center” of Scandinavia: Denmark, southern and central Sweden, and southern Norway. With its geographic location, Denmark, from the Middle Ages until the Industrial Revolution when all forms of travel and communication were improved, had always been the most connected to a rapidly changing Europe, while the other countries seemed to be much more removed from the day to day events that transpired to the south. Countries such as Sweden and Norway are long and sparsely populated, and when we move away from the central area as mentioned earlier, communication becomes more difficult. In the past, traveling to the north of Sweden and Norway

was no easy task and one group of people that inhabits this territory, the Sami, are neither ethnically similar to the Scandinavians, nor do they speak the same language.

The north was isolated from the south. This isolation, caused by nature and until recent times insurmountable by technology, had a great effect on the people of the north. It created a silence that emanated from the surrounding world and is deeply instilled in the people that inhabit the lands. Certainly in the world in which we live today, where communication is instant and travel is far easier than before, silence may not seem to be the norm, at least superficially. Tourists landing in a capital city in Norden may encounter a bustling city on the surface. Only later, after looking deeper into the culture of the people, does the silence come out. Making the move out of the capitals or other larger cities is another way to look at the silence that is present even today. Silence is present in a fully modernized world like we live in today, however a trip back to the past, even the recent past, like that of the beginning of the Twentieth century, makes silence even more apparent and quite inescapable.

Just as the north is isolated from the south, so too, is the west isolated from the east. It was already mentioned that due to geography Denmark had better connections than the rest of Scandinavia. Only those brave souls with a sense of adventure known as the Vikings were willing about traveling for long periods of time over the North Atlantic Ocean. As the political situation changed in ways to be discussed later, even though nautical technology improved, fewer people from the center were willing to make the trip out to Iceland, especially officials from Denmark who were supposed to be ruling over the country. Thus, geography here has a negative effect on the Icelanders as it isolates them from the rest of the world.

Icelandic isolation created a society that was in many ways different from the rest of the Nordic countries for a long period of time. It kept the Icelanders in the Middle Ages in many ways, and these differences are what draw me to the country of Iceland, and Halldór Laxness in particular, for my studies.

Biography and life experience are not the only things that are important when looking at literature, but they are also difficult to ignore, and his life experiences in some way shaped Laxness' view of the world which is present in his writing.

Laxness traveled throughout the world and spent much time abroad, both in Europe and the United States and these travels must have brought to light the differences between Icelanders and other citizens throughout the world. Åke Daun writes that it was his experiences traveling, working and studying abroad that helped him to form his conception of "Swedishness" (Daun 5), a concept that he writes about extensively. I believe that the same is important for Laxness in his recognition of what sets his country apart and who he is. Growing up in the North Atlantic on an island with little contact with the rest of the world certainly had an effect on him, but it was his travels that actually brought him closer to the history of his country, a history that has a rich literary tradition. This identity is what helped him to write the novels that would make him famous.

The wealth of medieval writings are the basis of our current knowledge of Norse mythology and the Icelandic family sagas are works that have been translated into countless languages and are read throughout the entire world. Icelanders are well aware of their rich literary tradition and Laxness is no exception. As mentioned above, most scholarly work done up until now with regard to Laxness has been on his

connection to the Icelandic sagas. Because of gaps in other areas of research, scholars have left much room for me to analyze the cultural representations of Laxness and the characters in his novels, looking specifically at the effects of silence on the family.

Chapter 2: The Family in Norden Throughout History

2.1 Why Family Studies?

In its earliest stages Family Studies was mostly statistical in nature, looking only at raw data, but in the past thirty to forty years it has grown to be its own very distinguishable field and much more inclusive of broader perspectives. Today it lends itself well to the greater understanding of culture by studying the family in an interdisciplinary manner. (Rogers 292) But how can Family Studies be used to study literature?

“‘Family’ is loosely used in reference to the historical study of childhood and youth, certain aspects of the history of education, and the history of women and feminist movements.” (Hareven 399) Tamara Havaren states that young scholars (albeit scholars of the 1970s when the article was written) have committed themselves to a total understanding of society through the family.

“They share the common assumption that ‘the family is ... an extremely fundamental and durable institution: it often provides a kind of common denominator, or baseline, for a whole culture whose various parts may differ substantially in other respects.’ (Demos lx) They believe that a study of the family provides an understanding of political and social structure, economic developments, and ideology, and assume that the key to an understanding of the interaction between personal development and social change lies in the family.” (Havaren 400)

Thus, we see from the definition of family and what this area of study seeks to better understand how working with family will easily mesh with the interpretation of the literature. There is no doubt in my mind that the family is *the* place to start with research into the mindset of the Nordics that teaches them silence. A better understanding of this state of mind can not come from only looking at the structure of society as is often recorded in the annals of history, which often only include the elite segments of that society, rather we must look at the most simple unit that the phenomenon of silence in all of its forms affects – the family, where interaction between members or lack thereof can be studied. In an attempt to make this study as comprehensive as possible I will work to avoid one of the pitfalls of the method of studying “culture and personality,” as Hareven says, by looking only at one demographic to try to prove a point. Instead I will take a larger approach and look several types of families, for example rich and poor. Though the main characters of the literature with which I will be working are all from very poor farming families, there are still strata in Icelandic society, just as in other areas of Scandinavia, and we must see how this phenomenon touches all of the Nordic people, not just those who are typically thought of as oppressed, i.e. those in the lower classes.

Family Studies also allows for all of the members of the family to be taken into account, that is, both the female *and* the male members. This is of particular importance because just as it is important to see if the lack of interaction – silence – that can be seen as typical in the poor Icelandic families, affected all strata of society it must also be researched to see if it affected all genders within society. Because both novels being used were written by a male and have his male perspective with

male protagonists, a feminist study of the literature would not as productive. Though women will be included in all analyses and play an important role in the history of the family, they are not the sole focus of this study.

By studying the broad picture of the Scandinavian Family and then narrowing in on the Icelandic family I hope to sufficiently compare and contrast the Icelandic family with the family in other parts of Norden as well as comparing the reality to the depictions that stand in the literature I am using as a basis for my assumptions. By studying not only poor families or the “typical” farmer I also hope to bring to light a better picture of the larger social order into which the Laxness-portrayed family fits.

2.2 What are the Sagas

“In the country everything is read, I said, “beginning with the Icelandic Sagas; and then everything.” – Halldór Laxness

The words in the epigraph above were not spoken by Halldór Laxness himself, but came from the main character of his book *The Atom Station* (*Atomstöðin*), Uglá, originally published in 1948, a mere seven years since the American Army first had been stationed in Iceland. Even in a book where the main storyline has less to do with the past, rather the more immediate present of an American army presence being in Iceland, the sagas are still present in Laxness’ literature. It is certainly a part of literary history that any Icelander can not forget. But what are the sagas and more importantly for this thesis, what can we learn about the family from them?

As mentioned before, family sagas are the main body of medieval literature from Iceland. The stories take place in a large range of time, from that of the settlement period of Iceland beginning in 874 through the thirteenth centuries. After this the saga literature diminishes. As is true for most cultures with a medieval writing tradition, the majority of the authors of these works are unknown. Ari the Wise was said to have written the *Landnámabók* (The Book of Settlements), however this is not quite a saga, more an annal of those that first settled the island. Snorri Sturluson, the author *Heimskringla*, the sagas of the kings of Norway and his version of the *Edda*, a book that is today one of the few remaining sources of our knowledge of the ancient Norse religion, was one of the few to put his name together with his art. The remainder of the composers of the sagas remain anonymous except for one mention of a still unidentified “Thorvaldur” in *Droplaugarsona Saga* who “told the story” which is now found in written form. (Byock 38) Telling the story, however, is not the same as creating the story, and still the author of the saga remains unknown. Saga scholars have tried to answer the question of who wrote or composed the sagas, as well as the answers to many other questions, and are probably the most prominent of all literary scholars in Iceland.

There are three main types of sagas: the Kings Sagas, the Sturlunga Sagas, and the “Family Sagas”. The Kings Sagas were written by Snorri Sturluson and are in his work *Heimskringla: The sagas of the kings of Norway*. The Sturlunga Sagas represent the somewhat more historically accurate compilation of sagas that were named after a prominent Icelandic family before the end of the Icelandic Free State, which came to an end in 1262. The Sturlung family includes the aforementioned

writer, Snorri Sturluson. This body of work is considered to be at least marginally historically accurate since it is figured that the stories were written at or around the same time that the events told within them transpired, that is the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. They seem to focus, just like the family sagas, on conflict and feud, but unlike the family sagas they tend to focus mostly on the social elite. Snorri's compilation of the sagas of the kings of Norway is a great example of his focus in writing. For this reason, even though they certainly contain a wealth of information, they are not as widely read and studied as the other type of saga, for this second group allows the reader to get a better picture of the more common people, although this is not meant to say that what takes place in the pages of the family sagas are normal, or day-to-day, events.

Why would the events in the family sagas be normal? Even for the anonymous composers of these works in the Twelfth century telling the story of the most common, mundane people would be considered boring. The "Family Saga," is a poor translation for this genre that has arguably come to be the most important in Icelandic literature. The Icelandic name for this body of literature is simply *Íslendingasögur*, or translated literally into English "the sagas of the Icelanders." As Jesse Byock states in his work, *Medieval Iceland*, the name "Family Saga" is somewhat misleading because the stories do not solely deal with extended kin groups, rather intraregional disputes. (Byock 35) Regardless, they are a source of insight into relationships between husbands and wives, children, and extended family members around the nuclear family that was most prominent in Iceland at the time.

But an important question still remains. Is it at all possible to trust what is written in the sagas, even the Sturlunga sagas which are considered to be more historically accurate? The camp is split when it comes to an answer. Scholars argue in both directions and have at times even changed their position on the matter. In a chapter entitled “Tradition and Authorship, History and Fiction,” Peter Hallberg extensively quotes the Norwegian scholar Knut Liestøl who has argued that the sagas come from an oral tradition due to characteristics markers of oral tradition, such as having recurring phrases that introduce situations. (Hallberg 55) Others, such as Sigurður Nordal, a well known name in saga scholarship, prefer to take a more middle of the road approach, calling for each saga to be read and analyzed individually. (Hallberg 67)

In the earliest stages of saga research it was said that the oldest sagas were the best and therefore most accurate, but Nordal, with his extensive research, has proven that this is not always the case. How could someone in the Thirteenth century accurately tell the story about something that happened in the Eleventh century? Luckily as other fields of research grew, such as archeology, some of the events contained within the “fictional” sagas were validated. It became more obvious that the sagas had some truth to them, even though they were clearly embellished, as any good story is. According to Nordal as quoted in Jesse Byock, “the changes in the social and material conditions, in housing, clothes, weapons, seamanship, and so on, were not very remarkable from the Tenth century to the Thirteenth century.” (Byock 47) Therefore it is not implausible to believe that the Thirteenth century authors in a

society that had experienced few changes since the Tenth century had a better idea of what they were writing about than one would imagine.

Archaeology not only helped scholars who believed in the historicity of the sagas to validate many of their claims, but it also helps us to get a better understanding of what happened in the past. Scandinavia as a whole is very rich in artifacts and archeological digs are constantly being conducted all over. This is constantly changing what we thought we knew and helps to make the field of medieval research in Norden incredibly vibrant.

Because of archaeology we find houses, farms, graves, and stones, all of which help us to piece together the parts of the story of the historical Scandinavian family. Artifacts are unbiased. They have no spin on them. These unbiased pieces of history help us to refine our picture of the past in combination with other sources, not just the sagas. Sources like annals, normally written up to keep track of laws and proceedings at the different *things* throughout Norden, and runic inscriptions found on stones, like those throughout central and southern Sweden that were raised by family members in memory of fallen family members, may not be fictional like the sagas, at least as far as we can tell, but they are still being written by a person and therefore have a bias to them which may cloud our knowledge of what really happened in society. This bias is especially present as Christianity begins to enter into Norden society around the turn of the millennium. The church's influence on Norden will be discussed in brief in later sections of this paper.

Using only annals and stones and the “hard facts” of archeology will only get us so far in a study of what life was really like for the Nordic family before even the

slightest hints of modernity began to creep into the north. These materials would provide us with a solely empirical study. As already mentioned before, this is not the most helpful way of approaching questions about culture in relation to the family. For this reason we must look at all of our sources of information from the past – those from the ground as well as those on parchment – in order to paint a picture of what life was like for the individual and the family throughout Scandinavia and Iceland.

2.3 Men, Women, and Children in the Settlement and Medieval Period

Unlike what scholars thought for many years, the family structure within Norden, Iceland included, was a nuclear family. Although there were most certainly clans in the area, the idea of strong, patrilineal clans that existed in former studies is just not true. (Sawyer 168) It is a well known fact in modern Scandinavian studies that women could inherit land and had more rights than in other societies that are thought of as being quite progressive for their time. Women's inheritance stood on the books but it seems that it was even more common than the law anticipated, especially with woman that survived childbirth often living longer than their male family members; children included. (Sawyer 182) Daughters had a better claim to an inheritance from their parents than other more distant kin, such as uncles, and it was very common for women to own their own property before, during, and after marriage. These practices were not inventions of the medieval period, rather they existed well into the past and were practiced by even the Vikings.

