

Burial Rites



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF HANNAH KENT

Hannah Kent was born in 1985 in Adelaide, Australia, where her mother was a school principal and her father worked in finance. As a child, Kent was a voracious reader. Kent took part in a Rotary Exchange to Iceland as a teenager, where she first became interested in the story of Agnes Magnúsdóttir. Kent released her second novel, entitled *The Good People*, in the fall of 2016. She is also the co-founder of the Australian literary magazine *Kill Your Darlings*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As a work of historical fiction, *Burial Rites* bases its plot and descriptions around actual historical events and lifestyles of Iceland in the 1820s. Specifically, the murders of Natan and Pétur and the resulting executions of Fridrik and Agnes are all events that actually occurred in Iceland in the late 1820s. Likewise, Kent's depictions of the omnipresence of religion, the traditional Icelandic house structures, and the colonial organization of Iceland are all drawn from the real conditions of the time.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Burial Rites frequently references the Icelandic Sagas, the historically-grounded medieval narratives describing life in Iceland from the island's first settlement in the 9th century through the 11th century. The Icelandic Sagas, written in the 13th and 14th centuries, are considered to be some of the best sources of information on medieval Norse mythology and tradition. They also reflect the cultural importance of literacy and writing in Iceland since early times. Kent quotes directly from the *Laxdala Saga* in her novel, a story about a love triangle. In the story, two former best friends become rivals for one woman's favor, resulting in fierce competition and ultimately leading to both of their deaths. Kent's novel also features the real 19th century Icelandic poet Rósa Guðmundsdóttir as one of her characters. Rósa Guðmundsdóttir wrote the lyrics to the well-known traditional Icelandic ballad "Visur Vatnsenda-Rósu."

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Burial Rites
- **Where Written:** Australia
- **When Published:** May 2013
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary fiction
- **Genre:** Historical Fiction

- **Setting:** 19th century Iceland
- **Climax:** Agnes's revelation of the real events on the night of Natan and Pétur's murder and her role in Natan's death
- **Antagonist:** Björn Blöndal, Fridrik Sigurdsson, and, to some extent, Natan Ketilsson
- **Point of View:** Various, including Agnes's first-person narrative, third-person omniscient narration, and letters and records from the time of the murder

EXTRA CREDIT

Awards and Translations. *Burial Rites* won *The Guardian's* First Book award and has been translated into twenty-eight different languages.

Last Execution. Agnes's real-life execution was the last execution to ever take place in Iceland.



PLOT SUMMARY

Hannah Kent's *Burial Rites* tells a fictional account of the story of Agnes Magnúsdóttir, the last person executed in Iceland (in 1830). As the story begins, Agnes has already been convicted of the murders of Natan Ketilsson and Pétur Jónsson and condemned to death for the crime, along with her coconspirators Fridrik Sigurdsson and Sigga Guðmundsdóttir. District Officer Jón, Jón's wife Margrét, and their daughters Lauga and Steina are all given notice that District Commissioner Blöndal has decided that Agnes will be housed at their farm, Kornsó. The family is not happy about this, but they have no choice. Meanwhile, Assistant Reverend Tóti is told that Agnes requested him as her spiritual advisor. Tóti accepts the position, and he and the women of the Kornsó family all greet Agnes and her guards as she arrives at the farm.

At first the family at Kornsó is hostile towards and skittish around Agnes. Agnes helps with their chores and, when she is not working, she talks with Tóti, who visits frequently. Agnes tells Tóti she chose him as her minister because she met him once crossing a river. Tóti eventually realizes that Agnes needs someone to listen to her, and so each time Tóti visits, Agnes tells him a little more about her past. Tóti also looks in the ministerial book of Agnes's childhood parish for information, and it is there that he learns about who Agnes's mother and father were. When he talks to Agnes about her family, Agnes tells him that her mother Ingveldur abandoned her as a child and also lied about her real father. Agnes has two siblings, but one is dead and she does not know where the other is. Agnes also tells Tóti about the traumatic death of her beloved foster mother, Inga, who died in childbirth.

One day Blöndal calls upon Tóti to describe his methods with Agnes, and Tóti explains that they mostly just talk. Blöndal, unsatisfied, tells Tóti the details of Agnes's alleged crime. According to Blöndal, Agnes, who was living with Natan and Sigga, was the mastermind of the murders. Blöndal thinks Agnes killed Natan out of jealousy for his interest in Sigga. Fridrik hit both Natan and Pétur several times with a hammer, but Blöndal believes that Agnes was the one who finished Natan off by stabbing him with a knife. After the murders, Agnes and Fridrik burned down the farm in attempt to conceal their murders. Blöndal believes that Sigga, if she knew about the murder plot at all, was being manipulated by Agnes. After hearing Blöndal's perception of the murders, Tóti struggles to reconcile the woman he knows with the crime that Blöndal alleges Agnes committed. Still, he continues to see and talk to Agnes.

Meanwhile, Agnes slowly wins over the family at Kornsó. Steina is the first to befriend Agnes, because Steina remembers that she met Agnes once as a child while traveling and Agnes was kind to her. It is through Steina that Agnes learns that Sigga has received an appeal on her sentence so she will not be executed. Margrét, who suffers from a debilitating cough, appreciates Agnes's help around the house. Agnes gains Margrét and Jón's respect when she helps their neighbor Róslín safely deliver her at-risk baby. Lauga, on the other hand, hates Agnes more and more the closer Agnes gets to the other members of the family.

Through Agnes's conversations with Tóti, the reader learns that, after Agnes's foster mother died, Agnes had no stable home. Agnes worked on various farms throughout her young adulthood, where she was often subjected to sexual violence. Agnes ran into her half-brother, Jóas, while traveling, and the two of them went to work together on Worm Beck's farm. One night after Jóas and Agnes got into a fight, Jóas stole Agnes's money and left. Agnes had another friend on the farm named María, and it was María who first pointed out Natan to Agnes. Natan and Agnes struck up a friendship during Natan's visits to see Worm, and then they started a romance. María, who did not like Natan, stopped speaking to Agnes. Eventually, Natan asked Agnes to come live with him and be his housekeeper.

At some point, Agnes admits to Tóti that she asked him to be her spiritual guide not only because they met when they were crossing the river, but also because Agnes once had a **dream** that Tóti helped her across a field of snow—before she even met him. Meanwhile, the family at Kornsó goes through the fall traditions together, slaughtering animals and harvesting hay for winter.

Agnes tells Tóti, with the family at Kornsó often listening, how she made the trip to Natan's farm, where she first met Sigga. Sigga also claimed to be Natan's housekeeper. When Agnes asked Natan about the confusion, Natan told her Sigga was just stupid. Agnes and Natan's romance continued at the farm, though Natan was away often. They hid the affair from Sigga.

Natan's ex-lover Rósa also visited the farm at some point to drop off their daughter, Thóranna, and she acted somewhat hostile towards Agnes. Natan's neighbor Fridrik came to visit often as well, though he and Natan fought because Fridrik was constantly trying to steal Natan's money. Fridrik and Sigga began to fall in love.

One day, Tóti falls gravely ill and cannot go to Kornsó for weeks. Agnes misses Tóti and wonders why he has stopped coming. She holds out some hope that somehow she will get an appeal like Sigga did. Her relationships with the other members of the Kornsó household continue to improve.

One night, Agnes and Margrét wake up in the middle of the night and begin talking. Agnes tells Margrét how her relationship with Natan began to deteriorate as Natan became moody and withdrawn. Natan told Agnes one day that he kept having dreams about his own death and Agnes was in them. Natan then became violent toward Agnes. One night, Agnes woke up and saw Natan having sex with Sigga, realizing that he had been sleeping with both of them the whole time. In the meantime, Fridrik asked to marry Sigga, and Natan agreed to let her. One night, Agnes confronted Natan about sleeping with Sigga, and Natan threw her out in the snow in a rage. Agnes then went to Fridrik's house for shelter. Agnes and Fridrik went back to Natan's farm the next day while Natan was gone, planning to leave and take Sigga with them. However, Sigga told Fridrik that Natan had changed his mind and would no longer let Fridrik marry her. At this point Fridrik also discovered that Natan had been sleeping with Sigga.

Natan then came back to the farm and told Fridrik to leave. Agnes slept in the cow shed that night and woke up to see Fridrik holding a hammer and knife. She went back to sleep and when she woke up she found Sigga cowering and Fridrik looking distressed. She entered the badstofa where she saw that Fridrik had killed Pétur and mortally wounded Natan. Agnes killed Natan with a knife because she knew he would die anyway. Then she and Fridrik burnt the farm with whale oil. Agnes's side of the story wins Margrét's sympathies.

Tóti wakes up from his illness one day to a letter saying that Agnes's execution has been set. He rides to Kornsó to talk to Agnes, where Margrét tells him that Agnes told her the whole story. Agnes exchanges tearful goodbyes with the family at Kornsó and Tóti accompanies her to the place of her execution. Agnes and Fridrik are both executed as planned, with Tóti holding Agnes's hand as she crosses the snow to the chopping block.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Agnes Magnúsdóttir – Agnes is a prisoner who has been condemned to death for the murders of Natan Ketilsson and

Pétur Jónsson. She is the daughter of Ingveldur, the sister of Jóas, and Natan's former lover. For most of the novel, Agnes is held captive at Kornská, a farm occupied by Margrét, Jón, and their daughters until her execution date. In the meantime, Reverend Tóti makes spiritual visits to Agnes per her request to help Agnes prepare for her death. Agnes, who is in her thirties, is known to be intelligent. She is also very superstitious and places a lot of importance on signs like **ravens** and **dreams**. Agnes suffered from a difficult childhood, during which her mother abandoned her and she experienced the traumatic death of her foster mother, Inga. As an adult, Agnes was seduced by and fell in love with Natan Ketilsson, who brought Agnes back to his farm to work for him. Their relationship turned toxic because of Natan's manipulative personality. When Fridrik killed Pétur and fatally wounded Natan (because Natan was sleeping with Sigga), Agnes helped stab Natan with a knife to save him from drawn out suffering. Then Agnes helped Fridrik burn the farm. At the end of *Burial Rites*, Agnes is executed for her role in these murders.

