

# The Liminality of Loki

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**ABSTRACT:** This article, the 2018 winner of the AASSC Gurli Aagaard Woods Undergraduate Publication Award, compares Victor Turner's concept of liminality with common characteristics of trickster figures to show how the Norse god Loki is not only a trickster figure, but also a liminal one. As this article demonstrates, both trickster and liminal figures comment on a society's social norms by challenging those social norms in order to enact change. Therefore, by closely examining the boundary-breaking nature of trickster figures as it relates to liminality, this article provides a fuller understanding of Loki's character and his motivations. This critical analysis then points to the significance of what the presence of these figures could have meant for Old Norse society, as well as society today.

**RÉSUMÉ :** Cet article, qui a remporté en 2018 le *Gurli Aagaard Woods Undergraduate Publication Award* (Prix Gurli Aagaard Woods pour les publications de premier cycle) de l'AAESC, compare le concept de liminalité introduit par Victor Turner aux caractéristiques communes des figures d'illusionnistes/« filous »/escrocs/farceurs pour démontrer que le dieu nordique Loki n'est pas seulement une représentation du farceur, mais aussi une figure liminale. Comme le démontre cet article, les figures de farceurs et les figures liminales fournissent toutes deux un commentaire des normes sociales d'une société en les remettant en question afin donner vie à ce changement. Par conséquent, en examinant de près la nature révolutionnaire des figures de farceurs à la lumière de la liminalité, cet article permet de mieux comprendre le personnage de Loki et ses motivations. Cette analyse critique met ensuite en évidence l'importance de ce que la présence de ces personnages aurait pu signifier pour l'ancienne société nordique, ainsi que pour la société actuelle.

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ithin various mythologies, the trickster figure emerges as an enigmatic and fascinating character. The trickster figure in Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda* and the anonymously authored *Poetic Edda* is Loki. He plays a central role in Norse mythology, appearing in various accounts in the *Eddas*. Loki is a complex character, and as a result there are many ways to interpret his personality and function.

Scholars Jan De Vries, George Dumézil, and Folke Ström have contributed to the analysis of Loki as a trickster figure. As Shawn Christopher Krause-Loner describes, De Vries "cites Loki's delight in mischief making and his cunning as defining traits on which to build one's understanding of the character" (66), Dumézil "links Loki with other Indo-European thief and killer figures" (66), and Ströme "claims that Loki is an integral part of the drama; he is the scapegoat figure" (67). Krause-Loner himself analyzes Loki by looking at three aspects: the different characteristics of a trickster figure, liminality, and the Norse myths that feature Loki. Fatima Eloeva explores the perspective that there is an evolutionary progression to figures such as Loki in which the figure moves from deity to trickster to culture hero. Jerold Frakes uses Dumézil's paradigm to show how Loki cannot be easily placed into any of his three categories of function (sovereignty, warrior/protector, or provider of well-being). Stephanie von Schnurbein looks at Loki in the context of medieval Scandinavian society in order to illustrate his role in their mythology. Kevin Wanner uses Loki as a case study to argue that there is a relationship between cunning intelligence and sovereignty.

Though the scholarship surrounding Loki is widespread, Krause-Loner is the only one to my knowledge who discusses at length the trickster figure's connection to liminality. Victor Turner's concept of liminality offers an interesting route to explore Loki's character. One function of Loki is to destabilize the established order of society by breaking boundaries so that he may bring about change. For the purpose of this article, boundary-breaking is examined in three ways with respect to physical boundaries, social boundaries, and moral boundaries. Each of these boundaries is applied to the character Loki as he serves to revolutionize society.

Before Loki himself can be analyzed, liminality as discussed and developed by British cultural anthropologist Victor Turner must be defined. Turner notes:

The attributes of liminality or of liminal *personae* ("threshold people") are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. (1969, 95)

Liminal figures are thus located somewhere between structures of society, never truly belonging to one or another. In this sense, trickster figures in mythology have a predisposition to be liminal. William Hynes points out in his discussion of trickster figures that a main characteristic of the trickster is that he “appears on the edge or just beyond existing borders, classifications, and categories” (34). As neither liminal nor trickster figures are confined by boundaries, we come to see that an overarching aspect of liminal and trickster figures, such as Loki, is their ability to break boundaries.

Loki’s non-conformity to physical boundaries is twofold. First, it is important to note Loki’s shapeshifting capability. According to Turner, there is a “structural invisibility” (1969, 169) to liminal figures; they “may be disguised” (169). Often, liminal figures are seen as altering their appearances in one way or another. In the *Prose Edda*, Loki aids in the theft of Idunn and her anti-aging apples. He is reprimanded by the Æsir and is sent to correct his crime: “When Loki got hold of the falcon shape, he flew north into Giant Land. ... Loki changed [Idunn] into the shape of a nut, and, holding her in his claws, he flew away as fast as he could” (Sturluson 82). Not only does Loki alter his own physique, but he also alters the form of another being. An underlying theme of Loki’s shapeshifting is that of deception. Loki is a cunning character, and he uses that to his advantage. He is able to manipulate a situation by disguising himself. Here, Loki showcases the hypocrisy of society—the act of outwardly being one thing, while inwardly being another. This hypocrisy could be applicable to Old Norse societies, as well as society in general. Only the liminal figure can go to such lengths to show this.