Marriage in Scandinavia was a very important aspect of life, as it was throughout Europe. In Viking times, before families became linked to only one location, it would be impossible for a man to go off without having a wife at home to

take care of the homestead by herself. The farm was still important to the sea-faring Viking as he would eventually have to return to it. Women had great responsibility and had to have been shown at least some appreciation because of what they did for their husbands. As time moved on, marriage was often viewed as a contract between two people but was not necessarily arranged solely between them. Relationships were most often mediated by the families of those to be brought together. Often was the arrangement strategic so that the two families would in some way benefit, but it is important to note that women, before and even after the Christian conversion had the right to consent to their own marriages and in some cases could flat out choose their own suitors. Here the saga depiction of women is somewhat misleading, as it appears that women that choose their own mates are often doomed to bad marriages whereas those that follow the advice of their parents prosper within their relationships.

(Sawyer 177)

The church also imposed a law upon the people that forbade divorce of the married couple, but this was a law that was not popular with many, as women had previously enjoyed the right to annul their marriages if their husbands were not faithful or had in some way proven themselves to not be what they should in the marriage. The opposite of a meek woman who is unquestionably pleased in her marriage, a vision that the church would certainly want purported, is the famed Hallgerð from *Njál's Saga*. Throughout the course of the story she has three different husbands, all of whom she finds in some way insufficient and she looks for a way out of the marriage. If she feels that she has been dishonored she has no qualms about going to the other male figures in her life, such as her godfather, and asking for

revenge to be taken in her name. This was yet another right that women had in early Scandinavia. In a way this right is extremely progressive because it helps to ensure that women will be treated correctly, or at least to a sufficiently high standard for the day. If women are taken for granted, neglected, or abused, they have the ability to use their means, namely those around them, to have the problem fixed. The fix was not always a clean divorce, and the harshest of options is seen in the examples with Hallgerð and her men, and they meet a most unpleasant death.

Some of the basics in the relationship between a man and woman have been established above, but there is no way to forget that children are also an important part of the family. As mentioned before, women were in charge of taking care of the farm and household while men were out on Viking voyages, but there is almost certainly no way that this could be done by one person. Younger couples could at some point live together or live with extended family, although this was not the norm. In most cases, just as in other places in medieval Europe, children were needed to help run everything on a day to day basis.

The typical medieval family seems to have had no more than three to four children. (Sawyer 170) The proof for this comes from rune stones from the Viking period and parish registers after Christianization. Noble families were an exception because of their need to have an heir to the throne and the desire to have other heirs connect with royal families from other parts of the world, but still the families were not remarkably large. Having sons was more important than having daughters to many families, and again the proof stands in the numbers, both on the rune stones and in the parish registries. In the pre Christian age the Scandinavians did practice child

exposure. This is the practice of leaving unwanted children, often girls, exposed to the elements causing their death. (Sawyer 41) When Christianity came to the north this practice was quickly outlawed but it is assumed that it did not come to a screeching halt, especially as one moved farther west and away from the aforementioned center of Scandinavia.

Roles within the family were fairly typical. This means that work load between men, women and children can be predictably divided, but the women were in charge of the household while the men were out on trips, lines dividing manual labor between men and women would be blurred. Men and boys were expected to be out in the fields taking care of the animals, as animal husbandry was and is still today an important way of life in Scandinavia. Women and daughters would be inside and would take care of the spinning and weaving, cooking and cleaning. In an economy that is heavily dependant on sheep and their wool, not only for clothing but also as a form of currency, a woman was crucial to the family's well-being. Without her the family would not actually have goods to be bartered. Even if an of-age male figure was present at all times on the farm, either in the form of the husband or the eldest son, there was at least one period of time each year when all family members were expected to work outside. In the fall, shortly before the animals were to be brought into their winter shelters the families had to make sure that the animals would have enough hay to last them through the winter. This meant that all hands within the household had to work outside in order to collect enough hay from the fields to store for the animals. Spinning and weaving could be carried on inside during the winter but nature would govern the periods in which work could be done outside in so many

parts of Scandinavia and to win the race against time women could not be shy of manual labor, and most often they were more than willing to participate.

As Sigurður Nordal stated, as quoted earlier, not much changed over the medieval period in Iceland, and though other areas of Scandinavia were better connected to the continent of Europe, the changes were still fairly insignificant into the Thirteenth century. This is where our sources of medieval knowledge begin to die down, at least within Iceland. Some scholars argue that this is the end of a golden age in Iceland. Where as in continental Europe the people experienced a dark age during the medieval times the Middle Ages in Iceland and other parts of Scandinavia were known more as a brighter time. As the political situation began to change throughout the world the changes were felt within Scandinavia as well. Norway had become a united country in the late Twelfth century and Denmark, with its connections to the growing Germanic states and Slavic areas to the south and east, continued to follow the model of monarchy that was developing, always becoming a more powerful presence in Scandinavia.

By 1262 huge changes happened in the way that the Nordic countries ruled themselves. Iceland, which had always been known as a free state came under the direct control of the Norwegian ruler. Norway was now an empire that had a far reaching rule out into the Atlantic Ocean. With the Icelanders' discovery of Greenland the Greenlandic settlements also came under Norwegian rule. This large empire is remarkable because it exists approximately 100 years before the Kalmar Union, initiated in 1397 as a reaction to the growing power of the Hanseatic League and the threat of German political domination. (Nordstrom 22) Just over 100 years

later the growing power of Denmark and the interweaving that happened within the nobility of Norway and Denmark lead to the southern country ruling over the whole of Norway. In turn Denmark also gained the provinces, so to speak, that had been under the Norwegian crown. Iceland became a territory of Denmark in 1380.

Political changes throughout the Nordic area are easily visible throughout the history and are recorded in many different sources, but sticking with the topic of this section of the paper, we must ask ourselves if at this turning point in the politics of the north changes occurred within the family. Was there any noticeable change in the way that the family structured itself? Was there a change in the roles that were taken by the different members of the family?

2.4 Men, Women, and Children from 1262 to 1918

By the year 1100 at the latest, the Viking age was coming to a close of its near 300 year reign of the north. The family became a more static entity as men no longer traveled for up to six months a year, sometimes staying out for years at a time and often dying abroad. Populations in Scandinavia began to grow and in many places people began to congregate more than they had in the past. Large areas began to be ruled by one person at a time, as was happening to the south as monarchy continued to develop in Europe. Traces of the modern Scandinavian states began to arise, starting with Denmark, then the conglomerate of Sweden and Finland, and finally Norway. While these developments happened in Scandinavia the rest of Norden was still left behind; especially Iceland.

The year 1262 is an important year in the history of the north, because states began to grow. Iceland was the first casualty of the process because for the first time it was no longer a free and independent state. As the Icelanders still lived in a fully medieval society in all aspects of life, their state fell under the official control of the king of Norway who promised to help them better provide for themselves. The growing population on Iceland could no longer provide for itself the way they had in the settlement period as the climate began to worsen and the land was put under increased stress due to overgrazing and overpopulation. Although Iceland was no longer its own free state, daily life did not change drastically. Iceland was still able to rule itself at home with provisions provided by Norway and the occasional representative from Norway being present to influence the situation in favor of the ruling crown.

For about 100 years, approximately 1262 until 1380, things remained fairly unchanged in the region with Norway being the largest empire in the north at the time, controlling both Iceland and the settlements that existed in Greenland at the time. Due, however, to the process of intermarrying between royal families, unrest instigated by the Danes, and luck, the Norwegian crown became part of the nation of Denmark. As a result so did Iceland and Greenland. Denmark was a much more powerful state than Norway and changes were felt in all areas of the north because of this new, incredibly large, conglomeration of power.

Denmark had always been more connected to the countries to its south, and was more likely to follow the trends of continental Europe, especially trends in politics because this allowed them to be able to make more connections and in turn

gain more power. This means that the Icelanders, who were not used to taking orders directly from someone else and who were many years behind the rest of Europe in all respects of life, had a new system thrust upon them by the new foreign rule. This version of foreign rule was not like that of Norway; changes were felt throughout the country, and these changes also affected the family structure.

Ida Bull says it best when she states that in early modern times society was built upon households and that the head of the household represented the household to the outside world. (Bull 195) As already discussed above, there had existed, in the medieval period, the opportunity for a woman to be the head of the household. If the man of the house was out on a Viking raid the woman was most definitely in charge of her household, and widows had the right to inherit property from their husbands. If a woman outlived her husband for many years and inherited a prosperous business it was certainly no stretch of the imagination for her to become a powerful woman. Several women had the ability to rule not only over a business and a household but even a full fief or country according to birth and family rights. (Bull 196)

The centralization of power that came as time went on and states grew, however, began to change things. Absolutism began to take over as the preferred way for a monarch to rule his country. Patrilinear clans and lines of kinship were determined and the previous idea of bilateral kinship was pushed to the side. This put women at a significant disadvantage in society because they lost the right to inherit land and power to their male kinsmen. No longer did daughters have the advantage to inherit their fathers' possessions over a distant uncle. Having a male heir in the

family was more important now than ever. Not only when it came to inheriting property but also other forms of livelihood, such as business.

Under absolutism within Scandinavia and Norden, which had its differences from country to country, women that often assisted their husbands in work, whether that work be business, crafts, or farming, could occasionally be able to inherit at least the management rights to the business. (Bull 198) This did not mean that they were in all capabilities able to do the job of their husbands, but did have some right to retain workers and could still make a living, at least until they remarried or got another male family member to take the business for them. This was never the case, though, when it came to jobs in civil service. Women whose husbands ran branches of a post office, for example, were not allowed to step in for their husbands after their deaths. Bull says that once absolutism had taken over in Norway, women disappeared fully from the postal service there until 1890. (Bull 202) Although a postal service did not exist in pre-modern Scandinavia, one might assume that in a time when women had a surprisingly large amount of rights they would also be able to work for the state.

Because of the new restrictions placed upon women by the government special widow's pensions were created in all of the states and were regulated either by the church or the state to help those women that found themselves without a way of livelihood. "Pension was no right" (Bull 207) and would only be granted in the right situations, especially if the pension were to be granted from the state. For this reason many women sought a new spouse for support. Pensions from the church, especially in Iceland, were a bit easier to come by, as the church would want to practice

compassion, however the life it allowed for was not glamorous. It often required living in less than desirable conditions until someone would come by and be willing to take care of the widow, either as a wife or as hired help during the seasons when extra help was needed around the farm. The term “on the parish” exists because of this phenomenon. The importance of this phenomenon will be discussed further in the section on Laxness’ literature, as women and families will end up living under the care of these pensions under the care of the church.

Rights for women had changed, as most people would see it, for the worst. Changes in the expectations of children, however, worked to improve life. New politics came to exist about education, and education became increasingly important as the world got more and more competitive. Universities grew which was an important part of helping Nordic societies to develop, but in order for the universities to be able to take students they first needed to have basic education. It was no longer appropriate for people to be illiterate if they ever expected to climb the ranks of society.

In Iceland many people, even farmers, were able to read – sometimes in several languages. This could be a remnant of the golden age of Icelandic literature because at that time most people could at least read Icelandic and understand the sagas. For many years the church was responsible for the education of the people. In 1741 a Danish clergyman traveled with an Icelandic counterpart to test the children around the districts. Statistics differ from one district to the next, which Karlsson discusses more in depth in his work, but even before compulsory education was initiated in Iceland as much as 53% of children over 15 were literate in the middle of

the Eighteenth century. By the early nineteenth century, however, changes in the way in which children should be educated began to occur. Education, in a form in which we recognize it today, began to develop and by the mid-nineteenth century compulsory education laws existed in Scandinavia. Denmark in 1814, Sweden in 1842, Norway in 1848, Finland in 1866 (Nordstrom 194) and Iceland in 1880 (Karlsson 225) all had laws about compulsory education on the books.

A child being forced to go to school and not stay at home to function as a worker within the family is a huge change for a largely agrarian society. Even though cities had begun to grow during this period of time, much of the population was still spread out and the idea of having one school in a district for students to attend was not feasible. A solution that existed, at least in Iceland, was that of having a traveling tutor or teacher, who would visit individual homes for a certain period of time or even go to a building that was temporarily used as a school where children would board for a few weeks a year to be able to learn. (Karlsson 171)

As children were drawn away from the household during the day and into schools, the intellectual, university population grew and inventions became more proliferate in the Scandinavian area, helping farmers throughout Scandinavia improve their crops and be able to better support themselves, the structure of the family continued to change. For the most part, the industrial revolution of the world was also felt in Scandinavia, though not through the whole of Norden. Changes in agriculture were important, and as towns and cities grew, more and more individuals and families depended on fishing, an occupation which could only be done in the coastal cities. Iceland, however, a country that is today thought of as surviving

mostly off of the fishing of its waters (a notion that is not true), was not a fishing country for many years because of their lack of technology. This kept the family structure in Iceland more traditional than in the rest of Norden because the concept of cities did not grow until later in the Twentieth century than other places. It is not until the end of what most scholars refer to as “The Long nineteenth Century” that Iceland was thrust into the modernity that we know today. For Gunnar Karlsson, who writes strictly about Iceland, the Twentieth century did not really begin until 1918, whereas for Byron Nordstrom, writing about Scandinavia as a whole, says that for the three main countries in the north, the Twentieth century did not begin until 1914.