Natan Ketilsson – Natan Ketilsson is a healer and farmer. He is also a well-known womanizer, and is the lover of Agnes, Sigga, and Rósa (he also has a child with Rósa). Known for his wealth, Natan makes a living providing medicines to sick Icelanders. Natan is a polarizing figure in his community, with some people admiring his skills as a healer and others calling him an evil sorcerer. Natan does not believe in God or Christianity, but he has a rich spiritual life and believes in superstition and **dreams** like Agnes does. Natan is intellectual and well read. He is also extremely manipulative and dishonest, and it is through lying to Agnes that he gets her to come work for him at his farm. Natan sleeps with both Agnes and Sigga at the same time, emotionally abuses both women, and throws Agnes out in the snow when she addresses Natan's infidelity. Still, Agnes loves Natan. Fridrik, angry that Natan has been sleeping with Sigga, tries to kill Natan in the night along with Pétur. Fridrik badly mutilates Natan so that he is fatally injured, and Agnes deals the final stab wound that kills Natan.

Björn Blöndal – Blöndal is a District Commissioner in Iceland and the owner of the farm Hvammur. As District Commissioner, Blöndal enjoys luxuries typically only available in mainland Denmark. Blöndal is calculating and cold and he enjoys lording his authority over the other characters. Blöndal was a friend of Natan's because Natan cured his wife of a deathly illness. By making an example out of Agnes and Fridrik, Blöndal hopes to encourage order in Iceland.

Assistant Reverend Thorvardur Jónsson (Tóti) – Tóti is the son of Reverend Jón, an Assistant Reverend, and Agnes's spiritual advisor. Having recently completed his studies in the South of Iceland, Tóti is very well read. Tóti is called upon to serve as Agnes's spiritual advisor per Agnes's request. Young and inexperienced, Tóti deviates from expectations as he ministers to Agnes, resulting in scrutiny from Blöndal and other

characters. Tóti becomes Agnes's friend as he encourages her to talk about her past and even seems at some points to harbor romantic feelings towards her.

Steina Jónsdóttir – Steina is Jón and Margrét's daughter and Lauga's older sister. Blonde and brown eyed, Steina is not as beautiful as Lauga, nor as socially adept. Steina's family often criticizes her for failing to complete domestic tasks correctly. Steina is somewhat headstrong and does not hesitate to express her opinions. When Agnes first arrives at Kornská, Steina recognizes Agnes from a time they met on the road. Steina, empathizing with Agnes, tried to strike up a friendship with her, causing tension between her and Lauga.

Lauga Jónsdóttir – Lauga is Jón and Margrét's daughter and Steina's younger sister. Lauga, with her blonde hair and blue eyes, is considered to be very beautiful and charming. Lauga does not like Agnes from the beginning, and she continues to loathe her even after the rest of the family warms to Agnes. Lauga thinks that Steina treats Agnes better than Steina treats her and worries that Agnes is ruining the family's reputation in the valley.

Jón Jónsson – Jón is Margrét's husband, Lauga and Steina's father, a District officer in his region of Iceland, and the tenant of Kornská. Jón accepts Agnes into his household on Blöndal's request, feeling it is his duty to do so as a District Officer. Jón generally does not speak to Agnes, but he is often called to Blöndal's farm to make decisions regarding her case.

Margrét – Margrét is Jón's wife and Lauga and Steina's mother. Margrét is plagued by a cough caused by the mold in the house at Kornská, which hinders her ability to work and occasionally causes her to cough up blood. Margrét begins by being harsh towards Agnes, but over time the two women develop an amiable relationship. Agnes makes Margrét a jelly for her cough and confides in Margrét extensively, ultimately telling Margrét her side of what happened the night of the murders.

Reverend Jón – Reverend Jón is Tóti's father and a Lutheran priest. Jón is a strict father, often criticizing Tóti's choices and rarely extending emotional support. Reverend Jón is particularly unhappy about Tóti's role as Agnes's spiritual advisor. Still, Reverend Jón, who cares for Tóti when he is sick, clearly loves his son.

Rósa Gudmundsdóttir – Rósa is Natan's former lover, Thóranna's mother, and a well-respected poet throughout Iceland. Rósa is a married woman, and Natan lived at her farm with Rósa and her husband for a time, fathering Thóranna in the process. When Natan left, Rósa was upset, and she became intensely jealous of Natan's later relationship with Agnes. Rósa is known for speaking in verse and for her moving poetry.

Sigríður Gudmundsdóttir (Sigga) – Sigga is Agnes's coworker at Illugastir, Fridrik's fiancée, and Natan's employee and lover. Sigga is a pretty girl of fifteen. She is not particularly smart. Natan, who hired Sigga as a housekeeper, sleeps with Sigga

regularly. When Sigga falls in love with Fridrik, Natan does not want Sigga to marry him. Sigga does not actively participate in the murders of Natan and Pétur, and her sentence gets commuted to imprisonment rather than execution because everyone thinks her youth and beauty must mean that she is innocent.

Fridrik Sigurdsson – Fridrik is Sigga's fiancée and Natan's neighbor and on-and-off friend. Fridrik is a boy of 17 who lives near Natan's farm and sometimes helps Agnes and Sigga do farm labor while Natan is away. Fridrik is prone to violence and has a reputation for stealing. Fridrik wants to marry Sigga, but Natan does not want to give her up. When Natan first agrees to and then rejects the match between Fridrik and Sigga, he incites Fridrik to try to murder him and Pétur with a hammer. Fridrik is executed just before Agnes.

Björn – Björn is Inga's husband, Kjartan's father, and Agnes's foster father from the time Agnes's mother leaves her to the time Björn leaves his farm. Björn is a generally stoic man, although he does occasionally show Agnes small kindnesses, like taking her outside to see the northern lights. Björn tries to help Inga when she goes into labor during a snowstorm. After Inga dies in childbirth, Björn is heartbroken. He decides to give up farming and go work in Reykjavik, leaving Kjartan with Uncle Ragnar and giving Agnes up to the parish.

Inga – Inga is Björn's wife, Kjartan's mother, and Agnes's foster mother from the time Agnes's mother leaves her to when Inga dies in childbirth. Inga is a loving foster mother to Agnes, who even calls her "Mamma." Inga teaches Agnes to read and write in secret, beginning Agnes's lifelong love of books. When Inga dies in childbirth during a blizzard, Agnes is absolutely heartbroken.

Ingveldur Rafnsdóttir – Ingveldur is Agnes, Jóas, and Helga's mother. Ingveldur is known to be a "loose" woman, and she often has to move from farm to farm looking for posts as a servant. Ingveldur's children are all fathered by different men Ingveldur works for. Ingveldur abandons Agnes when she's a child, and later abandons Jóas. Agnes has mixed feelings towards her mother, sometimes of anger and other times of sadness and longing. Agnes feels she can understand the choices Ingveldur made. Jóas, on the other hand, cannot forgive her. As an adult, Agnes has no idea where her mother is or whether or not she is alive.

Jóas – Jóas is Ingveldur's son and Agnes's half-brother. Jóas and Agnes were separated when Agnes's mother abandoned her when Jóas was around one. When Agnes and Jóas coincidentally find each other again on their way to Worm's farm, they quickly become close. Jóas hangs out with a bad crowd and seems to have a drinking problem. Jóas disappears one night after he and Agnes fight about their mother, and Jóas steals Agnes's money as he leaves.

Uncle Ragnar – Uncle Ragnar is Aunt Rosá's husband and the

brother of Agnes's foster father, Björn. Uncle Ragnar helps Björn after Inga's death, comforting him and helping him take care of his children. Uncle Ragnar does not like Agnes very much, however, and after Björn decides to go work in Reykjavik, Uncle Ragnar takes in Kjartan, but gives Agnes up to the parish.

Worm Beck – Worm Beck is a farm owner, a friend of Natan's, and Agnes's former employer. Agnes enjoyed working for Worm, who seems to be a good man, and who always gave them enough food. Natan sometimes leaves his homestead to go spend time at Worm's farm, and it is there that he first meets Agnes.

María Jónsdóttir – María is Agnes's close friend during her time working on Worm's farm, and one of Agnes's first friends ever. The two women grow apart, however, after Agnes begins seeing Natan. María warns Agnes to be careful of Natan, but Agnes thinks María is just jealous. Eventually, they stop talking altogether.

Daníel Gudmundsson – Daníel is a worker on Worm's farm and later, during lambing season, on Natan's. He is in love with Agnes and wants to marry her, and he resents Natan's manipulation of her. Daníel tries to tell Agnes that Natan is bad for her and the two of them get in a bitter argument.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Pétur Jónsson – Pétur is a servant and one of Fridrik's murder victims. Before his death, Pétur was known for being strange. He enjoyed killing animals and was convicted of illegally slaughtering sheep.

Kristín – Kristín is a servant at Kornsó. She helps with every aspect of day-to-day farmlife. Margrét often jokes about how Kristín is not especially good at her work.

Snaebjörn – Snaebjörn is Jón and Margrét's neighbor and Róslín's husband. He sometimes accompanies Róslín on her visits to Kornsó.

Páll – Páll is Lauga, Steina, Jón, and Margrét's neighbor and Snaebjörn and Róslín's son. Páll sometimes helps with farm work at Kornsó.

Róslín – Róslín is Margrét and Jón's neighbor and Snaebjörn's wife. Róslín has so many children that it seems like she's perpetually pregnant. Róslín is dramatic and gossipy, and Margrét doesn't like her very much. When Róslín goes into labor, Agnes helps her deliver the baby.

Haukur Jónsson – Haukur Jónsson is Dagga's husband and a farmer who lives near Reverend Pétur Bjarnason. Tóti goes to his house to find Reverend Pétur, and Haukur invites him in to wait while Haukur seeks out the Reverend.

