



The Hávamál (Sayings of Hár, Sayings of the high one) is one of the poems of the Poetic Edda. It sets out a set of guidelines for wise living and survival; some verses are written from the perspective of Odin (particularly towards the end, where it segues into an account of Odin's obtaining of the magical runes and the spells he learned). The Hávamál is both practical and metaphysical in content. The only surviving source for this poem is contained within the Codex Regius and is thought to be no older than c. year 800 from earlier oral tradition. We have seven English Translations of the Hávamál available on the Temple of Our Heathen Gods resource website:

[Auden & Taylor](#)

[James Chisholm](#)

[Benjamin Thorpe](#)

[H.A. Bellows](#)

[Lee Hollander](#)

[Olive Bray](#)

[Patricia Terry](#)

It can be immensely interesting and instructional to read and compare two of more translations, stanza by stanza, in order to identify the differences in meaning that each translation may contain. We've built whole Kindred study group sessions out of this activity, but a Heathen individual or family could do this as well. We're working on building an on-line version of this stanza-by-stanza examination and analysis. Follow this link to check our progress:

## Stanza-by-Stanza Havamal Analysis

The Hávamál consists of a number of poems, which shift in tone and tenor and narrative position. Numerous English translations exist of the text. The three main sections of the Hávamál are the Gestapátr (1-79), the Loddfáfnismál (80-137), and the Rúnatal (138-165).

### Gestapátr

The first section Gestapátr, the "guest's section", strophes 1 - 79, comprises a set of maxims for how to comport oneself when a guest and travelling, focussing particularly on the etiquette and behavioral relationships between hosts and guests and the sacred lore of reciprocity and hospitality which was endemic to a seafaring peoples. The first stanza exemplifies the practical behavioral advice it offers:

According to Carolyne Larrington's 1996 translation:

*All the entrances, before you walk forward,  
you should look at,  
you should spy out;  
for you can't know for certain where enemies are sitting,  
ahead in the hall*

Number 77 is possibly the most known one of the Gestapátr. This is from Larrington's translation:

*Cattle die, kinsmen die  
the self must also die;  
I know one thing which never dies:  
the reputation of each dead man.*



# Loddfáfnismál

The next major section of Hávamál deals with morals, ethics, correct action and codes of conduct. It is directed to Loddfáfnir ("stray-singer"), hence the name for this section, Loddfáfnismál, who stands in the place of the reader (or, as was the case at the time, the listener).

## Rúnatal

The Rúnatal (Rúnatáls-tháttur-Odhins or Odins Rune Song) is a section of the Hávamál of which Odin reveals the Secret of the Runes. It runs from Stanzas' 138 through to 165.

Odin talks of his self-sacrifice (to himself) in stanza 138 and 139, in the section known as Rúnatal.

According to Larrington's translation:

*I know that I hung on a windy tree  
nine long nights,  
Wounded with a spear, dedicated to Odin,  
myself to myself,  
on that tree of which no man knows  
from where its roots run.  
No bread did they give me nor a drink from a horn,  
downwards I peered;  
I took up the runes, screaming I took them,  
then I fell back from there.*

## Ljóðatal

The last section, the Ljóðatal, which is very mystical, deals with the transmission of knowledge, and the Odinic mysteries. It is essentially a list and a key to a sequenced number of runic charms. There are correspondences between this section and with the Sigdrífumál, in which the valkyrie Sigdrífa details a

number of the runes at her command.

Stanza 151, for example, according to Larrington's translation:

*I know a sixth one if a man wounds me  
with the roots of the sap-filled wood:  
and that man who conjured to harm me,  
the evil consumes him, not me.*

The sending of a tree root with runes carved into it is well documented in Norse literature; it was, for example, the cause of death of Grettir the Strong.



## Note by H.A. Bellows

*The following introductory note was written by H.A. Bellows at the beginning of his translation of the Hávamál, which he refers to as the "Hovamol." I've included them here, because I thought they were interesting...*

### The Ballad of the High One

#### INTRODUCTORY NOTE

This poem follows the Voluspo in the Codex Regius, but is preserved in no other manuscript. The first stanza is quoted by Snorri, and two lines of stanza 84 appear in one of the sagas.

In its present shape it involves the critic of the text in more puzzles than any other of the Eddic poems. Without going in detail into the various theories, what happened seems to have been somewhat as follows. There existed from very early times a collection of proverbs and wise counsels, which were attributed to Othin just as the Biblical proverbs were to Solomon. This collection, which presumably was always elastic in extent, was known as "The High One's Words," and forms the basis of the present poem. To it, however, were added other poems and fragments dealing with wisdom which seemed by their nature to imply that the speaker was Othin. Thus a catalogue of runes, or charms, was tacked on, and also a set of proverbs, differing essentially in form from those comprising the main collection. Here and there bits of verse more nearly narrative crept in; and of course the loose structure of the poem made it easy for any reciter to insert new stanzas almost at will. This curious miscellany is what we now have as the Hovamol.