Here, at the turn of the Twentieth century, shortly before the First World War, is where I would like to stop chronicling the history of the family in Norden. This is because from the Middle Ages until the Twentieth century we have seen how the family has changed throughout the majority of the Nordic world with several mentions as to how Iceland in particular managed to stay in a time period all its own. Although it can be said that no country in the north was fully in a mode of modernity, the Scandinavian countries were on their way while Iceland was still several years behind. This pertains not only to the political and industrial situation, but also the family. There is no doubt that the Nordic family model still retained the nuclear structure that it had had for ages, but in Scandinavia the family had more of a modern shape to it, with children being able to attend school and socialize with other children.

In Iceland, however, the situation still very much resembled a medieval family structure. Although certainly nuclear in structure, the family was still very self sufficient, or at least tried to be. Isolation was still very much the norm and the

socialization of children had to happen within the household. In other parts of the world, where children from the growing middle class began to play with each other and learn to communicate amongst different age groups and class distinctions, the Icelanders were still very aware of a difference in hierarchy and the children were still only able to follow the social model of their parents. This is extremely important to keep in mind as it will be very visible in the literature to be discussed later.

It seems valid to ask if the family situation in Iceland at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the Twentieth century was not a more bleak situation than it had been in the Middle Ages. This is certainly a matter of perspective and can not be judged easily, but it is for this reason that so many people refer to the Middle Ages as a Golden Age and the pre-modern society of the north, especially Iceland, as a much darker time. While the south experienced the Renaissance and other important movements that brought light and life to the people of Europe, the Icelandic family continued to live in turf huts and battle terrible winters, being thankful to just be alive when the sun returned. In this respect, we begin to see how the perspective develops that the Nordic people, one that still dealt with much natural hardship as the world around them developed to become more modern, could begin to be characterized as cold and stony, even silent. It seems most plausible that this silence was simply present within the family structure and that it perpetuated itself through the family.

Regardless of how the family would be characterized, stony, silent, etc. as this will be discussed at length in the coming section of the paper, there is no doubt that the family was and is the most basic and important unit of society in Norden. There

was no escaping the family, especially for survival. The structure of the family went through several changes as time progressed, such as the roles that women were allowed to play from the Middle Ages through to modernity, as well as the importance of children. There were many external reasons that the family changed, most of them coming from above. Politics played a large role in helping to shape the family because it governed things like inheritance and who could be the breadwinner for a family. Internal familial changes are not really seen in the history of the family outlined above. Movements for women's rights had not yet begun and the social safety net for which Norden is famous had also not been fully developed, therefore women and children did not have the freedoms that they have today, although this is not to say that women and children in Scandinavia were ever at a disadvantage in comparison to women and children from other countries at the same time.

Having an understanding of the family structure in Iceland as contrasted with that of the other Nordic countries up to this century will better help us to understand the characters in the novels of Halldór Laxness and how he wrote about his perception of the family in his country. We will better be able to understand how the families in his novels fit into the time period in which the novels take place and how the Icelandic families are somewhat unique from those in other parts of the north. However, to better understand his characters we will need to look not only at the family as an important aspect of the novel, but also at the way that the family, all of its members, and all of those that interact with it, are able to express themselves. How did socialization and expression take place in the north? Why do we have the

stereotype of the silent people of the north? Where does the stony silence that is so characteristic of characters in many Nordic works of art come from?

Chapter 3: Silence in Norden Throughout History

While it is easy to say that the silence just became a part of the way of life of the north, we can not simply take that at face value. In the coming section of the paper I will look at the tradition of silence in the north and its origins. Was it an imposed silence or is it something that has existed intrinsically from the beginning? How is silence taught? Are there other outlets of expression if one does not know how to express themselves? These are some of the questions that I will seek to answer as the paper continues.

For most outsiders that travel to an area within Norden, these countries will most likely appear to be no different than many other places in the world. Places like Copenhagen, Stockholm, and Oslo are well established cities that have been growing ever since the move to cities increased in the nineteenth century in Norden. What is also important to remember is that these cities are not just any place, rather the capitals of these countries. In any capital city, tourists are likely to be found mingling with the natives on crowded city streets seeing the sights that make this place somehow famous. The same can be said of Reykjavík as well, though it is not a Scandinavian capital, rather a Nordic capital, and has a character that is still a bit different than the three aforementioned places.

Moving just a bit deeper into the interior of all of the countries reveals a different view of the Nordic countries. It reveals a world that is quite full of silence that is so deeply entrenched into the mindset of most people that it is never questioned. A wonderful example is to be found in Åke Daun's work on the Swedish

Mentality, a book that provides a whole battery of examples of how silence plays a day to day role in Sweden. At the end of a short chapter on “Social Causes Behind Swedes’ Calmness” he tells a story of a German woman that was on a train which came to a stop due to a problem. There was a voice over the speaker and everyone on the train gathered their belongings and exited. The elderly German woman, who needed someone to explain to her what was happened, remarked that the whole process was “*ganz ruhig.*” She continued to tell the person helping her that if such an occurrence were to have happened in Germany that it would have been well known by the level of noise that people were unhappy with what had happened. (Daun 129)

Countless other outsiders tell their stories of their travel within Sweden in their home countries in newspapers and books and Daun has listed several of them in another chapter, on the “Norms for Being Quiet and Taciturn.” (Daun 118) What, at least from the American perspective, is seen as normal behavior, such as calling someone’s name out across the street to get their attention or other simpler forms of speaking in public, are things that Swedes do not participate in due to strict lines between public and private spheres and a desire to not be too obvious a presence while in the public sphere. Swedes have many phrases that revolve around silence, both good and bad, and that these phrases even exist is a reflection of how important it has been throughout history. *Tyst och fin*, or “quiet and refined” is looked at in a positive light, but taking part in *kallprata* (small talk, or more literally “cold talk”) or being called a *pladdermajor* (babblers) is much less desirable. (Daun 119) If one finds that another person is talking too much, another Swedish phrase comes in handy. It is certainly no coincidence that the phrase *att tiga ihjäl*, to kill one with

silence, (Daun 120) exists in Swedish but does not seem to have an equivalent in other languages. The closest that an American can come to this phrase is to “kill one with kindness” which has a much different meaning.

Sweden seems to be the most introspective of the Nordic countries, being the only country to have published academic literature on its own mentality. It has tried to document its own mentality fairly well, but the things that are present in Sweden are not isolated to that area alone. So where is it that these people got this mentality of calmness, quietness, and silence from? For the answer we must return again to the past and chronicle the history of silence as a phenomenon, just as before we chronicled the history of the family as a phenomenon within Norden. This historical perspective will once again help to paint a picture that clearly shows that silence is not a new phenomenon and is not something likely to disappear any time soon, even with the current rate of globalization which has affected the Nordic countries to a great extent. The Swedes, as well as the rest of the Nordics, will most likely always be looked upon as outsiders when it comes to how they deal with the topic of silence, because of the long tradition of silence that is in the subconscious of the people.

3.1 Values and the Medieval Mind

The conversion to Christianity came to Norden in and around the turn of the millennium. It is said that Iceland converted peacefully in the year 1000 and that other countries followed, albeit not quite in the same peaceful manner, though there were certainly never any unnecessarily bloody wars over religion in this area.

Snorri's *Heimskringla* tells many stories of kings that travel around and meet their "pagan" subjects and order them to convert and the family sagas, which were written in a time when Christianity was already the norm, talk about characters who were Christian, but that may have still dabbled in the old religion.

The old Norse religion was a polytheistic one with many gods for many occasions. Different regions also had their preferences for one god over another. In the areas written about in Tacitus' *Germania* we discover a god named "Wodan," whose name was spelled throughout other parts of Norden as "Odin," who was much revered, but moving further northwest we lose track of this god and the majority of people worshipped Thor. Along with Odin and Thor were many other gods, some of whom played larger roles than others, but in the end would all interact in some way, if only during the creation of the earth and its eventual demise at Ragnarök as well. We know about events such as the creation and Ragnarök, as well as many other events that supposedly took place, through the literature that exists even today. Already mentioned was *Heimskringla*, which tells us mostly about rituals that the Christian Norwegian kings encountered in their travels, but we also have Snorri's version of the *Edda*, a book that was meant to be a style guide to poets of the day, but that also tells, in fair detail, many of the myths that make up the mythology that we know today. These stories must be read with a careful eye because Snorri was already a Christian himself, but even looking past the bias that Christianity could have given him when writing, this is an incredible source of knowledge. There is also the *Poetic Edda*, another collection of the myths that make up our knowledge of Norse Mythology. This is not a story as told by one person, but a full collection of

poems, written and compiled anonymously. It does differ from Snorri in some ways, complicating our picture of the lost religion of the north, but it also fills in gaps where Snorri does not give us information.

These written sources, along with others such as those from Ibn Fadlan, Adam of Bremen, and Saxo Grammaticus pair well with the archeological findings that are constantly surfacing in Norden to help paint us a picture of what it would have been like to practice religion in the past. One god that we know much of, because of his position of prominence in the religion, was the aforementioned Odin. Although Odin was often referred to as the “all father” of the gods, present at both creation and the end of the world, he is a shadowy figure and very little is ever heard from him. He almost never finds an occasion worthy of speaking with humans, and when he speaks with the gods he does so in a manner befit only to a king god, with the poetry and wisdom that he had mastered in his many quests and trials throughout life.

Odin does many things throughout his life that are not to be considered model behavior for a person, such as cheating on his wife Frigg multiple times, but one thing that was most likely looked upon highly was his stoic mannerism. Always followed by darkness and cloaked in it as well, Odin would not be heard and would not make a scene unless absolutely forced to do so. This shows a real reserve to his character that was most likely looked at as very positive – a quality that helped him to stay at the top and rule over the other gods in the kingdom. He, however, is not the only god that stays shrouded in silence. Hoenir, whose nickname is simply “the silent god” was another companion of the Norse deities, and was also revered for his most marked trait.

Although we do not know much about this god because there are no myths that contain detailed stories about him, we do know about Hoenir from the myth of creation. H. R. Ellis Davidson explains it best in her book *The Gods and Myths of Northern Europe* when she says that in Hoenir we may find a clue to “the value put upon silence in Old Norse literature; it was thought to be a sign of wisdom, and conceivably some form of mantic wisdom was represented by the figure of Hoenir the silent.” (Davidson 168) She also adds that silence was his strength. If the Norsemen had just these two representatives of silence, it might be enough to begin to understand why they modeled themselves in a quiet way, but this is not the only important thing that we see in the religion.

Enclosed within the *Poetic Edda* is an important poem, “Hávamál,” or “The Sayings of the High One,” presumably Odin, which lays out proper etiquette for those following the Norse religion. Of the poem’s 164 stanzas, only 8 mention silence or quietness in some way, but it is interesting to note that these are all, with the exception of one, in the beginning of the poem. Silence is brought to the forefront. Stanzas 4 and 7 mention that it is polite to be silent to a guest, not pressuring them to speak, and likewise it is polite, as a guest, to be quiet, and not garrulous, another term Daun lists as a negative name that Swedes still call someone who speaks too much – *pratsjuka* (Daun 119). Stanza 6 equates wisdom with silence once again, as we had seen in both Odin and Hoenir. Another of Odin’s qualities is portrayed in stanza 15 where one is told to be silent and like a prince when fighting. The prince, by being silent and thoughtful, just like Odin, would be able to win in battle, and it is most desirable to model oneself after the nobility of a culture. Being silent is a way to

avoid looking foolish, and both stanzas 27 and 29 mention this. At the same time a balance must be struck, according to stanza 59, which says not to be fully withdrawn from society, because the more than one does this, the less wisdom one is able to gain. These few lines are very important because they encourage interaction among the people of the north even though they are so heavily persuaded to learn silence and taciturnity in most situations.

One of the most interesting stanzas in the poem has to do with drinking, a point that will be discussed at length in the following section of the paper dealing with the novels by Laxness. Stanza 19 of the *Hávamál* says that one should not over-drink and become too chatty. It is always wise to go to bed instead of having someone see you make a fool of yourself. These are words that many people today should try to remember while out on a night of the town, and the Nordics are no exception. Drinking in Norden today is done year round and at excessive rates by many people, especially the younger generations. As will be discussed later, neither novel portrays the family as having a drop of alcohol at any time, and the little bits of exposure to alcohol that certain family members receive are perplexing. The characters wonder why those around them are so loud while they imbibe.

At any rate, the teachings of *Hávamál* are of great importance when looking at the origins of silence in Norden. It was a most revered quality in the early Norse culture, and even though the area was converted to Christianity over a thousand years ago, the roots of this religion and tradition are still found in most households today. As I mentioned earlier, the Icelandic conversion to Christianity happened peacefully in the year 1000, but the reason that it was decided on peacefully is that everyone

agreed to say that the country was Christian while there was a sort of “don’t ask don’t tell” policy in practice about religion. If a family wanted to practice the religion of old behind closed doors, nobody in the society had a right to stop them as long as it did not infringe on the rights of others. This sort of attitude is what kept the Norse connected to their old religion, and leaves us with the silence that was taught back then still today.