Reverend Pétur Bjarnason of Undirfell – Reverend Pétur is the priest of the parish that Agnes grew up in, although he wasn't working there when Agnes was a child. Reverend Pétur shows Tóti the ministerial records about Agnes and later

appears at Kornsó to account for everyone in that year's record.

Dagga – Dagga is Haukur's wife. Tóti meets her while he is waiting for Haukur to fetch Reverend Pétur. Dagga and Guðrún tell Tóti about the rumored Satanic origins of Natan's name. Dagga is skeptical about the veracity of these stories.

Guðrún – Guðrún is an elderly woman who lives with Dagga and Haukur. Tóti meets her while he is waiting for Haukur to fetch Reverend Pétur. Guðrún and Dagga tell Tóti about the rumors surrounding Natan's supposedly Satanic name. Guðrún doesn't like Natan and believes the stories are true.

Guðmundur and Bjarni – Guðmundur and Bjarni are temporary farmhands on the Kornsó farm, hired to help with the hay harvest.

Guðmundur Ketilsson – Guðmundur Ketilsson is Natan's brother. He is chosen by Blöndal and the District Officers to be Agnes and Fridrik's executioner.

Magnús – Ingvaldur's lover and supposedly Agnes's father. Agnes believes Magnús isn't actually her father, but that Ingvaldur said so to avoid admitting an affair with Jón of Brekkukot. When Agnes goes to see Magnús, he's furious at the mention of Ingvaldur's name, but when Agnes leaves, Magnús gives her money.

Jón of Brekkukot – Jón of Brekkukot is a married farmer and, according to Agnes, her real father. Agnes believes her mother lied about who Agnes's father was to save Jón and herself from disgrace.

Ingibjörg Pétursdóttir – Ingibjörg is Margrét and Jón's neighbor and Margrét's close friend. Ingibjörg is sweet and kind, and she often visits Margrét at Kornsó. Ingibjörg is also nice to Agnes, especially after Agnes saves Róslín's pregnancy.

Helga – Helga is Ingvaldur's daughter and Agnes and Jóas's half-sister. Agnes never met Helga, who died as an adolescent.

Illugi the Black – Illugi the Black is Ingvaldur's lover and Jóas's father. Ingvaldur and Agnes live with him while Ingvaldur is a servant on his farm before Illugi's death.

Kjartan Björnsson – Kjartan is Agnes's foster brother when she lives with Björn and Inga. Agnes takes care of Kjartan while Björn attends to Inga as she dies in childbirth.

Guðbjörg – Guðbjörg is Aunt Rosá's servant. She helps the family clean up from Inga's childbirth and death and then comforts Agnes.

Aunt Rosá – Aunt Rosá is Uncle Ragnar's wife and the sister-in-law of Agnes's foster father, Björn. Aunt Rosá comforts Agnes after Inga's death. When Björn leaves for Reykjavik, Aunt Rosá and Ragnar take in Kjartan but not Agnes.

Karitas – A servant on Blöndal's farm and Natan's former housekeeper. Karitas, who left the post as Natan's housekeeper just before Agnes arrived, sympathizes with Agnes because she

knows how manipulative Natan can be. Karitas pulls Tóti aside during his visit to Blöndal to tell him about Natan's abusive behavior.

Thórunn – Thórunn is Fridrik's lover before Fridrik decides to marry Sigga.

Thóranna – Thóranna is Natan and Rósa's daughter, who lives with Natan during part of the time that Agnes is staying with him.

Bjarni – Bjarni is Fridrik's brother. His testimony is solicited for the trial, during which Bjarni says that Fridrik had killed two of Natan's sheep the year before.

Thórbjörg – Thórbjörg is Fridrik's mother. Thórbjörg kindly takes Agnes in after Natan throws her out in the cold. Agnes also suspects that Thórbjörg had a hand in plotting Natan's murder.

(Saga) Guðrún – Guðrún is a character in the Laxdoela Saga, from which Kent quotes at the beginning of Chapter Twelve. She is Ospak's sister, and it is Guðrún who encourages Ospak to seek revenge on Kjartan.

Ospak – Ospak is a character in the Laxdoela Saga, from which Kent quotes at the beginning of Chapter twelve. He is (saga) Guðrún's brother. At Guðrún's encouragement, Ospak leaves to seek revenge on Kjartan.

Kjartan – Kjartan is a character in the Laxdoela Saga, from which Kent quotes in the beginning of Chapter twelve. Ospak leaves to seek revenge on Kjartan at (saga) Guðrún's encouragement.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



TRUTH AND LIBERATION

Burial Rites uses fiction to explore the reasons for and events surrounding the real murders of Natan Ketilsson and Pétur Jónsson in Iceland in 1828. In doing so, it engages with questions about God, meaning, and the power of truth. Characters in the book frequently discuss whether stories that they hear are “true,” as Iceland is very isolated and has a limited communication network, making news unreliable and rumors omnipresent. For example, Margrét's neighbors hear rumors of Agnes's placement in her household before hearing it from Margrét herself, while Tóti hears a rumor that Blöndal was friends with Natan because Natan once healed his sick wife. As a result of these sorts of rumors, characters must constantly investigate and speculate

about the “truth” of the stories they hear as they attempt to determine their veracity.

Not only does the truth come up as characters try to separate fact from rumor, but the idea of “truth” is also on the forefront of people’s minds when they try to create and uphold social norms. Tóti talks with Agnes about what it means to be a “true” Christian, Blöndel talks to Tóti about what it means to be a “true” man, Natán is called a “true” farmer’s son, etc. As characters discuss what it means to be a “true” Christian, man, farmer’s son, or whatever else, they enforce norms of social behavior and establish what it means to be a certain kind of person.

Truth also takes on a highly religious significance in Lutheranism, the predominant religion of 19th-century Iceland and a constant presence throughout the book. Tóti’s role as Agnes’s priest is to guide Agnes to goodness and help her see “the way of truth and repentance” after her alleged role in Natan and Pétur’s murders. Truth in Lutheranism is tied to the idea of liberation, as evidenced when Tóti speaks with Agnes and quotes the Bible verse John 8:32, “and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”

For Agnes, however, the truth clearly has not engendered any sort of real freedom. Agnes tells her true side of the story of the murders to the judges at her trial, stating that, while she did stab Natan, she only did so to be merciful, because Fridrik had already wounded Natan so badly that there was no way he could survive. However, Agnes’s admission of the truth did nothing to save her from conviction and being sentenced to execution. Agnes is keenly aware of the fact that the truth did not liberate her as promised, and she clearly resents religious views of divine truth. When Tóti begins to quote John 8:32, Agnes interrupts him, saying that he can for himself “see how well that served [her]”, drawing attention to her continued incarceration. Not only does Agnes not have confidence in the liberating possibilities of truth telling, but she even doubts whether truth exists at all, saying at one point that there is “no such thing as truth.”

The truths that Agnes does believe in, however, are not happy or liberating truths, but rather ones that reveal hypocrisy, misogyny, and inequality in their community. Agnes sees the judges and leaders who condemned her as men unable to accept the fact that she is an intelligent woman, and thinks that their refusal to believe her innocence is related to this sexism. Their misogyny, Agnes says, is the real “truth of it.” When Tóti asks Agnes why her mother lied about who her father was, Agnes responds by telling him how she did so because her real father was a married man, and it would harm her mother’s reputation severely to admit to that. Essentially, Agnes shows how “the truth” often is determined by people in power, or manipulated to prevent persecution by these same people.

When Agnes does finally tell the “truth” of her story to Margrét, she is right in thinking that it will not save her, and Agnes is still

executed as planned. She does, however, at least form a connection with Margrét before she is killed, giving her an ally and friend before she dies. Perhaps this friendship and Margrét’s empathy towards Agnes could be seen as liberating Agnes in some way.

Throughout the novel, Kent shows how the commonly accepted truth, rather than being objective, is determined by powerful people at the expense of people who are disenfranchised. However, Kent’s choice to rewrite Agnes’s story, which is based on a “true” story in 19th-century Iceland, suggests that the truth as constructed by powerful men can be challenged and reimagined through narrative—though it is almost two hundred years too late to save Agnes.



WOMEN, VIOLENCE, AND INNOCENCE

Throughout the book, the novel portrays many of the challenges faced by women in 19th-century Iceland, from the gender roles that restrict them to the challenges of childrearing and childbirth. Clearly, life for Kent’s characters is difficult, between the bad weather, the isolation, and the poverty. These difficulties, however, are exacerbated for women, whose role as child bearers can be dangerous in such extreme conditions. Kent describes in gruesome detail Agnes’s foster mother Inga’s death in childbirth, which is due in part to a blizzard that prevents neighboring women from coming to the house to help her through labor.

Not only do women have to deal with the general hardships of life in Iceland and the way these exacerbate biological hardships like childbirth, but they also have to struggle against a general culture of misogyny and classism. For poor women who must act as servants, sexual violence and coercion seems to be nearly a given in Kent’s imagination of 1828 Iceland. Agnes describes her own experiences of sexual coercion throughout the book, discussing how many of the men she worked for forced her to have sex with them or else risk being thrown out into the cold. Again, the harsh realities of life in Kent’s novel clearly exacerbate this problem, since, for most of the year, Iceland is so inhospitable that sleeping outside would be a certain death sentence. Even Natan, who Agnes falls in love with and who initially seems to love Agnes back, uses his gender and class status to manipulate Agnes and use her for sex before hitting her and throwing her out of the house. Agnes’s continued love for Natan following this violence also shows how ideals of romantic love can trap women in violent and unhealthy relationships. Likewise, Agnes’s later conviction for Natan’s murder, despite her very small and merciful role in his death and Natan’s violence towards her, suggests how the justice system is not set up to favor or support women, even women who are victims of abuse.

