

Plot Synopsis of The Ring Cycle

Das Rheingold, Die Walküre, Siegfried, and Götterdämmerung

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(Edited version)

Richard Wagner's opera set The Ring Cycle (or The Ring of the Nibelungs) is full of trickery, myth, adventure, love, and loss.



A scene of the Rhinemaidens from the 2007 production of The Ring's "Götterdämmerung" performed at New York's Metropolitan Opera House

The Ring Cycle, a lengthy tale of epic adventure, can be summarized as follows:

First Ring: *Das Rheingold* (introduces the Ring)

The well-known prelude opens with 136 measures of an E-flat major chord: this prolonged harmony represents the ageless river Rhine, upon whose banks the Rhinemaidens play. **Alberich** (a Nibelung dwarf) tries vainly to seduce one of the Rhinemaidens. Mockingly, they reveal the secret of the gold they guard, that out of the gold, one can forge a ring powerful enough to rule the world, but the forger must forfeit love forever. Alberich manages to steal the gold and makes the Ring, using it to control his fellow dwarfs while he plans his world take-over. In the meantime, **Wotan** (king of the gods) has to figure out how to finance the construction of Valhalla (hall of the gods, or heaven). He has promised his sister-in-law **Freya** as payment to the construction workers, but his wife **Fricka** isn't too keen on selling her sister to the giants (led by **Fafner**). **Loge** (god of fire) tricks Alberich into turning himself into a toad and brings Alberich back to Wotan, who takes the ring from the dwarf. Bitter at losing his ring, Alberich places a curse on it: Death will come to the owner of the Ring. Wotan ends up giving the Ring to Fafner as ransom for Freya.

Second Ring: *Die Walküre* (introduces the twin siblings, Siegmund and Sieglinde)

Fleeing for his life, **Siegmund** seeks shelter, which he finds at his long-lost twin sister **Sieglinde's** house. Sieglinde's husband **Hunding** happens to be one of Siegmund's pursuers, and the two of them must cross swords the next day. Siegmund is weaponless, but Sieglinde directs him to the sword "Nothing" stuck in an ash tree. Despite discovering that they are twins, the two fall in love. Since the god Wotan is actually their father, he sends his Valkyrie (warrior) daughter **Brünnhilde** to aid Siegmund in his battle with Hunding. Fricka protests and Wotan uses his spear to break Siegmund's sword during the battle. Siegmund is slain, but Brünnhilde rescues both the sword fragments and Sieglinde (who is pregnant with Siegmund's child **Siegfried**).



Scene from *Die Walküre*

Wotan is angry that Brunnhilde intervened, but since she is his favorite child, he merely takes away her immortality and puts her into an enchanted sleep in the forest, surrounded by fire.

Third Ring: Siegfried (the bringing-up of Siegfried and capturing the Ring and winning the love of Brunnhilde)

Alberich's brother **Mime** raises the orphan Siegfried, hoping that Siegfried will kill Fafner (one of the giants who now possess the Ring) and enable Mime to gain the Ring. Mime attempts unsuccessfully to reforge the Nothung (the magic sword). Fulfilling prophecy, Siegfried forges the sword himself and kills Fafner, who has taken the form of a dragon. When he accidentally tastes the dragon's blood spilt on his hands, Siegfried gains the power to understand the song of a woodbird, who instructs him to take the

Ring from Fafner. Reading Mime's thoughts of betrayal, Siegfried kills the dwarf as well. The woodbird also informs Siegfried of a mysterious woman asleep in the midst of fire, and Siegfried sets off to find her. After defeating a disguised Wotan and breaking his spear, Siegfried successfully awakes Brunnhilde, and the two fall in love.

Fourth and Final Ring: Götterdämmerung (Twilight of the Gods)

Gunther, the lord of the Rhine people, gives Siegfried a love potion that causes Siegfried to forget Brunnhilde and fall in love with Gunther's sister **Gutrane**. Siegfried has given Brunnhilde the Ring as a token of their love, but her Valkyrie sister urges her to destroy it, because their father Wotan has lost his spear and power and is hiding out in Valhalla. Instead, Brunnhilde keeps it, and Siegfried who is still under the influence of the potion, steals the Ring from Brunnhilde. Enraged, Brunnhilde helps Alberich's son murder her husband Siegfried, but Siegfried's memory returns, and he dies thinking of Brunnhilde. Brunnhilde repents and orders a funeral pyre to be built. She rides into the fire herself, and the Rhinemaidens get the Ring back. The story closes with flames flickering about Valhalla in the background.



Max Brückner (1836-1919) *Walhalla* (1896)

Plot and Character Examination

By Aaron Green
About.com Guide
(Edited version)

Woton

Woton is chief of the gods and keeper of covenants and promises. He is married to Fricka, the goddess of house and home. Woton hired two giants, Fasolt and Fafner, to build a gleaming fortress / palace called Valhalla. In exchange for their labor, he promised to give them his wife's sister, Freya. Unfortunately, this was a promise he never intended to keep. Fricka is understandably angry with her husband for giving away her sister. As the giants come to collect their fee, Woton commands Loge to find an acceptable payment in lieu of Freia. This results in Loge telling the two giants of Alberich and the Rheingold. The promise of power and the ability to escape from the deal with the giants interests the gods, including Woton himself. Thus begins the chain of events that eventually lead to the destruction of the entire world, including the gods. It could arguably be said that it was Woton's greed for possessions [his home], and hypocrisy [intended not to keep a deal when he himself is supposed to act as enforcer of all contracts] is primarily responsible for the downfall of the gods. With his imprudent decision to wager the source of his (and the other gods') immortality for a palace (i.e., material goods), Woton was as guilty as Alberich for the destruction of the world.

Fricka

As mentioned previously, Fricka is the goddess of house and home and wife of Woton. She is also the sister of Freya. Fricka urges her husband, Woton, to obtain the ring after she learns that it could be used to keep him faithful. In *Die Walküre*, it is Fricka who tells Woton that he must defend Hunding's marriage to Sieglinde against the Siegmund. Woton is reluctant because he believes that Siegmund could save the gods by restoring the Rheingold; however, if he refuses to defend Hunding, he will lose his power.

Freya

Freya is a god who provides the other gods with golden apples that ensure their eternal youth and power. Her abduction by Fafner and Fasolt after the completion of Valhalla is devastating to the gods, who begin to age immediately. Had Freya's presence not been absolutely essential to the survival of the gods, Woton and company may not have gone to the trouble to rescue her.

Alberich

Alberich sets in motion the entire *Ring* by renouncing love and taking the Rhinegold from the Rhinemaidens. After his brother, Mime, fashions the gold into a ring of immense power, Alberich enslaves the other gnomes of the underworld (Nibelheim) and forces them to mine gold for his treasury. Alberich obtains a magical helmet (the Tarnhelm) that allows the wearer to change shape and size. Loge and Woton descend into the underworld and trick Alberich into turning into a frog, after which they steal the helmet and force him to give up his wealth to Fasolt and Fafner. He curses the ring, saying all those who possess it will encounter envy and death until it returns to his hand.

Fasolt

Fasolt and his brother, Fafner, built Valhalla for Woton in exchange for Freya. When Woton attempted to back out of the deal, it was Fasolt who refused to allow it, due to his infatuation with the goddess of youth. It was also Fasolt that refused to accept Alberich's wealth in exchange for Freya unless it was enough to hide her from view. When Woton eventually gives up the ring to the giants (to fill the gap in the wall of gold that hides Freya), they begin to fight and Fafner kills Fasolt.