From the pre-modern period we do not have just the mythology of the Norse, but we can also turn to the Sagas as a form of medieval literature that could portray silence in many cases. Although these stories would not be written in a manner that preaches one quality over another, societal reactions to a person will tell us how well the qualities that he or she displayed were, or even are still, revered. In the previous section we discussed Hallgerð as an example of a strong woman found within the saga literature; someone that was willing to fight for herself and use her means to not live in just the background, but she is not the sort of character that we are looking for. A more fitting example is that of Unn the Deep-Minded, a woman who was quite prestigious during her time, but whose death was looked up with great pride, because she died in a quiet manner, never wishing to call attention to herself.

Unn the Deep-Minded, also known as Aud, was the daughter of Ketil Flatnose, one of the first settlers of Iceland in 874. She and her father are mentioned several times in the *Book of Settlements* and Unn plays a role in several sagas. In *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, or *Laxdæla Saga*, Unn is present in the first seven chapters, at which point she dies during the evening of a feast. She had been eating and having an enjoyable time until decided it was time to retire to her bedchamber.

“The evening was spent feasting until everyone went to bed. Olaf Feilan came to the sleeping chamber of his grandmother Unn the following day. As he entered the room, Unn was sitting upright among the pillows, dead. Olaf returned to the hall to announce the news. Everyone was impressed at how well Unn had kept her dignity to her dying day. The feast then continued, in commemoration of both Olaf’s marriage and Unn’s death.” (Laxdæla 282)

As was expected of her, Unn practiced understatement in life and death. She did not draw attention to herself and did not dare bother others with her death. In the end, her passing was categorized as having “dignity” and the crowd was “impressed” at her death because she had modeled such excellent behavior.

Dignity and honor are often wound together with the notion of silence. Unn is not alone in wanting to draw attention to her death, and Peter Hallberg, an Saga scholar from Sweden points out, Þorgeirr, a character in *Fóstbræðra saga*, almost falls to his death while out collecting angelica on cliffs by the sea. The rocks on the cliff loosen and Þorgeirr is being held up only by the angelica for which he was looking. His brother, Þormóðr, looks for him and inquires if he has gathered enough angelica. “Þorgeirr answered with a steady voice and a fearless heart: ‘I think I shall have enough when the one I’m holding on to now pulls out.’” (Hallberg 98) Without so much as a scream Þorgeirr holds on for dear life and patiently waits for help in a dignified manner. If it had not come one could only imagine that he would have fallen to his death trying his hardest not to let out a peep before hitting the ground.

In the same saga the brother Þormóðr finds himself in a situation where silence gets the better of him. While being chased by a woman, Þórdís, on an island

somewhere off the coast of Iceland, Þormóður hides under a pile of seaweed. Þórdís' men poke the seaweed with their swords and wound Þormóður several times "but he does not betray his presence by a single sound or movement." (Hallberg 97)

Though he has not been found, Þórdís is still convinced that Þormóður is on the island and screams out that he make his presence known if he has any courage. "When Þormóður hears this, he wants to reply at once; faced with such an accusation of cowardice he is ready to spoil his successful ruse and expose himself to certain death. But, according to the saga, he is unable to utter a sound: It is just as though someone were holding his hand over his mouth." (Hallberg 97)

While the literature of the past proves that a tradition of silence has been built up from the very beginning the north, we can also move away from these sources and turn to more concrete history to see that still more silence existed in the Norden, especially in those countries that exist on the periphery of this area of land. The political structure of the north was internally turbulent over many decades, although it was very rare that the Nordic countries fought in wars with other nations. Countries like Finland and Iceland often took the brunt of the conflict over land and there is little doubt that this also helped to shape the demeanor of a people that were already used to living quietly and taking what was given to them.

3. 2 Silence Under Foreign Rule

We know about the effect of foreign rule on the role of women and widows in the family from Ida Bull's article on absolutism and the role of widows, but how can foreign rule work to silence nations and populations? There have been plenty of

examples throughout the history of the Nordic countries with some of the situations being unique to one country while others are common themes throughout.

We find our first example in Finland. The Finns are ethnically unique from the rest of the Nordic people and speak a language that is not related to the Scandinavian languages, rather to the Baltic languages and Hungarian. Despite this fact, the Finnish people did not have the chance to be their own nation until very recently in history. For hundreds of years the area was ruled mostly by the Swedish while a smaller portion of today's nation was controlled by the Russians. The ethnic Finns lived in both areas and were forced to speak the language of the ruling country. This form of oppression has been discussed in many different places throughout the world, and this forceful silencing is never appreciated. Once the Finns had gained control of their land from the Swedish it was quickly taken back from them by the Russians in World War I.

As nationalism swept over most countries during the nineteenth century, the Finns were also hit by it, but only as late 1849 was a full version of the first ever national Finnish epic, *The Kalevala*, published by Elias Lönnrot. The Brothers Grimm had already begun publishing their folk tales decades earlier which only added to a rich medieval tradition of literature within the German speaking area of the continent. The Finns, however, had been left out, not having been able to publish in their own language, rather in Swedish. A Finnish literary tradition just did not exist because they were silenced by outside rulers.

Finland is not the only country to be ruled by a neighbor. Norway is also an example of a country that had its face changed by foreign rule, namely that of

Denmark. Though Norway was already a fairly well established country with a sizable population in 1380 when it was officially taken over by Denmark, the Danes still molded the country and its people into what it wanted. Especially in the capital city, it became nearly a requirement to speak Danish, and not the native tongue of Norwegian, if one ever wanted to move up in ranks. Moving up in the hierarchy of the government was still difficult at first, though, since the Danish wanted their own government officials and ministers in the land in order to better monitor what the Norwegians were doing. Even today there are still deep traces of the Danish language in Norwegian. The language became so “Danified” that during the nationalistic period in Europe and Scandinavia, philologists set out to revive a more traditional form of the Norwegian language that had been stifled by the previous ruling country. While attempts to bring back the traditional Norwegian language were somewhat successful at first, most people do not claim this version of Norwegian as their first language, only some 17% of people while the rest continue to speak the heavily Danish-influenced version of Norwegian. (Askedal 221)

Denmark had a similar effect on the language of the Faroe Islands, a territory which it still claims today. Even though the writing system is remarkably similar to that of modern Icelandic, the sound system is much more similar to that of Danish. This again came from the fact that the Faroese were not allowed to speak their language in many settings while the Danish had their absolutist rule over the tiny archipelago of islands to the northwest.

While the effects of Danish rule were felt in both the Faroes and Norway, the proof of the silencing power of foreign rule is seen in Iceland, but even more so in

Greenland. The story of the Greenlandic colonies is told in several saga sources, such as *The Vinland Sagas*, a collection of two tiny sagas, one of which is named “The Greenland Saga.” Greenland was found in a much warmer period of time, before the “little ice age” and two settlements were made there by Icelanders and Norwegians. The Greenland colonies were always in contact with both Norway and Iceland, as contact was necessary for establishing the colonies. When Danish rule came to the North Atlantic, however, the Greenland colonies were no longer a government priority. The Norwegians had promised a certain number of boats to land at Greenland yearly giving supplies to the country, especially as the climate began to worsen, and even though the same promise was made by the Danes, it was never held through.

Communication was difficult and the Danish ministers of government did not care to trouble themselves with a distant colony from which they could gain no profit. The Greenlanders were all but forgotten about, and never heard from. In the Fifteenth century, after years of neglect, the Norse Greenland colony disappeared without a trace, leaving not even a single voice that was able to tell its story. No one is able to say for sure what happened to the Norse Greenlanders, even to this day. This is a very extreme example of what isolation and forced silence can do to a group of people that are not able to support themselves; destroy their existence completely. The Inuit settlers of Greenland, people from a culture that was much different than the European culture of the Fifteenth century, managed to survive, and still survives on Greenland today. The situation in Norway, the Faroes, or even Iceland was never quite as bleak as it was in Greenland, but the effect of foreign rule was certainly felt

on the large island out in the North Atlantic, just as it was felt other places. Let us turn to the history of Iceland to see how that country dealt with foreign rule.

It was mentioned previously that Norway ruled over Iceland in a fairly free style from 1280 until Denmark took control of Norway, and in turn all of its territories, in 1380. When foreign rule came to Iceland it was quite a shock for many people and many things changed. The importance of this epoch is illustrated by opening almost any history book on the Icelandic nation. One of Iceland's leading historians, Gunnar Karlsson, uses this as a dividing point for one of the sections of his latest book, and the leading Icelandic history written in English.

At its inception, the Icelandic nation did not have a central place of rule. The current capital of Reykjavík did not become a city, especially the city that it is today, until the beginning of the Twentieth century. Iceland was divided into several districts with two bishoprics, one in the north, Hólar, and one in the south, Skáholt. Although there was no central point from which legislature came year round, Iceland at least held its yearly Althing (*Alþing*) in the southwestern district, a place where the law was read and disputes were settled. This system worked fine for the tiny state for many years, and with the light hand of Norway not much was changed until the very end of Norwegian rule when the king wanted more power over the land. The Icelanders fought this as well as they could, and there were casualties along the way, such as Snorri Sturluson, the famed poet that has been mentioned countless times already in this paper alone, who was murdered in 1241 in his own home by an agent of the Norwegian king.

By the time, however, that Denmark came to rule over both Norway and Iceland, the Icelanders wanted only to have the chance to be their own nation. This vision was not in the cards. Denmark was ready to bring a much heavier hand to the Icelanders and insert their own version of politics into the already existing Icelandic model. Even though Iceland had already been under foreign rule for just over 100 years, this was the first time that Iceland truly felt that they were on the periphery with the center being quite distant; Copenhagen. Unlike Norway and the Faroes, Iceland did not go through the same linguistic ruin that other countries experienced. Distance and isolation could be the cause of this, bringing a positive light to the idea of being far away from your ruler, but there are still many more negatives that can be thought of.

The district men, governors, and bishops that were brought in from Copenhagen often did not seem to care what was happening to and in Iceland. Although they were stationed in the country itself, the day to day workings were of little concern to them. Icelanders were left out of the process of making decisions that affected them, especially when it came to trade and contact with other countries in the vicinity. Denmark wanted Iceland as a trade monopoly and did not allow for countries, like England, to trade with them directly. This isolation was harmful to the Icelandic economy which struggled up until modernity and the renewed Free State. The voice of the Icelanders was not heard due to the fact that all decisions were made in the “center” which was at least a two day sail from Iceland at the time. For the next several hundred years the Icelanders would struggle not only for their independence but even just to be heard by their rulers.

As the governmental hierarchy changed and the population as a whole lost its voice there were other internal workings in the country that created room for the overwhelming presence of silence. Iceland, physically, is actually quite large, just as are the Scandinavian countries; however it is even more sparsely populated than Sweden or Norway. A portion of the land is uninhabitable, namely the highland area in the middle and the near 11% covered in glaciers. This geography forced all that lived on the land to live somewhere near the coast in an attempt to gain some of the precious arable land. The same system is more or less still in place today, although modern infrastructure does help people live a better life.

While Iceland was being isolated from its fellow Nordic countrymen, the landscape of the country worked on its own to isolate one person from the next. The rocky landscape and the fjord indented coastline made travel very difficult and news did not, because it simply could not, travel quickly within a district or between several districts. If a feud erupted that should be solved in a meeting of the Althing, there was no way to ensure that by the time it convened the matter would not have been taken into personal hands.

Farms were isolated by each other just by the shape of the land. Rocky hillsides were natural fences between one person's land and the next and if there were no natural barriers in the form of rock, one could always count on a river to be a worthy border. The nuclear family, which was dominant at the time, had little contact with other people because it often took several hours, if not several days, to travel by foot or by horse from one small, self-sufficient croft to the next. Churches in Iceland were not the gigantic medieval creations that they were in continental Europe, rather

tiny one room buildings big enough for maybe 40 to 50 people at a time, which shows how small each congregation of people was in a certain area. There was no point in making a larger building because even if all people in walking distance came to the one building they would still scarcely fill the room.

In such a scarcely populated area with a landscape unsuitable for easy travel, the spread of information was as difficult as one could imagine. Messages were given to travelers coming by and one had to trust the delivery of the message to this stranger. Although King Christian VII of Denmark sought to bring a postal service to Iceland in 1776, the first mail boats leaving from Denmark did not sail until 1778 and the service did not become self operating in Iceland until 1873. (“Posturinn”) Before then all forms of communication were only as fast as chance would allow them to be. To further illustrate the situation, one must only look back to the time of the bubonic plague in Iceland.

In the 1400s when the plague came to Iceland it was not recorded as well as it was in other places in the world. Record keeping for this period of time, the shortly after the end of the golden age of the sagas, was sparse, and there was certainly no national record. But what can be deduced is that in two years, the plague had spread from one end of the country to the next and had wiped out some 50% of the population. (Karlsson 114) This was all done without rats and fleas, which were the main carriers of the plague in continental Europe, and this was done in a country where communication was few and far between. The epidemic, which started in the south, spread to the north before anyone was aware of what it was or that it even existed. The plague itself spread faster than the word about it. Hysteria did not

follow the plague because there was no easy way of spreading the excitement. By the end of the reign of the plague nearly 50% of all farms were abandoned and many parishes were left without priests. Even 40 years later only half of all of the abandoned farms had been again filled with tenants. These statistics illustrate the bleakness of the time and the extent to which an epidemic, such as the plague, has on a small, uninformed population. One could also surmise that the slow population growth following the plague was not only due to the small base population that could procreate, but also the fact that the inhabitants of Iceland were now even more distant from their neighbors, making it still more difficult for people throughout the district to meet one another.