Not only does Agnes herself experience this sexual manipulation and abuse because of her gender, but she also

watched her mother Ingveldur undergo the same thing when she was a child. Agnes moved with her mother from place to place when she was a young girl as her mother was taken into different farms and then thrown out again after the man of the house grew tired of sleeping with her. Kent shows through this mother-daughter parallel how gendered violence and abuse gets repeated throughout generations.

At the same time that women experience gendered violence in Kent's novel, they are also constrained by female gender roles. Women are valued differently based on how well they conform to these gendered expectations. For example, Lauga and Steina are constantly compared, and Lauga is regarded much more highly because she is beautiful, obedient, and much better at domestic tasks. Steina, meanwhile, is headstrong, loyal, and unafraid to challenge authority, so other characters consider her to be much less charming than Lauga. Similarly, Sigga and Agnes are compared in their criminal trial and Sigga comes out with a much better sentence than Agnes. Sigga gets her sentence reduced because she is "dumb and pretty and young," as Agnes puts it, and it wins the sympathy of the judges and the public. Agnes, who is known to be highly intelligent, is accused of being the mastermind and thoroughly demonized, even in the community that she grew up in. Agnes attributes the lack of sympathy for her in comparison with Sigga to the fact that the judges "believe a thinking woman can't be trusted" and that "there's no room for innocence" in women who are intelligent. Agnes essentially describes how smart women are more likely to be punished, effectively showing how conceptions of innocence and guilt are inextricable from gendered norms. This also suggests how gender roles are not separable from violence against women, as Agnes's failure to conform to gender roles is part of what provokes her condemnation to death.

Effectively, Hannah Kent shows how gender roles and gendered violence make up a vicious cycle, as gender roles are enforced with the threat of violence. This cycle, in addition to the general harsh realities of life in 19th-century Iceland, make womanhood difficult and dangerous.



LITERACY, LANGUAGE, AND THE ICELANDIC LANDSCAPE

In *Burial Rites*, the special place of writing and language in Icelandic culture quickly becomes apparent as Kent tells Agnes's story. Language and literacy are essential aspects of Icelandic cultural history, as Iceland has long had one of the highest rates of literacy in the world.

Icelanders in Kent's book place high value on literary knowledge and writing ability, showing how they value not only literacy itself, but also the quality of the literature being written and read. The poet Rósa enjoys a high amount of respect in her community for her ability to speak in verse and her skill at writing beautiful, moving poetry. Rósa's poems clearly evoke

strong emotional responses in readers, as Agnes describes them "making lamps out of people."

Agnes's superior, by-heart knowledge of the Icelandic sagas, meanwhile, is considered to be an extremely admirable quality, even if it is sometimes a source of jealousy from other characters. The Icelandic sagas are an unparalleled treasure trove of Norse mythology and literature and a source of Icelandic pride and identity. The sagas even seem to shape the way the characters see the world, as Kent suggests when Margrét thinks of the murderesses in the sagas while she's trying to understand Agnes and quotes from the sagas in an attempt to make sense of the murder itself.

Notably, the writing Kent's characters deal in is closely tied to another important aspect of Icelandic life: the climate and landscape. The striking Icelandic landscape shapes how characters in *Burial Rites* narrate their own stories and make metaphors. Agnes often describes her surroundings using metaphors from nature. At one point she describes Natan's groaning as lingering in the air like "a cloud of ash over a volcano," and in another instance, as Agnes is being transported from prison, she describes the crowd's anger bursting forth like a "geyser." These descriptions reflect the fact that Agnes's vocabulary and sources for comparison come from nature and the volcanic and geothermal activity that is omnipresent in Iceland.

Not only does Agnes describe people and human things using natural terms, but she also personifies the island of Iceland and its nature. Agnes talks about the island of Iceland as "sulking" and days as "ill-tempered...full of spasms of snow." At one point, the third-person narrator describes autumn as arriving like a "gasp."

Although at times this landscape is harsh, it can also be beautiful, and often its beauty and harshness are inextricably linked. As characters go about their daily lives, they interact with the nature around them: stumbling over rocks, listening to seagulls, taking in views of the valleys. Although these encounters with the landscape are daily, they still inspire awe. Tóti, for example, describes the river near the Kornsa farm as "beautiful" while imagining Agnes's throat being cut on the gray rocks. In another instance, Agnes, recounting what life was like at Natan's farm, describes the driftwood appearing on the shore like "magic." She talks about how, although miserable when the weather is bad, the ocean is "beautiful" on a clear day. These descriptions highlight how the power and splendor of nature in Iceland inspires both wonder and terror—essentially, the sense of the sublime often associated with poetry. Effectively, Kent shows how Icelandic nature inspires its rich tradition of writing, evoking strong emotions that poets translate into verse.



NAMES, SUPERSTITION, AND CHRISTIANITY

Kent places special significance on the role of naming and how names reflect and inspire meaning. Names in Icelandic culture have different significance than names in most English-speaking cultures, and Kent even goes so far as to preface her novel with an explanation of the Icelandic naming system. The Icelandic naming system, unlike the Western European one, is patronymic, meaning that the last name of each person is taken from their father's first name. Notably, this reflects both the patriarchal structure of 19th-century Iceland and Iceland's cultural distinctiveness from mainland Europe.

Not only does the system of naming people clearly set Iceland apart culturally, but names for things in general are clearly extremely significant for Kent's characters. At one point in the novel, Agnes recites the names of all the places she has lived, and when she gets to Natan's farm "Illugastadir", she feels disturbed, believing that "the name is everything that went wrong." Clearly, Agnes has the sense that the name of the place is not only a word, but also the essence of the place itself and the pain she associates with it—the name Illugastadir *is*, itself, everything wrong. At another point in the novel, Natan asks Agnes what the "name" is for the "space between the stars," and when Agnes responds that there is no name, Natan implores her to invent one. Agnes tells Natan the name is "the soul asylum," and Natan says that that is the same as "heaven." Agnes objects to the idea that they are synonymous, highlighting how different names for the same concept can radically change meaning or nuance, and how distinctions in naming matter.

In turn, the use of certain names for people becomes the subject of discomfort and scrutiny. For example, when Agnes first arrives at Kornsó, Margrét thinks it feels wrong to call such a violent criminal by a Christian name. Clearly, Margrét finds something disturbing about the use of a "Christian" name—a given, religiously linked name—for someone that Margrét sees as entirely immoral. As she mulls over the best way to address Agnes, Margrét finally concludes that the best name for Agnes is no name at all, and only silence. This silence, in a sense, denies Agnes of her personhood, and even refuses to acknowledge her existence. In fact, throughout the book, characters address Agnes through silence rather than by actually calling her a name, so uncomfortable are they with using her Christian name because she is an alleged murderer. As the execution draws nearer, Agnes worries about the silence surrounding her name and thinks that if no one says her name she will be forgotten. Although this seems to stem from the characters' sense of morality and their respect for Christianity, it also smacks of deep superstition—as if by calling Agnes "Agnes," they would be bringing on bad luck.

The silence surrounding Agnes's name is not the only place that this superstition comes in, and there is plenty of mythology and

rumor surrounding Natan's name as well. Natan's name is rumored to reveal his association with the devil, an association that people also suspect because of his relative wealth and his lack of interest in religion. According to the stories, Natan's mother named Natan after Satan, changing only the letter "S" to "N."

Clearly, names for Kent's characters do not only possess symbolic meaning, but rather represent the essence of the named thing's being and its relationship to God and morality. As characters discuss the meaning of names, evoke emotions with them, and use or refuse to use them, they reinforce the fact that names in Kent's novel contain a spiritual power unto themselves.



CLASS, COLONIZATION, AND HIERARCHIES OF POWER

Hannah Kent's story of Agnes Magnúsdóttir is inextricable from the hierarchies of power that defined Icelandic politics and life in the early 19th century. At the time, Iceland was a colony of Denmark, meaning that Iceland had to defer to the Danish crown and follow Danish law. The colonial state of Iceland was thus already the manifestation of a hierarchy, but the state also created further inequalities within the island itself. *Burial Rites* clearly depicts a pronounced class system within Iceland, with land and farm owning families possessing much more money and power than their impoverished servants.

Servants in Iceland were subject to physical discomfort and their lives were plagued by uncertainty, as they could be thrown out of the farm they were working on at any time without warning or reason. They had very few possessions, as evidenced by the meager list of Agnes and Sigga's personal belongings compiled by officials after their arrest. Female servants were frequently subjected to unwanted sexual advances from the farmers they were serving, and they could be thrown out simply for refusing sex. Agnes's experience at Natan's farm is a perfect example of the uncertainty and potential danger of servitude, as Natan lies to Agnes, uses her for sex, and then becomes violent towards her before throwing her out in the snow. Clearly, life for servants in Kent's novel is dangerous and their agency is severely limited.

These servants, meanwhile, do not benefit from luxuries that farmers and officials occasionally enjoy. Notably, these "luxuries" are things that most modern reader would expect as day-to-day items: glass windowpanes instead of seal bladder ones, coffee, salt. But in contrast to the lower class servants and middle class farmers, the upper class in Iceland benefit from many of these "luxuries." Although Icelandic officials have to defer to the Danish Crown, they also enjoy financial and social benefits that elevate them over the middle class farmers and landowners. Blöndal, who is the district commissioner,

clearly has much more money than the farmers he oversees, as evidenced by his beautiful red coat trimmed with silver buttons and his lavish home with its glass windows, iron stoves, swan quills, and many other luxuries that are unavailable except in Denmark.

As Blöndel's connections to Denmark result in his great wealth, so they also give him the power to control people in his community. Blöndel has let his power and money go to his head, and he expresses disdain for middle and lower class people, thinking at one point how the "hovels of the peasants had begun to repel him" when he goes to visit the Kornsó farm. Meanwhile, the family at the Kornsó farm cannot refuse to accept Agnes because failing to honor Blöndel's request would ensure that Blöndel would cause the family trouble. The family worries that Steina's objections to Blöndel and her impertinence towards him could affect their social standing. The family even hears a rumor that Blöndel originally was going to place Agnes in a different family, before deciding that, if Agnes decided to kill anyone else, the family on the Kornsó farm was more expendable. This shows how, even for middle class farmers like the family at Kornsó, small differences in status can be a matter of life or death.