Five separate elements are pretty clearly recognizable: (1) the Hovamol proper (stanzas 1-80), a collection of proverbs and counsels for the conduct of life; (2) the Loddafnismol (stanzas 111-138), a collection somewhat similar to the first, but specifically addressed to a certain Loddafnir; (3) the Ljothatal (stanzas 147-165), a collection of charms; (4) the love-story of Othin and Billing's daughter (stanzas 96-102), with an introductory dissertation on the faithlessness of women in general (stanzas 81-95), which probably crept into the poem first, and then pulled the story, as an apt illustration, after it; (5) the story of how Othin got the mead of poetry--the draught which gave him the gift of tongues--from the maiden Gunnloth (stanzas 103-110). There is also a brief passage (stanzas 139-146) telling how Othin won the runes, this passage being a natural introduction to the Ljothatal, and doubtless brought into the poem for that reason.

It is idle to discuss the authorship or date of such a series of accretions as this. Parts of it are doubtless among the oldest relics of ancient Germanic poetry; parts of it may have originated at a relatively late period. Probably, however, most of its component elements go pretty far back, although we have no way of telling how or when they first became associated.

It seems all but meaningless to talk about "interpolations" in a poem which has developed almost solely through the process of piecing together originally unrelated odds and ends. The notes, therefore, make only such suggestions as are needed to keep the main divisions of the poem distinct.

Few gnomic collections in the world's literary history present sounder wisdom more tersely expressed than

the Hovamol. Like the Book of Proverbs it occasionally rises to lofty heights of poetry. If it presents the worldly wisdom of a violent race, it also shows noble ideals of loyalty, truth, and unfaltering courage.



## Note by Patricia Terry

*The following note was written by Patricia Terry at the end of her translation of the Hávamál. I've included these notes, because I thought these were also interesting...*

The title presumably alludes to the king who answers King Gylfi's questions in Snorri Sturluson's handbook. He was called High One, although he occupied the lowest of three high-seats, under "Just as High" and "Third." In Snorri's version it is Gylfi who pronounces the first stanza in the Hávamál, counseling prudence. That is perhaps the most fundamental lesson: one does not walk confidently into a hall, sure that one will be among friends. After caution, the first requirements are warmth and wit, understandably enough in a climate with long dark winters and a sparsely settled countryside. The most important values are an avoidance of extremes, friends who can be trusted, life itself, even if it be impoverished or otherwise handicapped, and above all the "one thing that never dies," one's reputation.

There is no presence of women in the non-narrative sections of the poem -- not even a suggestion that life might be pleasanter with a good wife, or even just a good cook. There is no thought of an after-life, no judgement beyond that of one's fellow men.

The collection includes two narratives relating Odin's quest for wisdom. The tale of his stealing the mead of

poetry is introduced during a sequence about moderation, Odin being the one whose wits were caught by the "mind-stealing heron" of stanza 13, the magic that lured him, or the drink that befuddled him, at the giant Suttung's feast. (The "Fjalar" of stanza 14, according to Snorri was a dwarf who participated in the creation of the mead of poetry from the blood of the murdered Kvasir, wisest of men.) The story is taken up again in stanza 104. Odin penetrated the giant's underground hall by turning himself into a snake, and seduced Suttung's daughter who gave him a drink of the mead. Snorri tells us that Odin escaped in the form of an eagle, and returned to Asgard where he spat the mead into crocks. The gift of poetry was thus given to the Æsir and also, it is said, to human poets. Odin acquired another form of wisdom by hanging, self-wounded, "on a high windy tree," presumably the Ash Tree, for nine nights. (Hallberg believes that the general title of the poem refers to Odin's situation here.) The story is told in stanzas 138-163, and inserted into the sequence of stanzas addressed to "Loddfafnir." Whether "Loddfafnir" is the person addressed, or, as Hollander suggests, the name of the singer, the rune song does not contain the information it points to. For Odin himself, the quest for wisdom, which includes his sacrifice of an eye, leads to no perceptible result. Perhaps he had not yet acquired the sixteenth and seventeenth runes when he wooed Billing's daughter. When the völva mockingly alludes to his sacrifice, in her narration of Ragnarök, she seems to indicate the ultimate futility of his knowledge.

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Sources: [Wikipedia](#) and The Poetic Edda at [Sacred Texts](#).

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Or follow this link to examine the various translations on a stanza-by-stanza basis, along with discussion and analysis regarding the meaning of each stanza:

## Stanza-by-Stanza Havamal Analysis

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