Just as Iceland did not have its own self operating postal service until the late nineteenth century, the telegraph was an even later addition to Iceland. In 1906 Iceland's "Home Rule" party of government initiated a telegraph that finally allowed the Icelanders to communicate better amongst themselves and other nations.

(Karlsson 290) This invention had a bit of a late coming to Iceland. It had been put into use almost 50 years earlier and was quite established 20 years before coming to Iceland. Although superficially twenty years without a telegraph may seem quite insignificant, this is on top of the fact that Iceland trailed in all forms of industry at the time. Where in the nineteenth century many countries were experimenting with new technologies, the small population was doing everything it could to try to keep afloat by still utilizing the medieval systems that it had in place.

As mentioned earlier, it is a common conception today that the Icelanders live mainly of the capital they gain from fishing and many people believe that Icelanders

have always lived this way. The truth is, however, that legislation forced most people to stay away from fishing and to live on farms, trying desperately to make something out of the land. Consulting the CIA World Factbook today shows that Iceland has only .07% arable land. (CIA World Factbook) The majority crop has always been hay for animal husbandry, which was the main form of farming from medieval times into even the early Twentieth century. Technology did not exist for the farms or fishing either, so while countries like England had the technology to sail far off of their coasts and into Icelandic waters, the Icelanders were helpless to do anything about it until the end of the first quarter of the Twentieth century.

Isolated and left in the past, the Icelanders had to make leaps and bounds to catch up to a world already taking part in the industrial revolution that shaped the way that each of us lives today. It was no easy task, because at the same time as the government was fighting for modernity, they were fighting for independence. A stratification was beginning to become apparent in the country as well, with an education system being in place, as mentioned above, from the 1880s on, there was now a difference between the poor farmer living on an isolated croft and the university educated man living in one of the small coastal cities that was beginning to develop by the turn of the Twentieth century, working in technologies and in contact with other countries and the government.

This again, is where it is best to leave the chronology of the tradition of silence of the north, for it leads directly into the place where the novels of Halldór Laxness will take place. Using what we know from the history of the family in the north and the development of a tradition of silence we should be able to better

understand the characters in the novel and why they act in the manner in which they do. I hope that it is apparent the degree to which silence affects the north and that it is clear that this is not just a superficial phenomenon, rather one that has been in development since pre Christian times in the north. It is created both externally, as by the imposition of foreign rule, and internally, as in the lay of the land which works to naturally isolate one person from their neighbor. This is where we leave the world of medieval literature and history books and join the world of Halldór Laxness and his characters.

Chapter 4: Representations in the Literature of Halldór Laxness

Halldór Laxness was born in Iceland in 1902. His real name, his Icelandic patronymic, another tradition that Icelanders still practice even up to today, is actually Halldór Guðjónsson. His parents' farm was situated on the peninsula of Lax, or the "Laxnes" as the word is in Icelandic. From here is where the writer, born Guðjónsson, derives his pseudonym.

Laxness began writing at an early age and his first book, *The Great Weaver from Kashmir* (*Vefurinn mikli frá Kasmir*) was published in 1927. He tried his hand at all forms of writing; novels, plays, articles, etc., but his greatest achievement, or at least that for which he is best known, is his work *Independent People* (1934) which won him the Nobel Prize for literature in the year 1955. *Independent People* is a great work that calls up many references to the sagas, as do most of Laxness's works. In fact, most scholarly work done up until this point has to do with the connections to the saga literature in his works and very little has been done to look at other elements within the pages.

Laxness's choice to work with the sacred tradition often brought him both praise and criticism. Although his books were fairly widely read, not everyone felt that it was fair of him to be so harsh and satirical in regards to the Icelandic people. Others found it almost sacrilegious to turn the saga literature into something modern. Nonetheless, Laxness wrote many novels that were dark and satirical when it came to the view of Iceland and its culture. Another is the other work that I have chosen to use for the discussion on family and silence within Iceland; *Paradise Reclaimed* (1960).

Though the plots of the novels are strikingly different they have many similarities that speak to the heart of what I wish to look at within Nordic and Icelandic culture, how silence affects the relationships of family members and the entire family. Both novels have a resounding silence that can be seen amongst the rich descriptions and language that Laxness uses to narrate his stories. Even in translation the silence is an element that has not been lost. As stated earlier, Matsuda, et. al. wrote that words can wound and tear apart individuals and groups, but within the world of the north I believe that silence can have the same effect on people. The cultural representations that exist in the works of Laxness are hints to what lies beneath the surface. Here is where we enter the world of the novels to see the entanglement of class, gender, and family, and how these things are all in some way touched by the aura of silence present around them at all times.

4.1 Farms and Landscape

Nature has always been something near to the hearts of all Nordics. The Icelanders are certainly no exception to this rule and the settings for both novels show that the families have a close relationship with the landscapes that surround them. Numerous times already I have mentioned that the characters belong to poor farming families. Each family encounters nature on a daily basis, and it is almost as important a character as any of the humans in the novels. Nature and the seasons compliment each other in order to enhance the silence that is found throughout the works. Often one hears more from animals, winds, or waters than from the people on the farm. It is

truly telling of the extent of silence in the works when the characters don't do the noise making and it has to come from other sources.

The type of farm is a small croft used mainly for animal husbandry. During the summer the animals are allowed to wander and graze anywhere except for the manured home-field, where grass is grown for the purposes of making hay to feed the animals, mostly sheep, during the winter. The sort of home that the farmer and his family live in are small, one room homes with the animals either directly below or to the side of the house.

When we first meet Bjartur, the main character of *Independent People*, he is just claiming his first independently owned farm after 18 years of service to another, better to do, family. He and his new wife, Rosa, travel to the farm over long hills and through valleys to get to the place where the self-named "Independent Man" will make a home for himself and his family. There are never any specific numbers given as to how many kilometers away the new farm, named Summerhouses, is from the closest neighbor, but one gets the impression that the trip is not short. Summerhouses is its own valley, which also has the implication that it is separated from the other farms by several natural boundaries. "Ridges and high moorland enclose the valley on all sides," according to the lengthy description in the second chapter of the novel. (Laxness 10) It is not the most accessible property in the district and the area has a less than desirable reputation. "It is ... the work of long dead peasants who built their homes there on the grassy bank by the brook, generation after generation, one on the other's ruins." (Laxness 9)

Very few visitors come by the property, and those that do usually come with a purpose. This farm is not along anyone's normal path. It is quite a lonely place, illustrated by not only its isolation but also the actions and thoughts of Bjartur's wife. Before the first winter comes he must leave her for several days, and she is very adamant about disliking the farm and the idea of being alone for such a long time. As an answer to the problem Bjartur leaves a single sheep, his most prized of the flock, with her. Location and landscape make it so that she can not travel on her own to get to another location with more people and must wait out the long fall nights in Iceland with no human contact. The only noise in this world is that made by nature. The rustling of wind and the stomping of hooves are the only noises that Rosa hears and this terrifies her. Silence truly is deafening to Rosa and it begins to wear on her.

At the beginning of *Paradise Reclaimed* we meet the farmer, Steinar and his family at the already established farm of Steinahlíðar. Just as is the case with Summerhouses, Steinahlíðar is a small farm that has a tiny croft house and lands that are used primarily for animal husbandry purposes. The Icelandic word "hlíð" means a sharp incline, much like the face of the mountain. Hlíð is incorporated into the name of the farm, which tells us right from the start that this farm is also not situated in a high traveled area that is easily accessible by the public. While at least one side of the farm is being blocked off by a large natural barrier this is not all that separates Steinahlíðar from the rest of the world. Steinar, the farmer, is an expert at making walls – the finest walls in the whole district. These are not metaphorical walls, rather actual stone walls that even further block off the farm from the rest of the world.

From the beginning, nature and landscape work to create an isolation that very few people could deal with. There is truly no sense of immediate community due to the distance of each farm from the next. While there are people that enjoy being alone and quiet settings this is not a suitable lifestyle for everyone. To not choose such a life, but to be placed into it by circumstance is enough to start to drive a person mad, and as is the case with Rosa and Bjartur's later wife, he considers this madness a "breakdown of the nerves" and seeks to medicate the women so that they can join him in his life of solitude.

The presence of nature and landscape is inescapable in an agrarian world like the one depicted in the novels. The families are living in and off of the land. The houses have elements of earth in them, such as turf from which they are built, and the land is their substance and prison at the same time. It surrounds the people at all times and has a very negative mental effect on those who were not built with a preference for solitude. This is already the beginnings of the destruction of silence to certain members within a family.

4.2 The Men

While the surrounding land works to break down those that are living off of it and impose its silence upon them, we must turn to the characters of our novels to see how this manifests itself in humans. This is certainly not to say that nature is the one and only driving force behind silence. Though it affects some more than others, people also work to harm themselves and those around them. Looking at the main characters of *Independent People* and *Paradise Reclaimed* will illustrate the presence

of a silent nature within them and what effect this has on them and their interactions with others.

Bjartur of *Summerhouses* and Steinar of *Steinahlíðar* are both well into adulthood when we meet them at the beginning of their respective stories. They have already gone through the process of socialization that existed in late nineteenth century Iceland, and when we meet them, both have already developed the characteristics that will stick with them until the passing of the novel. Both men display an almost statically constant stoicism that goes down to the core of their nature and is present in all of their daily activities. As the many events that make up the novel transpire, there is rarely any reaction recorded, not verbal, and equally as interesting is the lack of nonverbal expression as well, such as body language.

Jane Smiley says in the forward of *Paradise Reclaimed*, “the manner in which Laxness portrays these [small] incidents is very Icelandic – they are full of unexpressed emotions; what is expressed is courtesy, philosophy, acceptance, not exactly wit but something very dry that lies somewhere between stoicism and humor.” (Smiley xvi) What she says in reference to *Paradise Reclaimed* and Steinar is also fully applicable to *Independent People* and Bjartur, as well.

On the surface Bjartur and Steinar are quite different. Bjartur is a stubborn, stoic man who is at times abusive in manner, and most certainly idiotic. While expressing his love for the novel in a review for the *New York Review of Books*, Brad Leithauser talks about chasing after Halldór Laxness just to speak with him. In one encounter in the mid-eighties, he mentioned to the author his love for the character Bjartur, to which he received the response “Oh, but he’s so stupid!” (Leithauser 42)

Laxness himself finds the character to be a bit idiotic, and anyone reading the story will almost certainly see for themselves how true the previous statement is. Bjartur is a very poor farmer but is also too stubborn to accept help from those that offer it to him, insisting instead on being an “independent man.” This is seen in constant interactions with the middle class farmer for whom he worked, the Bailiff, as he is known. Never is Bjartur willing to accept his help for fear that it will only hold him down and keep him under the control of the Bailiff. Steinar, on the other hand, is not quite as negative in demeanor. He is known throughout the district as being quite generous and caring, even though he and his family are incredibly poor. Quite the opposite of Bjartur, however, Steinar looks forward to pleasing those in higher standing in society, as is shown by his eagerness to please the Danish King who comes through for Iceland’s millennial celebration.

One of the largest and most recurrent pitfalls that both of the men display is the way that they choose to answer questions. Whether these questions come from the Bailiff, the King, a wife, or a child, rarely passes a simple, direct answer over the lips of these men. Their inability to express themselves is manifested here in the constant reliance on the literary tradition of the past. Both men often can not answer for themselves, but refer back to the medieval poetry of the sagas. It can be seen from a perspective that modern language is useless in comparison to the language of the past. With modern language comes cultural decay, and neither Bjartur nor Steinar look at learning this new form of language, one that they will need in order to survive every day, worth it. The high point of language has passed, and instead of looking towards modernity, possibly because the Icelandic nation had still not even begun to

embrace the idea, the men choose to stick to only that with which they are already familiar.

Bjartur is even selective about the sagas he will use to express himself, not ever allowing anything but the “purest” of classics to be told, even when he seeks to teach his daughter to read and write from the sagas. Sagas that are too expressive, especially with regard to “smut” or “wenching” as Bjartur puts it, should not be read by the public. (Laxness 172) For him, even the classic Jomsvíking poems have a bit too much raunchy character. Steinar is often described as being “Quixotic” in character. Just as Quixote always had to rely on the past to lead him through his day to day conquests, so too must Steinar, and arguably Bjartur as well, though Bjartur’s journeys never take him far past the borders of his own farm.

Silence and stoicism has been manifested in these two characters, which is easily evident in both of the novels without even searching hard, but how do these manifestations affect the daily actions of the characters? Speaking first about Bjartur, the most striking instances where his lack of an ability to show emotion shine through are those occasions that deal with death. Several children, all newborn, die during the course of the novel and all are buried without even shedding a tear or uttering a sentence in passing. More importantly, Bjartur has two wives die during the course of the novel, and again, no form of emotion is expressed.

His first wife, Rosa, dies during childbirth, alone in her home, while Bjartur is out looking for one lone sheep. The reader has known from the beginning that his priorities are not necessarily in the same order as those of a fully sane person, but this is part of the idiocy that this character shows. When Bjartur returns home without his

sheep, he finds his wife dead at home with the child being cared for by the family dog. With hardly even a sigh of expression, Bjartur leaves his dead wife on the ground, still in her own blood, and the child in the care of the dog, to go fetch help from the family he detests so much, the Bailiff of Myri's family. Upon arriving, Bjartur, with full stoicism, tries to explain what has happened to the Bailiff and his wife, but uses such circular language that the Bailiff's wife, the Mistress of Myri as she is called, yells at him to get to the point. Speaking of a loved one's death is never an easy thing, but to shed not even a single tear and leave on another trip leaving two human beings, one alive and one dead, in an unheated home shortly before winter is beyond the scope of a normal reaction.