Through her examination of characters like Agnes and Blöndel, Kent gives portraits of different class statuses, showing how colonization exacerbates class differences and how people of high classes generally abuse people of lower classes.

worked, but she still keeps the stone until it's taken away from her when she is arrested. This stone and its lack of utility seem to represent Agnes's mother's many failures regarding her daughter. It also reflects Agnes's desire to decode the symbols in the natural world around her. When Agnes is leaving Kornsó for her execution, she believes that she feels the stone in her mouth and spits it out. While it seems that this may have been Agnes's imagination acting up due to her distress, the fact that Agnes has, at least mentally, had the stone under her tongue the whole time suggests that Agnes has always possessed an ability to understand and perceive elements of the natural world that are inaccessible to most people.



DREAMS

Throughout *Burial Rites*, Hannah Kent describes characters' dreams, which often reflect their desires or anxieties. The characters themselves also place a lot of importance on dreaming. Natan's mother was rumored to have prophetic dreams, including one in which she spoke to the Devil. Agnes, meanwhile, believes that she met Tóti for the first time in a dream where Tóti helped her across a snowy lava field. Natan has dreams of his own death and Agnes's role in it even before Fridrik murders him. Clearly, dreams represent more than just imagination for the characters, who believe that dreams can predict the future and provide a connection to the adjacent spiritual world.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



RAVENS

Ravens appear throughout *Burial Rites*: they caw unexpectedly, land on fences, or fly overhead.

According to Agnes, ravens are symbols of death, and they often foreshadow it. Agnes recalls how she once watched a raven move its head in the direction of a farm where a little boy drowned later in the week. Although many people fear ravens because of their association with death, Agnes says that she likes the birds because they are smart, even if they aren't very nice. Agnes seems to see something of herself in ravens, as she is likewise stigmatized for her intelligence. As a result, ravens not only represent death, but also people like Agnes who are marginalized because of their difference.



AGNES'S MOTHER'S STONE

Ingveldur gave Agnes a stone when she left Agnes, telling her that, if she put the stone under her tongue, she could speak with birds. According to Agnes, it never



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Back Bay Books edition of *Burial Rites* published in 2014.

Prologue Quotes

●● I imagine, then, that we are all candle flames...fluttering in the darkness and the howl of the wind, and in the stillness of the room I hear footsteps, awful coming footsteps, coming to blow me out and send my life up away from me...I will vanish into the air and the night. They will blow us all out, one by one, until it is only their own light by which they see themselves. Where will I be then?

Related Characters: Agnes Magnúsdóttir (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, which Kent uses to open her novel, Agnes, who has not yet been introduced by name, meditates on the

nature of life and death. As she does throughout the book, Agnes imagines the nature of mortality as being outside of the Christianity that dominates society in the book, preferring to think of human lives as candles lights. Instead of imagining that her soul will go to the Christian afterlife, Agnes pictures herself “vanish[ing] into the air and the night.” She expresses uncertainty about exactly where she will go after death, asking “where will I be then?”

Agnes’s imagination of human morality also features an unnamed “they” approaching to blow out her life, and which will “blow us all out.” It is unclear who she means by “they”—is “they” a god? A group of gods? The mortal authorities that are persecuting her? Agnes never answers this question, but her description of “them” blowing out her life and everyone else’s reflects her feelings of fear and powerlessness in the face of persecution and death.

Chapter 1 Quotes

☞ He had grown corpulent since his posting as District Commissioner and was accustomed to the more spacious dwelling provided for him and his family at Hvammur, built from imported wood. The hovels of the peasants and farmers had begun to repel him, with their cramped rooms constructed of turf.

Related Characters: Björn Blöndal

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

When Blöndal, the District Commissioner of the region and one of the most powerful men in Kent’s Iceland, arrives at the Kornsa farm, his contempt for Kornsa and the family of District Officer Jón is immediately palpable. Blöndal is one of the story’s villains, and in this first chapter Kent introduces him through passages like this that convey his sense of superiority and lack of respect for the people he rules over.

As a perk of his authority, Blöndal enjoys a large house made from “imported wood” and enough fine food to make him plump, marking his power and wealth. In comparison, the farm at Kornsa is very humble. Blöndal’s word choice in this section conveys his disdain for Kornsa when he describes the farm as a “hovel of the peasants” and talks about how it “repel[s] him.” Clearly, Blöndal does not have much respect for the people he is supposed to be protecting

and serving, suggesting that Blöndal has his own greed and not their best interests at heart.

☞ As he traveled over the north peninsula with its thin lip of ocean on the horizon, the clouds began to clear and the soft red light of the late June sun flooded the pass...The dread that Tóti had felt so firmly lining his stomach dissipated as he fell into a quiet appreciation of the countryside before him. We are all God’s children, he thought to himself. This woman is my sister in Jesus, and I, as her spiritual brother, must guide her home... “I will save her,” he whispered.

Related Characters: Assistant Reverend Thorvardur Jónsson (Tóti) (speaker), Agnes Magnúsdóttir

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

This quote describes the scene as Tóti sets out on horseback to Kornsa to minister to Agnes for the first time. Tóti, who is extremely nervous to begin his work with Agnes, observes the landscape as he rides.

While the Icelandic climate and landscape is often a stark and hostile presence in the novel, this quote shows the positive side of Icelandic nature as Tóti takes in the view of the ocean and the soft, red summer light. The spare yet beautiful landscape begins to set the scene for all the events of the novel, and here the scenery seems to calm Tóti, who feels “the dread...so firmly lining his stomach” disappear as he rides and falls into a “quiet appreciation of the countryside before him.” Although the Icelandic landscape is sometimes set in opposition to Christianity in the novel, here it actually helps Tóti achieve the relaxation he needs to feel confident about his ministering abilities, centering him and giving him a sense of purpose. For Tóti, the Icelandic landscape and God are intertwined and symbiotic.

Chapter 2 Quotes

☞ How can I say what it was like to breathe again? I felt newborn. I staggered in the light of the world and took deep gulps of fresh sea air. It was late in the day: the wet mouth of the afternoon was full on my face. My soul blossomed in that brief moment as they led me out-of-doors. I fell, my skirts in the mud, and I turned my face upwards as if in prayer. I could have wept from the relief of light.

Related Characters: Agnes Magnúsdóttir (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 35-36

Explanation and Analysis

Agnes narrates this quote just after she is released from the storeroom where she was being imprisoned at Stora-Borg. From there she will ride to Kornsó, where she will be imprisoned again. Agnes, who has been kept in wretched, unsanitary conditions and not allowed outside, is thrilled to be outdoors.

Agnes describes going outside again as a nearly religious experience. She talks about feeling “newborn” as she sees light for the first time in months, and she falls to her knees “as if in prayer” from the “relief of light.” Agnes’s pleasure at being outside and in the Icelandic nature is so powerful that it frames nature practically as a religion to be worshipped. In presenting nature this way, Kent identifies it as a kind of alternative spirituality to Christianity.

●● Cruel Birds, ravens, but wise. And creatures should be loved for their wisdom if they cannot be loved for kindness.

Related Characters: Agnes Magnúsdóttir (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

Agnes explains the symbolic meaning of ravens in Icelandic superstition—according to her, ravens can indicate that death is nearby. This naturally makes them ominous creatures, yet Agnes finds them sympathetic for their wisdom.

In Agnes’s description of her sympathy for ravens, the reader may draw a parallel between the birds’ bad reputation and Agnes’s own. Like Agnes, the birds are disliked and mistrusted for their intelligence, as the birds’ foreknowledge of death makes people afraid of them. Agnes, meanwhile, is considered to be too smart for a woman, and so is presumed guilty of the murders of Pétur and Natan. Agnes hopes that creatures can be “loved for their wisdom if they cannot be loved for kindness,”

suggesting that people should learn to appreciate things for their different, individual strengths rather than judging them all by the same standards.

●● What sort of woman kills men?

The only murderesses Margrét had known were the women in the sagas, and even then, it was with words that they had killed men; orders given to servants to slay lovers or avenge the death of kin. Those women murdered from a distance and kept their fingers clean. But these times are not saga times...This woman is not a saga woman.

Related Characters: Agnes Magnúsdóttir, Margrét

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Margrét, who is still very wary of Agnes, ponders her crime. Margrét does not know any other women who have murdered men, except in the Icelandic sagas.

Margrét’s meditation on the female murderers in the Icelandic sagas shows how characters use literature not only as entertainment, but also as a point of reference for making sense of their own world. As Margrét struggles to fit Agnes in with the murderesses that she remembers from literature, she thinks that a key difference between Agnes and these women is how Agnes physically killed Natan while the other women ordered murders and did not carry out the killings themselves. This further emphasizes the importance of language in the society of the book, as women kill men “with words,” suggesting that language can not only be useful, but also dangerous.

Although Margrét compares Agnes’s murder to the sagas, she then establishes distance between the sagas and contemporary times, realizing the futility of finding a clear answer in the ancient literature. Kent explores both the possibilities of applying literature to real life and its limitations.

Chapter 3 Quotes

●● I prefer a story to a prayer. They whipped me for that at this farm, Kornsó, once, when I was young and fostered out to watch over the home field. The farmer Björn did not like that I knew the sagas better than him. You’re better off keeping company with the sheep, Agnes. Books written by man, not God, are faithless friends and not for your kind.

Related Characters: Agnes Magnúsdóttir (speaker), Björn

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Agnes discusses her love of literature and how her foster father disapproved of her literary talent. Agnes begins by saying that she prefers “a story to a prayer,” setting literature in opposition to religion. This is interesting because, at various other points in the novel, Christianity and reading are closely linked, since many children learn to read through the church and the Bible. Agnes is punished for her preference for non-religious stories as a child—perhaps an early sign of Agnes’s skepticism towards mainstream Christianity.