Second, Loki rejects the binary notion of sex. Turner comments, “[liminal figures] are represented as being neither male nor female. Alternatively, they may be ... assigned characteristics of both sexes” (1967, 98). Loki appears in Norse mythology as being able to transform himself to be either male or female. During an episode in the *Prose Edda*, Loki not only morphs into a mare, once again displaying his shapeshifting ability, but also his “relations with [the stallion] Svadilfari were such that a while later, he gave birth to a colt” (Sturluson 54). This is not the only time Loki uses his ability to change his sex. In “Thrym’s Poem,” recorded in the anonymously authored *Poetic Edda*, the gods decide to dress Thor up as a woman in order to retrieve Thor’s missing hammer Mjöllnir. Though Thor, the epitome of masculinity, is reluctant, Loki offers to accompany Thor and “be [his] maid” (*Poetic Edda*, 96). Loki’s capacity and unashamed willingness to break the boundary of binary sex seems to have the underlying purpose to comment upon fixed cultural ideals of what is male and what is female. Moreover, this ability of Loki’s might suggest that there is a problem with society—specifically Old Norse societies, but once again perhaps also extending to societies across cultures and ages—thinking in terms of and abiding by strict gender roles. This notion is reflected in the subtext. For example, the colt that Loki birthed, Sleipnir, becomes the famous horse of Odin. Also, it is only due to Loki’s cunning intellect

and womanly disguise that Thor's true identity remained a secret for long enough so that they could retrieve Mjöllnir. Had Loki not been able to switch his sex, Odin would not have his horse and Thor may very well have not regained his hammer—two significant elements in Norse mythology.

Delving deeper into the social construct of gender, particularly binary gender, Loki does seem to be more associated with one over the other. At first, this may seem contradictory to his inherent liminality, but upon closer inspection, it only reinforces his liminality. As Turner writes, “[liminal figures’] ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions” (1969, 95). We have seen in the episode of Thor and his quest for Mjöllnir that masculinity is a prized attribute of Thor, and we can thus conclude that masculinity would have been a prized attribute of men in general at the time of this poem's recording. Loki does not have that need to be seen as masculine. Throughout the *Eddas*, he is in fact associated with the feminine. In the story of Baldr's death as told by Sturluson, Loki is described twice as the “son of Laufey” (65, 69), “Laufey” being Loki's mother. Later on in the *Prose Edda* during the account of how the dwarves made treasures for the gods, Loki is once again named the “son of Laufey” (92). This same type of pattern is seen in the *Poetic Edda* in the poem “Loki's Quarrel” when Loki refers to himself as “Laufey's son” (52) as well as in “Thrym's Poem” when he is named “Laufey's son” (18, 20). Even though Loki's father is named in his initial introduction in the *Prose Edda* as Farbauti (Sturluson 38), Loki is not associated with his father as the other *Æsir* are. Thor, for example, is associated with his father, as we can see in the Eddic poem “The Seeress' Prophecy” where Thor is deemed “Hlodyn's glorious boy: / Odin's son” (*Poetic Edda*, 11). Loki, conversely, is associated with his mother, which is, in fact, what heightens his liminality. Though we know Loki's father to be a giant, the species of his mother is not named in either the *Prose* or *Poetic Eddas*. Loki's identifier, then, is a mysterious figure—perhaps even a liminal one herself. Once again, he could be used to criticize society's view of gender. Simply because Thor is the son of Odin does not automatically make him stronger, faster, or smarter—traditionally masculine traits—than Loki, the son of Laufey.

Looking more broadly at social boundaries, Loki provides a commentary on etiquette. Turner relays that liminal figures are “temporarily undefined, beyond the normative social structure. ... They are dead to the social world, but alive to the asocial world” (1974, 59). The entirety of the Eddic poem “Loki's Quarrel” is exemplary of Loki's conflict with social order. Not only does he interrupt a feast to which he was not invited, he also proceeds to insult everyone there once he obtains a seat. What is interesting about the commentary Loki gives in this poem is that many of his allegations are backed up in other accounts. An instance of this occurs when Loki says to Freyr:

“With gold you had Gymer’s daughter bought  
 and so you gave away your sword;  
 but when Muspell’s sons ride over Myrkwood,  
 you don’t know then, wretch, how you’ll fight.”  
 (*Poetic Edda*, 88)