Childbirth is the cause of death of Bjartur's first wife, but the cause of death of the second is somewhat more absurd. She was very depressed and could hardly tolerate living on the farm of Summerhouses any longer, and after Bjartur's lack of emotion, coupled with his lack of understanding of how others operate, pushes her over the edge and physically breaks her heart. In this instance, the family's new cow births a calf which brings joy to all of the family members young and old, except Bjartur, who looks at this extra life as a chore and burden upon him. Without so much as warning his wife, who loved the cow and calf almost as much as her own children and almost cured her depression, Bjartur decides to slaughter the calf and take the meat to town for sale. Shortly thereafter he also slaughters the cow. He did this without taking into account the emotional attachment that his wife had to the animal and the happiness that it brought her and the cow that was its mother, an

animal that Bjartur would also kill later, just as he manages to kill his wife, on the small, isolated croft of Summerhouses.

Thinking without acting is a trait that Bjartur exhibits often. Steinar is guilty of the same thing. Though Steinar never kills an animal that is close to the hearts of his family, he does give away the family's most prized, white horse in an attempt to please the King of Denmark. This upsets the children of the family more than the wife, but this inability to understand the emotions of those surrounding you is a terrible result, at least from some world perspectives, of the poor socialization that happens in silent isolation. The attitude of acting before thinking accompanies one of Steinar's biggest decisions, that to leave his family behind in search of a new, and better life in America.

It sounds at first like thought did go into the decision, insofar as looking at the possibilities of a better life elsewhere, but the long term effects of leaving a family behind was not something that crossed his mind. One also gets the feeling that he was also not fully aware of what the world was like at the time of his travel. Perhaps he did not realize how much larger things were outside of Iceland when he decided to search for the gold at the end of the rainbow. His travels led him first to Denmark and later to America, following the Mormon missionary that he encountered several times throughout his early life. Steinar is easily convinced, showing a lack of conviction, or perhaps even a lack of true thought. Although Steinar often referred to the Icelandic poetry of old one can argue that he never fully understood why he was using it and what its importance was if he was so eager to leave it behind. This naiveté is proof that the socialization and educational process of Steinar's childhood

let him down, just as he would let down his family, specifically his children, by not being able to teach them how to think on their own and defend themselves. When Steinar left his family he left them without the rhetoric to think on their own and defend themselves, which ultimately leads to the demise of his farm and his family's entry into the church parish just to survive.

Throughout the course of the story, both men are always very stoic and at times even completely silent, not knowing how to act in the world around them. Bjartur stays in his own universe for his whole life, while Steinar travels around and often encounters things that he does not know how to react to. Lack of reaction and expression of emotion are key elements to the silence that is pivotal in understanding these characters. It truly becomes their downfall and has a detrimental effect on the members of their family as well, both wives and children. Especially the children. In an agrarian society with little contact to the outside, such as on the farms of Summerhouses and Steinahlíðar, the only form of socialization that the children have is from their parents, but with Bjartur, for example, he is not able to talk to his family the way that he can talk to the other farmers in the district. There is no school system that these children attend where they have the opportunity to meet large groups of people and learn how to speak for themselves. Children must learn this at home, but if the fathers act the way that they do, the children have only the mothers to look to for cues of interaction. Sadly, though, the mothers in the families profiled in the stories are just as little help when it comes to the socialization of children.

4.3 Wives and Mothers

Apart from the little girls in the stories who will be discussed in another section of the thesis, there are several other types of women that play important roles. There are wives, mothers, and grandmothers. Women from different classes are also outlined in the novels and will be discussed, as well, because there are some striking differences in the way that these characters act, though all women appear to be received in a very similar manner.

Mothers are important members of the family because they truly create the family. They are the bearers of children and the only ones that can properly care for the child in its infancy. This is not to say that other members of the family, brothers, sisters, and fathers, can not properly care for a baby, but a mother's nourishment is incredibly important, especially in a society with no such thing as baby formula. Other "traditional" roles are showcased within the novels of Halldór Laxness, as well. Apart from being the caregivers of the family, the women are often relegated to the kitchen duties, cooking and cleaning, and must often deal with the sewing and other textile duties. These roles did not change much from the Viking times until the advent of modernity. Women were not only the bringers of new life to the family, but were also in charge of milling the homespun wool that would then be sold by the male head of the household in order to buy provisions for the year or at least season.

The fact that women were also required to do yard work in the seasons when the most labor power was needed had not changed since the medieval period. Most of the year the women would be cooped up inside with the sewing and cooking, but during the late summer and early fall they would be expected to help collect hay for

the animals on top of other chores that would still have to be maintained. The life of a woman was certainly not easy even though they were looked on as weak, emotional, and fragile creatures by the men in society. The traditionality of women's roles are epitomized in *Paradise Reclaimed* when Steinar, who has already long been on his travels, asks that a package of sewing needles be sent back to his wife from Denmark. In his mind this is a top gift for her and he expects it to bring her much joy. Later, while in Utah, he meets a woman with a most prized possession among the women in the community at that time, a sewing machine. When this woman later falls out of favor with the community, her sewing machine is taken from her and she is truly heartbroken.

Tradition often works to relegate women to the background of life and literature, especially when talking about pre-modern and pre-feminist eras, and one sees that present in both Laxness novels. Mothers will often talk to the children, trying to give them little bits of advice for life, but are often ill-equipped to do so as their world has never extended past the farm where they live. When Bjartur's second wife speaks to one of her children, Nonni, to tell him that he will have a great future, she can not speak from experience, rather she speaks from a dream that she has in which an elf woman comes out from the rocks and whispers the child's fortune to her as a secret.

This second wife of Bjartur's is often accused of having trouble with her "nerves." She takes to bed for long periods of time physically unable to say anything. She has been broken down by all possible outside forces to the point that she must be silent. When she tries to make decisions she is usually silenced by her husband. The

patriarch of the family did the same thing to his first wife, never allowing her to make decisions for him, let alone herself. Throughout the novels Bjartur likens women to animals, always saying that they are more trouble than sheep or have the temperamental demeanor of a cow. Whenever Bjartur makes the comparison between a woman and an animal, the woman is always said to be the weaker of the two beings.

As discussed in a former section, Ida Bull stated that the women's pensions, that were developed by the governments to help widows continue to live as they had previously, were no guarantee for each person, and that they were to be appreciated if granted. These pensions were developed in order to keep women out of the district parish and self sufficient, but in the case of both of the Laxness novels being discussed, the parish is a presence for women that is inescapable. Not so much as an act of compassion, but out of necessity, Bjartur takes in a total of three women from the church. Two come from the church parish after the death of his first wife and the later in a short-lived time of prosperity on the farm of Summerhouses to help with the manual labor. The younger of the two women from the first parish group becomes the mother of the majority of Bjartur's children and the older their grandmother. Partly because the two women are somewhat feeble, at least as described in the novel, and partly because Bjartur feels that he is of a higher class than they, due to the fact that he is an independent man and has never had to rely on anyone else for support, he treats them as lower beings, often silencing them and not counting on their opinion in the least, except for occasional matters in raising the children. The last woman, Frida, is taken in so that she may work during the growing season. She is incredibly brazen

and not afraid to yell at Bjartur for making decisions that she deems to be less than wise, and because of this Bjartur despises the loud-mouthed woman.

The parish also takes in the “widow” of Steinar and her children after he leaves to go abroad. She is often referred to as the widow of Steinahlíðar because no news was ever received from her husband and the entire district makes the assumption that he has passed away while on his travels. As was mentioned in the section above, the wife and children do not have the ability to run the farm on their own, nor do they know how to answer for themselves when the district officials come to them and want to take them away from their farm and their livelihood. With the absence of the male head of household comes an absence of an authoritative presence, and more importantly voice in the district.

The female voice is often missed throughout the novels, even though the characters are most certainly present. It is also interesting to see that all of the women in the stories die at prematurely, with the exception of Finna, the elderly woman that Bjartur takes in from the parish. Bjartur’s wives die under different circumstances in the home and Steinar’s wife dies on a ship that is taking her and her children to America to meet with the husband whom she has not seen in years. None of these women, with the exception of Finna, are strong, but across the board all are very much timid when it comes to expressing themselves through words. Finna will sing hymns as she works, but has trouble speaking to a guest from the south, who comes to stay on the property for several nights. Her typical strong willed demeanor disappears when she must try to converse with this stranger.

One strong female character who is no stranger to words is the Bailiff's wife, the Mystress of Myri. She is one of the few female characters, coupled perhaps only with the daughters in both of the novels, that is ever described in full detail. Perhaps this full description is only warranted for a woman who comes from a higher class, or at least jumps at every opportunity to make it seem as though she is a level above the farmers whom she claims are so near to her heart. She is a self-proclaimed poetess who loves to speak and will do so at any opportunity. Where the pastor of the district is not willing to give a sermon, the Mistress of Myri will gladly deliver her own words free of charge. She may be long winded and never at a loss of words, a trait that she passed along to her children, a fact to be discussed later, but what does not work out in her favor for being heard at events is her gender. The words of a woman poet, according to Bjartur and his friends, will never be as great as those from a male. In their minds it is only appropriate to "speak" through the ancient poets. No weight is held to her words and she is often brushed off by the men of the district. Only the women look up to her.

Here is an example of class giving on the courage to speak up. Because of Madam Myri's position in society, a position that she would not be able to hold without the prominence of her husband the Bailiff, she is able to make a voice for herself, whether it is appreciated or not. Women of lower classes look up to her because she looks to care for their "poor souls," but the men of lower classes still look down at her as pretentious, partly due to her use of language. New and free forms of expression are not something valued by the stoic class of farmers who live in the district.

Silence, in all of its forms, both active and passive, that is not being able to produce words or not having those words actually register with your interlocutor, affects not just one class of women, but all classes of women. It is important to realize that this is not a class related phenomenon and presumably has not been throughout Icelandic history. Where one sees the biggest difference in what class differences can do to a family comes into play with the children of a family and how the silence will affect them. Differences will develop as the children grow, eventually leading to a great advantage for children from families like the Myri family, while children from Summerhouses and Steinahlíðar are left behind.

4. 4 The Children

Not all children will grow up to be like their parents, and with an example like Bjartur or Steinar, one could imagine why a child would want to work hard to model himself or herself differently. Within both of the novels, but most strikingly in *Independent People* there is a constant struggle for children to find their own voice. As was mentioned above, Bjartur's second wife told her youngest son, Nonni, that he would have a great and prosperous future. What the elf woman from the rocks told her was that her son would grow up to sing for many people. Later when his mother is dead and his sister moved to the developing city closest to the farm of Summerhouses, Nonni leaves his father for America, hoping for the chance to be heard by many people. He wants to find his voice and get out of the silent surroundings in which he has lived his whole entire life.

Nonni was lucky. He got to leave the environment of oppression which caused so much of the silence on the Summerhouses farm. Before he got his chance to leave, though, he too had to endure the silence that surrounded him. There was such a lack of interaction among the members of the family that Nonni dreamed of conversation. He was so desperate that the words did not even come from other humans, rather from the pots and pans that would break into their own fanciful meetings during the night. “What impressed the boy the most was not the powers of logical thought they showed in conversation, but the knowledge, the experience, and the richness of vocabulary it revealed.” (Laxness 143) This intriguing conversation would go on until the morning when it became “obvious... that the kitchen things were gradually exhausting their night’s supply of wisdom. And as soon as their conversation dwindled, the boy’s ears were free for other voices.” (Laxness 144) Unfortunately, the only other voices to be heard were the animals below the house waking up and searching for hay in the manger.

This was how Nonni lived out his childhood nights until he was able to follow his dream and move away to a different land, just as his mother had heard from the elf woman. Other children in the stories do not get to leave the environments in which they are raised until the effects of silence, isolation, and oppression have already done the damage that they can do. Whereas the already adult women in the stories cope poorly with their environments and eventually leave them through death, the development of the children is so clearly marked in so many cases by their surroundings and their socialization, or lack thereof.

The children in the novels are generally loved, especially the daughters, but the love of the parents is not readily shown, especially by the fathers. The female care giving figures are better equipped to express emotions, but this does not always happen with the use of words. Bjartur teaches his daughter, Ásta Sollilja, to read as a present for her, and he also takes her on a trip to town, wanting to buy her a few presents that she deserves at her age. This is a sort of love without words, but this does not help the children, especially the daughters, to be in any way socialized or prepared for the life that awaits them beyond the farm.

When life beyond the farm comes to the children, the readers find themselves in a scene that truly depicts the nature of silence and lack of socialization that has already ravished the children at an early age. When a man from the south, the same man that Finna could not speak with, comes to visit the farm of Summerhouses, he sleeps in a tent down by the lake, seeking to not bother the farming family. After several days he offers the Summerhouses family a gift of some waterfowl and fish that he has caught on the property; a sort of payment for his stay. Later on, after Bjartur is fully embarrassed by this generous gesture, he sends two of his children, Ásta Sollilja and Nonni, to give the man a pail of milk as not to seem rude in return. The man is appreciative of the thoughtful treat and inquires about what was done with the gifts that he gave to the family. He is greatly disappointed to hear that the birds were boiled, stating that this does not provide a chance for the bird's full flavor to develop, and invites the children to try a piece of his bird that has been fried.