Agnes believes that Björn is jealous of her superior knowledge of the sagas, showing how literary prowess is a highly desirable quality in Kent’s Iceland. Björn seems wary of secular books, telling her “books written by man, not God, are faithless friends.” Essentially, Björn is telling Agnes that reading outside of the Bible is a dangerous pursuit for her. When Björn tells Agnes these books are “not for [her] kind,” it is unclear what “kind” he means, exactly— is it her low class? Her gender? Either way, Björn worries about the effect of literature on Agnes, showing exactly how powerful he considers books to be.

In this quote, Agnes talks to Tóti about how society has unfairly judged her mother without really understanding her as a person. As Agnes draws distinctions between her mother’s deeds and her mother’s identity, the reader may feel that Agnes could be talking about the public’s judgment of her own deeds, identity, and guilt as well.

Agnes, frustrated with how people conflate actions and identity, thinks that people do not “[sit] down and [listen] to you speak for yourself” and instead let actions define who people are. Agnes believes that the truth of who someone is cannot be found in a list of their actions, but only by understanding their subjective perception of events and the reason behind their decision-making. Agnes also laments that, even if people try to “live a godly life” and atone for their actions, there is no real path to forgiveness in her community. This lack of forgiveness stands in stark contrast to Christian philosophy, which is based in the forgiveness of sin. Agnes criticizes her society for its close-minded view of the truth of people’s characters and their inability to forgive.

☞ “No such thing as truth,” Agnes said, standing up. Tóti stood up also... “There is truth in God,” he said, earnestly, recognizing an opportunity to do his spiritual duty. “John, chapter eight, verse thirty-two: ‘And ye...’” “‘Shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.’ Yes, I know. I know,” Agnes said. She bundled her knitting things together... “Not in my case, Reverend Thorvardur,” she called to him. “I’ve told the truth and you can see for yourself how it has served me.”

Chapter 4 Quotes

☞ To know what a person has done, and to know who a person is, are very different things...It’s not fair. People claim to know you through the things you’ve done, and not by sitting down and listening to you speak for yourself. No matter how much you try to live a godly life, if you make a mistake in this valley, it’s never forgotten...Who was she really?...she made mistakes and others made up their minds about her. People around here don’t let you forget your misdeeds. They think them the only things worth writing down.

Related Characters: Agnes Magnúsdóttir (speaker), Ingveldur Rafnsdóttir, Assistant Reverend Thorvardur Jónsson (Tóti)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 103-104

Explanation and Analysis

Related Characters: Agnes Magnúsdóttir, Assistant Reverend Thorvardur Jónsson (Tóti) (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 105-106

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Agnes and Tóti debate the function of truth. Agnes argues that objective truth does not actually exist at all. Tóti, meanwhile, who comes from a highly religious point of view, states that there is “truth in God.”

Agnes and Tóti’s different understandings of truth reflect their very different experiences of religion. While Agnes expresses skepticism towards Christianity throughout the book, Tóti finds truth and direction in God and his rigorous religious education. Tóti’s faith in the Christian teaching that “the truth shall make you free” also reflects the fact that Tóti views religious truth as an inevitable liberation.

Agnes, on the other hand, has become bitter because her own experience has disproven this theory, since, during her trial, she told the truth and still has been incarcerated. Agnes seems to feel betrayed by both God and the justice system as a result.

Chapter 5 Quotes

●● He built his church from wives' tales and the secret language of weather; saw the blinking eye of God in the habits of the sea, the swooping merlin, the gnashing teeth of his ewes. When he caught me knitting on the doorstep he accused me of lengthening the winter. "Do not think nature is not watchful of us," he warned me. "She is as awake as you and I." He smiled at me. Passed the smooth breadth of his palm over my forehead. "And as secretive."

Related Characters: Natan Ketilsson, Agnes Magnúsdóttir (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 114

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Agnes describes Natan's spiritual philosophy. Agnes equates Natan's spiritual and superstitious views to Christian religion when she describes it as a "church" "built...from wives' tales and the secret language of weather." Natan's religious views are highly connected to nature and the Icelandic landscape, and Agnes describes how he found "God" in "the habits of the sea, the swooping merlin... his ewes."

Interestingly, and although other characters describe Natan in ways that suggest that he lacks religion, Agnes sees Natan as highly religious and spiritual, although he is not a member of an organized Christian church. Natan also describes nature as a God itself, and specifically a female god, personifying her as "awake" and "secretive." Effectively, Natan's religious views, although incompatible with Christianity, offer a rich alternative in the form of nature-based, nature-goddess-worshipping spirituality.

●● I'll tell you something, Reverend Tóti. All my life people have thought I was too clever...That's exactly why they don't pity me. Because they think I'm too smart... to get caught up in this by accident. But Sigga is dumb and pretty and young, and that is why they don't want to see her die...They see I've got a head on my shoulders, and believe a thinking woman cannot be trusted. Believe there's no room for innocence. And like it or not, Reverend, *that* is the truth of it.

Related Characters: Agnes Magnúsdóttir (speaker), Assistant Reverend Thorvardur Jónsson (Tóti), Sigríður Guðmundsdóttir (Sigga)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 126

Explanation and Analysis

Here Agnes lays out her theory of why Sigga was granted an appeal and she was not. Agnes believes that people do not trust her because she is "too smart," while Sigga is "dumb and pretty and young," so they do not want her to die. Agnes then goes on to say that the people who condemned her believe "a thinking woman cannot be trusted" and there's "no room for innocence."

Agnes suggests that, because people see in Sigga the feminine traits that they associate with innocence, they ignore the facts of the case and assume that Sigga must not be responsible for what happened. Meanwhile, these same people prejudge Agnes based on her intelligence and age (especially as connected to her gender). Agnes effectively shows how innocence, rather than being a divine state of righteousness, is actually a socially constructed set of expectations. Sigga is only perceived as innocent because of her youth and beauty, while Agnes's against-the-norm womanly intelligence threatens the status quo, making people believe she is guilty. To Agnes, this is the "truth" of the situation— not the real account of what happened on the nights of the murders, but the patterns of how the judges choose to blame her for it.

Chapter 6 Quotes

●● I explained that I had begun to dig a grave for Mamma. Uncle Ragnar frowned and told me I shouldn't call her Mamma, and wasn't I ashamed of myself, thinking to bury her near the doorstep where everyone would tread on her, and not in the holy ground of a churchyard.

Related Characters: Agnes Magnúsdóttir (speaker), Uncle Ragnar, Inga

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 147

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Agnes recounts how her Uncle Ragnar found her trying to dig a grave for Inga several months after her death. The family had not yet been able to bury Inga because the ground was too frozen.

When Ragnar finds Agnes digging the grave, he seems to consider her endeavor inappropriate. Agnes, who is only a child, is digging the grave near the doorstep and not in a churchyard, meaning that she does not understand the need for Christian burial rites and revealing, Ragnar seems to think, Agnes's lack of respect for Inga. Moreover, Ragnar objects to Agnes calling Inga "Mamma," as he seems to think it inappropriate since Inga was only Agnes's foster mother. While Inga was the best mother figure Agnes ever had, Ragnar's objection to the name makes it clear that he is only willing to see the facts of the situation—that Inga was only Agnes's foster mother—rather than the emotional truth of it—that Inga really was "Mama" to Agnes. Later, Ragnar casts Agnes out and leaves her to the mercy of the parish, perhaps in part because of this interaction.

could not have killed him instead.

Blöndal's response effectively confirms Agnes's earlier analysis of why she believes people have sympathy for Sigga and not for her. Blöndal points out Sigga's young age and describes how she "burst into tears" when questioned. Blöndal seems to believe that, because of Sigga's emotional outburst, her youth, and the fact that she is "simple-minded," she could not be guilty. These traits (emotionality and supposed "simpleness" especially) are stereotypically feminine traits, and they appear to make Blöndal trust Sigga even more, despite the fact that, rationally, they would seem likely to make Sigga's perspective less reliable.

☝☝ Tóti nodded, and slowly picked up the swan feather... "You mean to make an example of her," he said quietly. "I mean to deliver God's justice here on earth," Blöndal said, frowning. "I mean to honor the authorities who have appointed me by fulfilling my duty as a lawkeeper." ... "I hear that you have appointed Gudmundur Ketilsson as executioner." ... "I do not have to explain my decisions to you, Reverend. I am not accountable to parish priests. I am accountable to Denmark. To the King... We are not her to discuss my performance. We are here to discuss yours."

Chapter 7 Quotes

☝☝ "Why not Sigga?" Tóti asked in a small voice. Blöndal shook his head. "The maid of sixteen who burst into tears as soon as I summoned her? Sigga didn't even attempt to lie—she is too simple-minded, too young to know how. She told me everything. How Agnes hated Natan, how Agnes was jealous of his attentions to her. Sigga is not bright, but she saw that much."

Related Characters: Björn Blöndal, Assistant Reverend Thorvardur Jónsson (Tóti) (speaker), Natan Ketilsson, Sigríður Gudmundsdóttir (Sigga), Agnes Magnúsdóttir

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 161

Explanation and Analysis

This dialogue takes place during Tóti's meeting with Blöndal, when Blöndal asks about Tóti's progress with Agnes and tells him in detail about what he believes happened on the night of the murders. After Blöndal has laid out his evidence for why he believes Agnes killed Natan, Tóti asks if Sigga

Related Characters: Björn Blöndal, Assistant Reverend Thorvardur Jónsson (Tóti) (speaker), Gudmundur Ketilsson, Agnes Magnúsdóttir

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 164-165

Explanation and Analysis

This dialogue takes place during Tóti's meeting with Blöndal, after Blöndal has explained his perception of the events the night of Natan's murder. Tóti turns the tables on Blöndal in this dialogue, subtly implying his objections to Blöndal's use of Agnes as an "example" and his appointment of Gudmundur Ketilsson, Natan's brother, as the executioner.