Here, Loki mentions how Freyr exchanged his sword for the help of his servant, the full story of which is told in the poem “Skirnir’s Journey.” Once again, Loki’s criticism seems to be directed at society’s hypocritical ways—only this time in a blunter manner because he verbally states them. Each one of the Æsir has shortcomings, yet the only one able to call attention to them is the liminal figure because he is not, like the others, bound by social customs. Though the other Æsir try to turn the flytings back to Loki, none of their words hold any merit. They fail at their attempt to shame Loki with his own shortcomings. In fact, Loki seems to be immune to shame, which is a consistent quality of the liminal figure. The result of Loki’s immunity to shame is the Æsir desperately trying to get the attention off themselves because they know Loki’s words are true, but do not want to be called out.

Moral boundaries are closely associated with the previously discussed matter of social boundaries in that many aspects of society include a moral code. Turner states, “If our basic model of society is that of a ‘structure of positions,’ we must regard the period of margin or ‘liminality’ as an interstructural situation” (1967, 93). This idea can be applied to the notion of morality. Liminal figures cannot be regarded as moral, for that is a defined social construct. Neither can they be labelled immoral, however, because that position occupies the opposite pole, and liminal figures do not align with extremes. Therefore, liminal figures must be deemed as amoral. They do not act out of goodness, but then they also do not act out of evilness; they simply act. Loki displays this concept in many of his appearances in the Prose and *Poetic Eddas*. Sturluson remarks, “[Loki] constantly places the gods in difficulties and often solves their problems with guile” (39). Loki both helps and hinders the Æsir. He puts them in danger and gets them out of trouble. The significance of this lies in the paradoxical need for Loki to achieve some sort of balance, but balance on his own terms and in his own way.

Coincidentally, there is one instance where Loki causes a problem for the Æsir, but when he has the chance to remedy the problem, he fails to do so. This instance is Baldr’s death. The episode of Baldr’s death includes Loki once again going incognito, where he obtains knowledge about the only way to harm Baldr—mistletoe. He then convinces Hod, a blind member of the Æsir, to shoot Baldr with mistletoe (Sturluson 65–66). The only way to save Baldr from Hel is for everyone to weep for him, but Loki, wearing the guise of a giantess named Thokk, says:

“Thokk will weep  
 dry tears at  
 Baldr’s funeral pyre.  
 Alive or dead the old man’s [Odin’s]  
 son gave me no joy.  
 Let Hel hold what she has.”  
 (69)

Loki’s refusal to weep for the dead god in order to release him from Hel could very well be the most significant comment on social change made by Loki thus far; as Turner describes, a liminal figure “produces revolutionary strivings for renewed *communitas*” (1969, 129). Since liminal figures do not soundly fit into the established structures of society, their very nature lends themselves to be activists for change. Baldr’s death signifies the start of Ragnarok, the Norse apocalypse. The world is ultimately destroyed, both physically and socially. However, in Norse mythology, life is of a cyclical nature, rather than a linear one. Thus, the world is subsequently reborn. After the earth literally goes down in flames and submerges beneath the sea, it resurfaces once more. Humanity is lost, and then starts anew. Baldr is killed, but then rises from the dead. Loki commits second degree murder and then refuses to rectify this as a way of changing society in the most literal and direct way possible—by obliterating it so it may be reinvented. He does not act maliciously, but instead is arguably trying to help society by overhauling it. His criticism of society here is clear; that it has remained stagnant for too long and needs to continue on in its cycle.

In conclusion, by analyzing the ways Loki breaks boundaries, we can see that he shows himself to be a liminal trickster who functions as a critic of society’s cultural norms. One must ask, then, why? Teaching society a lesson is a possible purpose for Loki’s critiques. Society thrives on order, on everything fitting nicely into a structure. Tricksters disrupt order, never fitting into any structure. They are always changing. Loki, as we have seen, changes his gender, his appearance, his species, and the social order. Perhaps all of this is an attempt to change society’s values. Since change sometimes takes time, especially when dealing with social norms inherently ingrained in society, the liminal trickster figure in mythology can be used as an outlet. Society can use the liminal trickster figure to vicariously experiment with its values without actually practicing change. The liminal trickster figure might act as a release for society, the one place where members of society can participate in gender and sex exploration, for example, or other historically taboo areas. These values are not restricted to just ancient Norse civilization, but are cross-cultural and cross-generational. A liminal figure such as Loki crosses these boundaries of culture and generation, and therefore can still provide the means of seeing and voicing problems of society. In our world today, we see cultures constantly wanting to evolve and adapt. Conversations around sex and gender, as well as social and moral values, are becoming more

and more prevalent. Further research into how these universal themes relate to the liminal trickster could provide more findings as to how these figures are relevant to society today.

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