While waiting for the meat to cook he tries desperately to start a conversation with the children who insist on being shy and trying to run from him. "Then at last

the visitor looked at the children, and it was as if he realized for the first time that this was a conversation, and that there was, moreover, some real substance in this conversation.” (Laxness 231) For once someone sought to expose the children to a conversation that did not encompass the typical topics of the poor district farmers; namely sheep, dogs, and worms. This simple act of conversation was too distressing for the children who could not wait to find their way back to their comfort zone. They had not yet developed a voice. They remained literally silent.

Ásta Sollilja’s lack of socialization and voice becomes much more distressing than just not knowing how to speak with a stranger who is staying on the farm, and the same happens to little Steina, Steinar’s daughter from the farm of Steinahlíðar. Both girls find themselves in a situation that is still considered taboo today; teenage pregnancy. In the case of Steina, who never had a father present to teach her as he was supposed to, the tragedy occurs because of pure ignorance. As her body changes, no one in the household thinks that it could possibly be a pregnancy, just that she is growing into a more mature body. By the chapter “A Baby in Spring,” however, she gives birth to a child and must discuss with the pastor of the district who the father of the baby is so that it can be put into the parish register.

The exchange between Steina and the pastor is painful, because one realizes the lack of social contact that she has had and how little she has been educated in the world. The silence that surrounds her has led her to believe that the baby that she just had has come from God. She does not understand how a child is made between two humans, nor does she understand what sexual contact is and can therefore not

recognize it. Not quite the same happens to Ásta Sollilja, although her situation is equally as grim.

During the period of time in which Bjartur seeks to educate his daughter in the literature of the past, beginning with the Saga of the Jomsvikings, she comes across a few passages of a saga that Bjartur finds to be too brash and too bold for a young girl. These passages are what he discerns as smut. Being that his daughter is not old enough to make decisions on her own, and in his mind will possibly never be old enough for such a task, he disciplines her, telling her that she is never again allowed to read lines like those. By nature, Ásta Sollilja is intensely shy, but with the stern words of her father she is afraid to ever cross him again. Ignorance is forced upon her, just as it was forced upon Steina, even though a father figure was present in Ásta Sollilja's life. Her father's silence causes her problems and embarrassment and when she later in life becomes pregnant she is banned from her father's home and left to move out and live on her own in the nearby city, raising her daughter with no connection to her family and in miserable poverty.

The shyness that causes Ásta Sollilja's silence, and was most likely caused by the silent environment in which she was raised, is apparent in many other, less serious situations, as well. She and Steina find themselves in similar situations at other parts of the story, during Ásta Sollilja's first trip to the city and during Steina's long trip across the Atlantic on a ship filled with immigrants from other nations. Mentioned earlier was the present that Bjartur wished to give his daughter in the form of a trip to town and gifts from various shops. She enjoyed the trip very much, remarking on how different life was in the town, such as the well dressed men and women who were

“extroordinarily generous with their laughter and their happiness.” (Laxness 197)

These were emotions that Ásta Sollilja did not often experience and the noise of laughter and chatting was surprising and new. The errands that father and daughter ran together were pleasing to Ásta and she got to speak to several new people, such as the merchant and the bookseller. All was well until the very end when she and her father had to spend the night in a lodging house with many other men from town and the surrounding farms.

The noise was incredible and Ásta Sollilja did not know how to react. It terrified her to see dozens of men being rowdy, all the while screaming at each other and threatening to make fights amongst the group. When she asks her father why the men are being so loud, he assures her that it is all of the alcohol that they have consumed, a drink that never shows up on the farm of Summerhouses. The young girl is terrified and seeks only the comfort of her father, who refuses to give it to her. His stoicism can not even be broken to comfort his scared daughter.

When Steina finds herself in a situation that is noisy and incomprehensible to the simple farm-child’s mind she is on the ship that will carry her to America to see her father. The ship is filled with immigrants that are all drinking and singing and having a merry time. Steina is worried by all of the partying that surrounds her and all of the noise is as foreign as the languages that she hears being spoken to her. Even in the ruckus she can not actually understand anything. She is being silenced again by her upbringing, because her language skills, which are barely sufficient for everyday spoken Icelandic within her own family, do not allow her to communicate with the new people she has encountered.

Interestingly, in both of these situations, alcohol is encountered by characters for the first time. Nature and upbringing encourage silence, but alcohol seems to have a power to break down the well established norms of silence. It allows many Scandinavians to break from their typical social shyness and be as loud and as obnoxious as they wish to be. Daun explains in his book that when alcohol is present “it is permitted to be “too” aggressive, “too” sentimental, “too” loud or gay.” (Daun 51) The same applies for anyone who has been to Reykjavík in modern times, for the Icelanders are a very hardy culture of partiers, yet in neither of the novels that Laxness writes is alcohol present, except for these two situations. The lack of alcohol could certainly be seen as a contributor to the stark silence that is felt throughout the book, and arguably could have helped out on those long winter nights trapped inside of a turf house with little sunlight and nothing but work to occupy the time.

From just the few examples that stand here in the pages it is obvious that the upbringing of children in a world of silence does more harm than good. In a best case scenario children wish to leave their parental homes and move onto bigger and better things, as is the case with Nonni, but in the worst case silence can lead to the teen pregnancy that has a detrimental effect on the lives of the young girls of the family and their parents as well, at least those that are present at the time of birth. But just as we looked at women from different classes to see the effect of a silent nature we must too quickly look at the children that appear from other classes, with our main example being the children of the Bailiff and Mistress of Myri.

As mentioned earlier, the Mistress of Myri was never afraid to speak out, even though she was not always heard, a situation that mirrors that of the Icelandic nation

in its fight for independence from Denmark, but her attempts to be heard seem to have been a much better behavioral model for her children than the silent model that Bjartur and Steinar used. The proof is evident in the professions that the children of Myri were able to secure for themselves. The Myri son, Ingolfur Arnason Jónsson, becomes the head of the cooperative that seeks to help the poor farmers of the district build a better life for themselves. He uses his language and position daily to talk to farmers and convince them to invest their time and stock in the cooperative company. He has grown up to be a true politician, and all politicians must have a way with language that brings them power. An aura of silence would never get anything accomplished in a political world and luckily, with the upbringing in the Myri household, Ingolfur does not fall victim to a silent way of life.

Here, as opposed to the situation with gender, it appears that class can overpower silence. A possible explanation for this could also have more to do with a difference in generation than a difference in class, seeing that the Mistress of Myri is older than her son, but there are insufficient appearances of her daughter to be able to make a decent and fair judgment on the matter. All we know of the daughter is that she was well educated and beautiful, and even more than her mother, well spoken. Whether or not her words were taken seriously is not present in the novel, though it would certainly solidify the argument that class can have an effect on the presence of silence.

Children's susceptibility to their surroundings is something that is important to take into account when reading the novels and also looking at how silence, such as that that is exhibited by Bjartur and Steinar, can manifest itself for generations, even

centuries, within a community like those found within Scandinavia. The tradition of silence that was built up in Section III of this paper proves that silence has been present since the settlement of the area and continues to be present through its manifestations in the family structure.

4.5 Other Characters

The family has been the main aspect of study in this paper, but as I have tried to do by talking about difference in class and gender amongst members of the family, it is important to remember that nothing exists in a vacuum, and the family is no exception. Because of this I would like to talk about other members of the community that are seen in both of the novels that have some sort of interaction with the family units at some point or another and how they exhibit silence. All of the people that will be mentioned here that are outside of the family are from a different social standing than the poor farming families, but not necessarily much more well off. The town officials certainly have more clout but it is arguable that the clergy members, although men of the cloth, do not carry as much weight in society.

The parish pastor in *Independent People* is a very interesting character who appears only a handful of times throughout the novel, but each time carries a demeanor very unlike what one would expect from a man of the church, especially the leader of the church. This is the person that occasionally refuses to deliver a sermon even when the occasion calls for it. At the wedding between Bjartur and his first wife, the pastor is quite unhappy to be there. “I see no reason for dragging me out here,” he grumbled. “There are probably people here already who know more

about preaching than I do.’” (Laxness 22) After Rosa’s death, he reacts in a similar manner stating “you’re sure demand a sermon of me, but I intend telling you once and for all that I don’t see the point of making a speech over a corpse in this sort of weather.” (Laxness 117) Neither for Bjartur’s first marriage nor for the death of his first wife was a sermon delivered by this man, allowing the Mistress of Myri to step in and deliver her own version of a speech, which as already discussed, was not gladly taken by the majority of the crowd.

Just like the job of a politician, the job of a preacher is to talk, but for this somewhat peculiar, often sullen man, it is not a part of the duty which he wishes to fulfill. It is this attitude from a man that holds a high position in society, even though not one that provides him with much wealth, that is yet another negative model for the people of the district, especially the men, such as Bjartur. If the man whose job it is to talk refuses to do so then why should anyone else below him, who has neither the credentials nor the eloquence to speak, open his mouth in any forum?

Another religious figure, the Bishop Þjóðrekur in *Paradise Reclaimed* is a bit different from the pastor in *Independent People*. He is a Mormon missionary, originally an Icelander that had emigrated to Utah, who returns and is chased out of district after district, beaten, and tied up on occasion, just because of his willingness to speak. Here is a man who is not afraid of the silence that engulfs the majority of the Icelanders, possibly because of his extensive travels and his connection to a foreign religion in a foreign land, but when he speaks up, he is forcibly put back down. He is tied to rocks, his belongings stolen, and threats are made against him, such as telling the king of Denmark about the blasphemy he is preaching, as if the

King would personally punish the man for breaking with tradition. The Icelanders look at his words as blasphemy, telling him that he can not speak the way he does. Just as the Mistress of Myri, who speaks but is never heard, the same happens to this ambitious man.

This speaks to the ties that the Icelanders have with tradition and their fear to break with that. Just as Bjartur sees the peak in language as having happened long before his birth in the literature of the sagas, so too see many Icelanders the situation. To speak outside of this tradition is uncomfortable, possibly even terrifying, for many people. Tradition leads the people to silence a man who is looking to free them from the chains of oppression that have been on their mouths for so many years.

The two contrasting religious figures are interesting to look at, even though they are on the fringe of the topic, because they show two different positions based on the silence and tradition of the land, but they work together to illustrate the nature of silence in Iceland. At the same time, there are two district officials who should be mentioned as well, because they work with silence in their own ways. These people are the Bailiff from *Independent People* and the Sheriff from *Paradise Reclaimed*.

The Bailiff's wife, the Mistress of Myri, has been mentioned many times in this paper already, but oddly enough, her husband, Jón of Myri, the man who gives her the status that she claims in society, has hardly been spoken of. Though his name is often uttered, usually in disgust by Bjartur, he does not play a very active role in the novels. On the occasion when Bjartur must travel to the house of Myri to tell them of his first wife's death, when he finds himself in a room with both the Bailiff and the Mistress, he talks to the Bailiff but is answered by the Mistress. This odd

triangle of conversation shows the obvious disdain the the Bailiff has for words as well. He does not even show much of any expression with his body language.

“When the Bailiff saw that his wife had assumed the leadership in this affair, he settled down quietly again and started yawning, a habit of his if, when listening to conversation, his mouth was not full of tobacco juice...” (Laxness 108) His biggest worry is the chewing tobacco in his mouth and not losing a drop of the nicotine laden spittle that is in his mouth. Instead of reacting to the news of Rosa’s death, he occasionally will tilt his head just to release some of the spittle and continue chewing on the snuff.

Again we have a poor model for the people of the district. The man to whom they all look for care is a man who is hardly willing to speak. His façade of silence may appear scary to some people, namely the women and children in the district, especially someone like Ásta Sollilja, but it makes him the object of scorn of others, like Bjartur, who could possibly wish to be as silent as the Bailiff who never has to seek to defend himself because he is comfortable in his own standing in society.

In the pages of *Paradise Reclaimed*, we find another district official, the Sheriff Björn of Leirur, who is very different than the Bailiff in the other story. Björn is quite outspoken and is of course a well known name in the district. What is unique about him in comparison to the Bailiff at the house of Myri is that he actively seeks to silence people within his community. The Sheriff is the well known father of many illegitimate children throughout the district, including the one born to Steina, who was fully aware of what sexual contact was and what happened to her at the hands of the Sheriff. Lucky for the Sheriff he must not work hard to silence his victim, as she

is naïve enough to not know what happened to her, but he seeks to keep his relations with the child a secret and goes so far as to claim that the father of the child is another boy in the district, one that had previously been interested in Steina before her pregnancy. Both the sheriff and her former suitor look to mold the situation to their favor because they are fully aware that the girl will not be able to say anything in her own defense, especially to the contrary of two men within the district.

The Bailiff in Myri would never go to such lengths to silence the people in his district, and his “oppression” seems to be much more of an imagined phenomenon in Bjartur’s mind, though there is no doubt that his silence has an effect on those around him, at least in the form of a negative model of behavior. His counterpart in the other novel, however, is a much more negative example of someone who works within the confines of silence to oppress someone else that is so deeply affected by the conditions that silence have created within her life.