While Tóti sees Blöndal's execution of Agnes as a demonstration of Blöndal's power and the power of the authorities, Blöndal reframes the execution as delivering "God's justice here on earth" and "honoring the authorities who appointed [him]." Blöndal conflates Christianity and God's justice with his own power and the power of the Danish authorities, showing the danger of a highly intertwined church and state. Even though Tóti, not Blöndal,

is a priest, Blöndal presumes to equate “God’s justice” with his own. When Tóti tries to imply his dissent, Blöndal uses his higher status to shut down the conversation.

☞ When I was sixteen years old I dreamt that I was walking barefoot in a lava field...In every direction there was nothing but rock and snow, and great chasms and crack in the ground...Just when I thought I would die from fear, a young man appeared ...and even though I was still terrified, I had his hand in mine, and it was a comfort. Then suddenly, in my dream, I felt the ground give way beneath my feet...and I fell into a chasm...I was dropped into the earth, buried in silence, and it was unbearable, and then I woke.

Related Characters: Agnes Magnúsdóttir (speaker), Assistant Reverend Thorvardur Jónsson (Tóti)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 175

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Agnes tells Tóti about a dream she had when she was sixteen, in which she met Tóti for the first time. Agnes is crossing a lava field covered in snow and she is frightened, but Tóti finds her and helps her. Agnes then falls into a chasm and is swallowed into the earth.

Agnes’s dream is one of many throughout the book that carry symbolic significance. Agnes’s dream clearly is prophetic, as are several dreams in the novel, since she had never met Tóti before she saw him in this vision. The dream seems to be a fairly neat metaphor for Agnes confronting her own execution, as she is terrified to confront the immense emotional turmoil that she faces (represented by the lava field) because she knows that her own death is fast approaching. Tóti helps her over the lava field in the dream just as he helps her bear the spiritual burden of death and her past. Agnes’s death is then represented when she is swallowed into the dark, silent earth.

☞ She said Natan had started giving himself some airs, calling himself Lyngdal, not Ketilsson, though neither of us could work out why—it was a strange sort of name to have, not Icelandic in the slightest. María thought it was probably to make himself out to be a Dane, and I wondered that he was allowed to change his name at all. María told me that men might do as they please, and that they are all Adams, naming everything under the sun.

Related Characters: Agnes Magnúsdóttir (speaker), Natan Ketilsson, María Jónsdóttir

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 182

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Agnes’s friend Maria tells Agnes about Natan before she meets him for the first time. Maria describes how Natan has supposedly changed his last name from “Ketilsson” to “Lyngdal.”

Because names are so significant in the novel and evoke strong emotions or indicate what is essential about a person or place, Natan’s multiple names suggest that his identity is amorphous or splintered. This makes sense with how polarizing a figure he is (many people hate him, while others love him) and how he can be viewed in so many different lights—and, further, how he presents different facades to different people, particularly the various women he manipulates. Maria’s suggestion that Natan is trying to make himself out to be a Dane makes sense with Natan’s desire to elevate his social status and prove himself superior to those around him, since the Danish colonizers have much more power and wealth than most Icelanders. As Agnes wonders about the logistics of name changing, Maria says that, as an “Adam” (the biblical first man, who gave names to all the animals), Natan can name whatever he wants. Maria highlights the power that men have to change their own identities and name others—a privilege that, based on Maria’s Adam and Eve reference, women do not have.

Chapter 8 Quotes

☞ “What’s the name for the space between stars?”
 “No such name.”
 “Make one up.”
 I thought about it. “The soul asylum.”
 “That’s another way of saying heaven, Agnes.”
 “No, Natan. It’s not.”

Related Characters: Agnes Magnúsdóttir, Natan Ketilsson (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 209

Explanation and Analysis

In this dialogue, Natan and Agnes, who are just beginning their romance, are looking at the sky together when Natan

asks Agnes, “What’s the name for the space between stars?” When Agnes tells Natan that the space between stars is called “the soul asylum,” she links the night sky with spirituality as she evokes the idea of a “soul.” Natan, clearly picking up on the spiritual resonance she is evoking, tells Agnes that “soul asylum” is the same thing as “heaven.” Agnes, however, objects. Agnes has already made it clear that she sees distinctions in names as very important. While Natan conflates “heaven” and Agnes’s term, Agnes, perhaps objecting to the Christianity implied by the idea of “heaven,” distinguishes between the two. Agnes draws the reader’s attention to the importance of language specificity in creating different kinds of meaning.

picturing a more stable, comfortable, and normal life for herself, in which she has a loving family and Christian faith. Again, Agnes’s name change allows her to imagine an entirely new selfhood.

Chapter 9 Quotes

☝☝ Agnes Jónsdóttir. I never thought it could be that easy to name yourself...Let everyone know whose bastard I truly am. Agnes Jónsdóttir. She sounds like the woman I should have been...She could even be the sister of Sigurlaug and Steinvör Jónsdóttir. Margrét’s daughter. Born blessed under a marriage. Born into a family that would not be ripped apart by poverty. Agnes Jónsdóttir would not have been so foolish as to love a man who spent his life opening veins, mouths, legs...She would have been assured of a place in heaven. She would have believed in heaven.

Related Characters: Agnes Magnúsdóttir (speaker), Jón of Brekkukot

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 221

Explanation and Analysis

Agnes narrates this quote just after the local priest visits to record the names and literacy levels of every member of the household. Agnes, who previously went by Agnes Magnúsdóttir, tells the priest her name is Agnes Jónsdóttir to reflect the fact that she believes her real father was named Jón.

Agnes expresses how her name change gives her a sense of comfort and relief. Throughout the book, Agnes shows that she believes names are supremely important for defining the essence of who someone is, so Agnes experiences her own name change as a kind of rebirth. Changing her name allows Agnes to create a new start for herself and to define her own identity. Agnes imagines the person she might have been if her name had been Agnes Jónsdóttir all along,

☝☝ “What do you do with the kit after you kill its parents?”
 “Some hunters leave it there to die. They are no use for market— the skins are too small.”
 “What do you do?”
 “I stove their heads in with a rock.”
 “That is the only decent thing to do.”
 “Yes. To leave them is cruelty.”

Related Characters: Natan Ketilsson, Agnes Magnúsdóttir (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 221-222

Explanation and Analysis

In this section of dialogue, Natan and Agnes discuss Natan’s methods of fox hunting. Natan describes how he breaks the legs of a fox kit (cub) to use as bait, and this dialogue begins as Agnes inquires about what he does with the fox kit afterward. Natan tells her that he kills the kit.

Agnes and Natan’s agreement that the best thing to do is to kill the kit foreshadows how Agnes later murders Natan in order to limit his suffering after Fridrik’s attack. Even the method Natan uses to kill the kits (hitting their heads with a rock) mimics Fridrik’s use of a hammer to critically injure him. It’s possible that Agnes’s decision to kill Natan in order to prevent his further suffering was informed by this conversation, since they both agreed that ending the kit’s suffering is morally right. However, this contradicts both the laws of the state and of Christianity, which object to this kind of mercy killing.

Chapter 10 Quotes

☝☝ What else is God good for other than a distraction from the mire we’re all stranded in? We’re all shipwrecked. All beached in a peat bog of poverty. When was the last time I even attended church? Not while I was at Illugastadir...Perhaps things would have been different if Natan had let me go to church at Tjörn. I might have made friends there. I might have met a family to turn to when it all became twisted...But he didn’t let me go, and there was no other friend, no light to head towards in that wintered landscape.

Related Characters: Agnes Magnúsdóttir (speaker), Natan Ketilsson

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 236

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Agnes wonders how her life at Natan's farm might have been different if she had been allowed to attend church.

Clearly, Agnes does not have a lot of optimistic Christian faith (she wonders “what else is God good for other than a distraction”— not an especially rosy portrait of Christianity). Still, Agnes admires and wishes for the community that many Icelanders find in religion and thinks that this kind of social network could have helped her escape from Natan's abuse.

Instead, Agnes has “no light to head towards in that wintered landscape.” Agnes, who loves the outdoors, seems to connect her own spirituality, which she shared with Natan, with the Icelandic nature, while identifying Christianity with the indoors. While Agnes prefers the former, it can be isolating and inhospitable just like the Icelandic landscape, and focusing only on her own personal spiritual beliefs gives her nowhere to turn to for help. The fact that Natan didn't “let” her go to church also emphasizes just how little power and agency Agnes has in the situation. Natan is her lover and abuser, but he's also her employer and only source of consistent shelter in the harsh landscape.

☝ Where would I have gone? I knew only the valley of Vatnsdalur; knew where it was scabbed with rock, knew the white-headed mountains and the lake alive with swans, and the wrinkled skins of turf by the river. And the ravens, the constant, circling ravens. But Illugastadir was different. I had no friends. I didn't understand the landscape. Only the outlying tongues of rock scarred the perfect kiss of sea and sky— there was no one and nothing else. There was nowhere else to go.

Related Characters: Agnes Magnúsdóttir (speaker), Natan Ketilsson

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 252

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Agnes remembers her feelings after Natan hit her and she saw Natan sleeping with Sigga. Agnes wanted to leave, but she had nowhere else to go.

Agnes ponders the landscape around her as she imagines leaving Natan. She thinks about the landscape that she knows well, around Vatnsdalur, where she perhaps could have set out on her own. She imagines the land as a person, describing its “[scabs] of rock, “white-headed mountains,” and the “wrinkled skins of turf.” The land around Natan's farm, however, is totally unfamiliar to Agnes, and the toxicity of Natan and Agnes's relationship seems to be reflected in the landscape. Agnes describes the rock “scarr[ing] the perfect kiss of sea and sky,” mirroring the violence and volatility that mars Agnes and Natan's relationship. While certain landscapes are familiar and welcoming to Agnes, the one around Natan's farm is hostile and impossible to confront on her own.

Chapter 11 Quotes

☝☝ “Thórbjörg had an inkling of what Fridrik planned. She knew about some sheep Fridrik stole. She lied to the courtroom...Thórbjörg saved my life,” Agnes added after a moment's pause. “She found me on her doorstep after Natan threw me out. I would have died had she not brought me inside and let me stay there.”
Margrét nodded. “No one is all bad.”