All of these characters that are outside of the family still interact with the unit at some point in time and also work within the realm of silence. Some are simply models of what silence can do, while one works with it to oppress others, and another is an example of how Icelanders react to those that break the silence. They are important for the understanding of this phenomenon in society at the times in which their lives are illustrated and can not be left out of the larger picture of the society into which the family fits. Family history and the chronology of silence have woven themselves together into the entity which presents itself in a very clear light in the works of Halldór Laxness which certainly must have been some reflection on what he saw occurring around him from day to day throughout his childhood and at present

when he wrote the novels. This comment on society is an important one, and adds to our further understanding of the Nordic mind and the extent to which it was, and still is affected by the phenomenon of silence.

Chapter 5: A Jump Forward: The Family, Silence, and Today

In chapters 2 and 3, which presented the Family History of Norden and the Chronology of Silence in the north, the presentation of material ended at the end of the “Long Nineteenth Century,” a term that appears in history books on the Nordic world. This was a convenient place to end the build up of information in these two areas because it led perfectly into the time period in which the novels by Laxness took place. At least a century has passed, though, since the time period written about in the novels, and nearly half a century since the second of the two novels, *Paradise Reclaimed*, was published in 1960. There is still one question that is begging to be asked with regards to the family and silence. Namely, what is the situation like today? How have things changed and what is the current situation like in Norden?

Today in Norden the family unit is still the typical nuclear family that one has seen throughout history, with a few changes that have happened over time. The Nordic countries lead the world in rights for minorities, particularly relevant to the family are rights for women and homosexuals. These rights, coupled with the “social safety net” or Nordic welfare system, which is famous throughout the world, allow for many more alternative families in the north. This welfare system, as comprehensive as it may be in all of the Nordic countries, is not congruent across borders, and in Iceland, for example, it is more difficult for one to acquire social benefits. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s 1999 report on Benefits and Wages, social assistance is to be given

only as a “last resort.” (Benefits and Wages 3) Other countries, such as Sweden, tend to be much more generous with the dispensation of assistance.

In a pamphlet by Karin Alfredsson entitled *Equal Opportunities: Sweden leads the way*, detailed explanations are given about how Sweden is trying hard to push equality between the sexes. The north leads the world in numbers of women working outside of the home, which is easily allowed for with the system of childcare provided by the government and the fact that countries such as Sweden are working to close the gap in pay scale differences between men and women, a fight that Alfredsson calls “an uphill struggle.” (Alfredsson 20) Once again, according to OECD 71.8% of women in Sweden are employed outside of the home compared to 81.2% in Iceland. Sweden has 39.5% of children under three years of age in childcare services, while Iceland has 58.7%. These numbers shed light onto why so many women are in the work place. (Babies and Bosses) More freedom exists for women to choose to go to work sooner after their maternity leave is over. This system has worked seemingly well in Norden and helps to reshape the family and allow fathers and mothers to reclaim their independence, the common goal for Nordics that has existed from the Middle Ages well into today.

Sweden was one of the first countries to introduce paternity leave to the world, a phenomenon that is catching on today, allowing fathers to stay home and bond with their children. These equal opportunities lead to lower divorce rates, at least according to Lars Jalmert, as quoted in Alfredsson’s work that “in Sweden, it is inequality that leads to divorce.” (Alfredsson 14) Even though divorce rates in Sweden are lower than in other places in the world, most likely due to the equality

that is fostered by the governments, the majority of children that come from households of divorce, some 90%, stay in contact with their fathers, and not just through monetary support. (Alfredsson 14)

Divorce is not totally extinct in the north, but single mothers do not struggle to support a family in the same way that they have to in other parts of the world, due to the social safety net. The situation of equality also leads to more alternative families than just single parent homes. Laws allowing homosexuals to marry or at a minimum register their relationship with the government, such as in Denmark, also allow for same sex couples to care for children. Though insufficient statistics are given in an article by Edward Ashbee entitled *The Same-Sex Marriage Debate in the US and Representations of Scandinavia*, he does write that according to William Eskridge, et. al. in a 2004 article that the authors were “tempted to think that registered partnerships drove the higher marriage and lower divorce rates and, in effect, staved off the ‘end of marriage’.” (Ashbee 168)

It seems fairly obvious that equal rights have helped to reshape the face of marriage and family on the adult side of the spectrum, but they have also made strides for the children, as well. Nordic families find it very important that their children be independent, a theme that was very visible in the Laxness novels, and still exists today. With the compulsory schooling that was introduced into the north and constantly improved as time continued, children are properly socialized and know how to interact with people of their own age and from other generations. This is something that the children in the novels lacked. Girls have the same opportunities as boys to attend school and the university system. Parents, especially working parents,

do not have to worry about their children being taken care of and have the luxury of living their own lives as children grow up. Although it sounds like the state has taken over the right to raise children, this is certainly not true, but what has happened is the creation of a happier family unit than before, where much of the day to day stress that existed before has been lifted off of the shoulders of the struggling parent, allowing him or her to raise happier children.

The changes to the family unit seem to be for the best. The situation seems to have improved to make life easier and the family as a whole happier. But equally important is to look at the status of silence in today's Norden. All of Norden, Iceland included, is certainly a modernized society. At this point they are even considered "post-industrial" due to the fact that they are societies that produce more services than goods. Iceland's economy is heavily based on the services that it provides, though the burgeoning aluminum industry is becoming more and more important for creating jobs. Iceland has been independent for 64 years in 2008 but remains more connected to the world than when it had mandatory connections with Denmark or Norway. It has made a much bigger name for itself in independence than in being a territory.

So the question must be asked, does the tradition of silence still exist today? Is it possible for isolation to exist in a globalizing world like today? Iceland, as mentioned earlier, is now a society based on services, like tourism. Companies like Icelandair have brought many people in and out of the country and connect the Icelanders with worldwide destinations. No longer is travel accomplished by unsafe ships needing days to cross portions of the turbulent North Atlantic. Access to the island is the easiest it has ever been.

At the same time, however, the Icelanders have worked hard to maintain their uniqueness in a world where blending of cultures is the norm. Language purity standards are higher than they are in France, a country that is known worldwide for its efforts to keep foreign languages, namely English, out of its vocabulary. The Icelandic Language societies regularly meet and invent new words for technology that never existed before. Icelanders readily incorporate these old words that call up the tradition of the sagas into their vocabulary. Computers weren't even a twinkle in an inventor's eye during the medieval period, but their name takes us back to the mythology of pre-Viking times, with the modern word, "tölva," in Iceland being a mix of the plural for numbers, "töl," and the ending of the word for goddess, "volva." By using language that is so radically different from others an isolation is built up.

Even on an Icelandair flight, one notices that little connection is felt with the Icelanders and that their language is quite incomprehensible to the typical outsider. Even though the three main Scandinavian languages are mutually intelligible, Icelandic is out of the loop. Its written form is only understood by those who spend time looking for connections and it does not have a sound that is readily understood by others. Physical separation may not be the same issue that it was in the past, but there still exists a mental separation. Icelanders are well aware of their traditional past, namely the sagas, which reside now in Iceland after a long stay in Denmark.

Just as is visible in other societies, it is not a necessity to talk at all times just to be heard. If there is nothing to be said, there is no need to waste time with talking. As mentioned earlier with the quotes on alcohol in Swedish culture by Daun, unless one is inebriated there is no need to be "too" loud, let alone heard at all. I am

reminded of a story that was told to me by a friend who visited Iceland in the wintertime. While traveling in the car one afternoon with friends, the radio, which had previously been playing the disc jockey's chatter in between songs, was suddenly silent, save for faintly heard background music. When my friend inquired as to what was going on, she got the reply from her Icelandic friends that it was time for the news on the radio. The background music was typically the background for the new report. Since there was nothing to report, however, instead of reporting about something of little importance, the preference was to just keep quiet and not say anything at all.

It would be tough to imagine anywhere else in the western world where the news report would be filled with silence. American news seeks to inundate everyone with as much information in as little time as possible, and if there is nothing "real" to report about, a news anchor can always fall back onto celebrity gossip. There is no doubt that silence is still in the minds and souls of the Nordic people. Not only is it still in Iceland, but also in the rest of Norden. One must only look at the places in Daun's book in which silence, quietness, shyness, and the likes are mentioned. Although his work was originally published in Swedish in 1989, it was republished in English translation in 1996. Even though these dates are still over a decade from today, the book is still important for today's understanding of the Swedish Mentality and can even be found currently on bookshelves here in the United States. Proverbs and sayings that Daun mentions in his book still exist within Sweden today and are used regularly, showing that there is some real substance to the topic.

Looking beyond the scope of today, we can also ask ourselves how, with the influx of immigration into the northern countries, the family and silence will be affected throughout the coming decades. Already in 1989 Daun was able to collect quotes about the volume, meaning actual decibel level, not size, of foreigners on the streets within Sweden and how it made those native to the country feel. Taken from a term paper by Marie-Louise Öhlund, foreigners on the streets of Stockholm are described as screaming, loud and having large families. (Daun 122) Although initial reactions to immigration and foreigners seem to be more negative than positive, at least regarding language and noise level norms, one will have to wait and see what the future holds in regards to attitudes. This is a question to be addressed in the future.

As for now, however, it seems even though there have been great improvements to the structure of the family since the time period described in Laxness's novels, there is still a silence, or at least a desire to stay quiet, that is intrinsic to the Nordics. The appearance on the surface may have changed, but internalized within the soul of the people lies the dangerous phenomenon that has existed throughout history, as far back as can be researched by modern means.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

I hope that in the previous pages the sense has come through that silence is as destructive as the assaultive speech which troubled Matsuda, et. al. in 1993. Just like words, silence can assault, injure, exclude, and oppress people that posses it internally as well as those who are subjected to it. Even with its high standing in society that has existed for many centuries, it can work to destroy individuals and groups of people. One of the groups that it attacks to its core is the family. It creates problems within this basic unit while at the same time working across class divides to solidify hierarchy and stop mobility.

We saw examples of silence coming from the outside in the foreign rule that Denmark imposed onto other countries and in the story with Björn of Leirur intimidating the girls of the district into not talking. We saw people in all areas modeling silence. Pastors, district officials like the Bailiff of Myri, and parental figures like Bjartur and Steinar. The family perpetuates the silence that has become a daily part of life to the Nordics. It is its creator and its victim.

With Matsuda worried about the effects of speech and my research worrying about the effects of silence, where can one find a happy medium? I suppose that most people in the western world have found a way to be comfortable balancing speech and silence but there still exists many places where the political situation deals with these two phenomena. There are many countries where people are afraid to speak or because of tradition are accustomed to not being able to speak freely as is the case in the west. A study in silence pertaining to the literature of China or Japan, for

example, would be a very interesting addition to this study. Asian culture is quite different from Nordic culture, but it would be very exciting to look at the roots of the phenomenon of silence to see if they tend to be fairly common.

While I set out with the goal of writing as comprehensive a work as time would allow, there are still gaps in information that could be filled in to benefit this study. A deeper and more extensive look into saga literature would be beneficial for understanding more of the representations that Laxness uses in his novels. Though I mentioned that the majority of scholarly work that has been done with Laxness to date is about his connection with the sagas, this secondary literature is quite dated. One would want to look more at newer interpretations of the sagas based on updated information and possibly redraw connections to Laxness rather than simply take the existing literature, though certainly well done but sparse, at full value. There has also been much more extensive research done on the status of women than I was able to look at. The comprehensive books written by people like Jenny Jochens that tell of the status of the medieval Norse woman would be a bolster to the information chronicling the history of the family and would possibly also shed light onto the women in the novels. Having a chance to look at more research in this area could only help in understanding the literature. Researching a topic like this is a never ending process and certainly as time goes on and more research comes across my desk, I hope to continue to look at the novels and how they represent a fascinating society.

Throughout my time working with this topic several other questions came to my mind, more particular to Laxness and the north, which would also make for

valuable projects in future research. Looking at the presence of alcohol in literature would be an interesting project, as it has only few appearances in the Laxness novels that I have used. Does it appear in other works from the same time period or other time periods? To what extremes is it presented? How does it come to affect those who use it? These questions are not easily answered, but would make for an interesting cultural study dealing with what many Nordics look at as a problematic phenomenon; alcoholism. Is Daun correct that alcohol is used to consciously loosen up, or has its use and abuse just become another destructive tool, like silence, that is no longer given much thought?

While these questions require study that does not necessarily pertain to silence, I would also find it interesting to look deeper into the issue of body language. Several times it was mentioned that a character was unable to verbally express him or herself, but at the same time gave little physical reaction. Are there standards or norms for body language in the north that have been studied? Did Laxness intentionally leave out the physical response to a situation or is this a signal of a deeper quality of stoicism that goes beyond words? To get a larger feel for how physical responses are depicted in literature I think that any kind of cross cultural study would be most interesting and can hopefully be done in the future.

In the meantime, while projects like those outlined above are being researched, we will have to continue to pay attention to the boundaries of speech and silence and how they affect us and those that surround us in our lives. If the protagonists of Laxness's novels had had the insight to look at their actions their lives

might not have been as negative as they were. Luckily for us, however, silence got the best of them and made for great fiction for us to enjoy.

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