Related Characters: Margrét, Agnes Magnúsdóttir (speaker), Fridrik Sigurdsson, Thórbjörg

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 259

Explanation and Analysis

In this dialogue, Agnes and Margrét discuss the character of Thórbjörg, Fridrik's mother, who lied to the court about Fridrik's actions but who also took Agnes in out of the cold, saving her life.

Agnes and Margrét, trying to puzzle out their moral judgments of Thórbjörg, discuss how Thórbjörg is a complicated character. Thórbjörg serves as a parallel character to Agnes—both are smart woman with vexed moralities that are subject to judgment and discussion. Even though Agnes is in a similar situation, she struggles to reconcile Thórbjörg's lies with the kindness she showed her. When Margrét tells Agnes that “no one is all bad,” she displays the comfort with moral ambiguity that Kent seems to be trying to encourage through her portrayal of Agnes.

Chapter 12 Quotes

☞ “Admit it. You want this too, Agnes.”

At that point...I saw what Fridrik held in his hands. It was a hammer and a knife.

What do I remember? I didn't believe him. I went back to my bed on the floor of the cowshed, suddenly weary. I wanted nothing to do with him. What happened?

Related Characters: Agnes Magnúsdóttir, Fridrik Sigurdsson (speaker), Natan Ketilsson

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 284

Explanation and Analysis

Here Agnes is remembering when she woke up the night of Natan and Pétur's murders and saw Fridrik standing nearby with a hammer and a knife. Fridrik tells Agnes that she “want[s] this too,” and Agnes states that she did not believe he would do anything.

Agnes's reaction to Fridrik's knife and hammer-wielding is peculiar because, although she insists that she did not think he would do anything, she had every reason to believe that he *would* hurt Natan, given his history of violence, his jealousy towards Natan, and the fact that he is carrying weapons. Agnes's own narrative, meanwhile, becomes somewhat hazy at this point as she asks herself “What do I remember?” and “What happened?” This is one of the moments in the book when Agnes's narration becomes unreliable, and the reader has to wonder whether Agnes is telling the truth that she did not believe that Fridrik would hurt Natan. It seems more likely that Fridrik is correct that, after all the abuse Agnes has suffered at Natan's hands, she also wants it to end. Although Agnes's narrative is a kind of corrective to the judgment of the court, this moment suggests that Agnes's own perception of events may be somewhat clouded.

Chapter 13 Quotes

☞ I am crying and my mouth is open and filled with something, it is choking me and I spit it out. On the ground is a stone, and I look back at Margrét, and see that she did not notice. “The stone was in my mouth,” I say.

Related Characters: Agnes Magnúsdóttir (speaker), Margrét, Ingveldur Rafnsdóttir

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 307

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes when Agnes is preparing to leave Kornsó for her execution. As she is saying goodbye to everyone, Agnes feels something in her mouth and spits out a stone.

It is uncertain whether the stone actually exists or whether it is Agnes's imagination. It seems likely, however, that Agnes, who is extremely emotionally distressed, is hallucinating the stone. The stone seems to be the stone Agnes's mother gave her years ago, which Ingveldur said she could use to talk to birds.

The significance of Agnes finding the stone in her mouth is somewhat unclear, but seems to represent the fact that, even if Agnes could not actually talk to birds, she has been able to read the symbols in nature around her (including ravens) the entire time and use them to make sense of her world, and as she readies herself for death has reached some new level of understanding regarding nature or life. Alternatively, the stone could represent that Agnes has finally come to terms with her difficult childhood and past.

☞ “Will they drown me?” I ask, and someone shakes her head. It is Lauga. “Agnes,” she says, and I say, “That is the first time you have called me by my name,” and that is it, she collapses as though I have stabbed her in the stomach.

Related Characters: Lauga Jónsdóttir, Agnes Magnúsdóttir (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 307-308

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, as Agnes says goodbye to the family at Kornsó before her execution, Lauga, who hated Agnes during most of Agnes's stay and was occasionally quite cruel to her, speaks Agnes's name for the first time. In the book as a whole, names carry strong significances, and Lauga speaking Agnes's name represents her acknowledgment of Agnes's humanity. When Agnes points this out to Lauga, who in the last few weeks seems to have realized and repented her cruelty to Agnes, Lauga is so deeply troubled that she collapses. Agnes's comment that Lauga's collapse is “as though I have stabbed her in the stomach” then echoes Agnes's complicated, love/hate relationship with Natan,

which ended in Agnes stabbing him in the belly. As Lauga confronts the reality of her own poor treatment of Agnes

and failure to acknowledge her humanity, Lauga is extremely upset.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PROLOGUE

The novel opens with a prologue in the first-person. It later becomes clear that the narrator is Agnes Magnúsdóttir. She describes her condemnation to death. She then imagines that all people are “candle-flames” in the night, and imagines hearing footsteps as someone approaches to blow out her life. She wonders where she will be after death. Agnes relives the experience of watching a farm burn during the cold winter. She remembers looking back and watching the fire. Then she hears footsteps and the prologue ends.

Agnes imagines death to be like extinguishing candles. Clearly, Agnes does not neatly subscribe to Christianity's vision of the afterlife, as she cannot imagine what happens after death. When the prologue ends as Agnes hears footsteps, Kent seems to be trying to convey that Agnes's days are numbered, as her execution is coming like a person approaching to blow her candle out.



CHAPTER 1

The first chapter of the novel begins with a public notice announcing the auction of Natan Ketilsson's possessions, including animals and household objects, to be sold to the highest bidder. If the weather is too bad, it will be held the following day. The notice is signed by District Commissioner Björn Blöndal.

Kent uses documents designed to resemble records, letters, and notices to remind the reader that her novel is based on historical events, blending the barrier between “true” stories and fiction.



Next, Kent presents a letter to a reverend from Björn Blöndal, responding to a prior letter in which the reverend inquired about the burial of Pétur Jónsson, who was murdered along with Natan Ketilsson earlier that month. Blöndal states that, because Pétur was a convicted criminal, there was debate about how he should be buried. Since the Icelanders had not received any letters from Denmark telling them what to do, they buried Pétur Jónsson with Christian rites.

Kent makes it clear how deeply intertwined the government is with Christianity when she depicts the debate about whether Pétur should be buried with Christian rites. Notably, the Icelanders defer to Denmark in this decision, showing how influential the colonial power is in their daily life.



In the next letter of the chapter, Björn Blöndal writes to Assistant Reverend Thorvardur Jónsson (Tóti). First, he extends his congratulations to Tóti for completing his studies. Then, Blöndal tells Tóti he is going to execute Natan and Pétur's murderers. To refresh Tóti's memory, Blöndal describes the murders, recounting how Natan Ketilsson and Pétur Jónsson's burnt remains were found on Natan's farm. Eventually, one man and two women Fridrik Sigurdsson, Sigríður Gudmundsdóttir (Sigga), and Agnes Magnúsdóttir, were charged with the murders and sentenced to death.

Kent first introduces Agnes to the reader in this letter, where Blöndal describes to Tóti the crimes for which Agnes, Sigga, and Fridrik are to be executed. This puts the reader in the same position as the family at Kornsó— having already heard the story of Agnes's evil deeds, they encounter her with significant prejudice. The reader, like the characters, must compare the real Agnes with her reputation in order to figure out what is true.



The convicts are being held in the north, and one of them, Agnes Magnúsdóttir, is being moved from Stóra-Borg to Kornská. Agnes has requested Tóti for spiritual guidance, which is why Blöndal is writing to him. Blöndal conveys his hesitation, saying that Tóti has little experience, but says that if Tóti wants to take on the task, he will have to visit Kornská regularly. Blöndal tells Tóti he is awaiting his response.

After Blöndal's letter, the novel begins a third-person narrative, which opens with Tóti's father, Reverend Jón, walking into their house and telling him that a messenger has arrived. The messenger enters and tells Tóti he has a letter from District Commissioner Blöndal, saying he is supposed to wait at the house until Tóti has read it. Tóti breaks the seal of the letter and reads. When he finishes, the messenger asks for his response. Tóti says he must talk with his father.

Tóti finds Reverend Jón in the communal bedroom (the badstofa), and gives him the letter to read. Once he finishes reading, Tóti asks him what he should do, and his father says it is his choice. Tóti returns to the other room and tells the messenger that he will meet with Agnes. The messenger is shocked when he hears Agnes's name, and jokes that Tóti is too young to be Agnes's spiritual advisor.

The third-person narrative jumps to describing Steina Jónsdóttir, who is working on her family's farm, Kornská. She suddenly hears hooves while she is piling dried dung. Steina stands up, and, seeing a man in a red coat approaching on horseback, tries to clean her hands in a hurry. The man greets Steina and then introduces himself as District Commissioner Björn Blöndal, Steina's father's superior. Steina tells Blöndal that neither her father nor mother is home.

Blöndal asks to come inside. Steina shows Blöndal where to tie his horse and leads him in. As Blöndal walks through the house, he is uncomfortable in the small space, thinking he does not like "the hovels of the peasants and farmers." Steina tells Blöndal that her parents will return tomorrow or the next day, depending on the weather. She tells him to take a seat while she goes to find her sister.

Lauga Jónsdóttir, Steina's sister, is weeding in the garden when Steina comes looking for her. Steina tells Lauga that Blöndal is there. Lauga criticizes her sister for leaving "a man like Blöndal" in their house alone, and probably with only the servants' whey to drink. Steina corrects her, saying she did not give him anything, and Lauga is even more dismayed.

Through Blöndal's various letters, Kent shows how powerful he is in his district. When Blöndal asks if Tóti will be Agnes's spiritual advisor, Kent again shows how closely tied the government and the justice system are with religion.



Here, the reader sees Tóti reading Blöndal's letter, which Kent displayed just before the commencement of the third-person narrative. By giving the letter to the reader before having Tóti read it within the narrative, Kent places the reader in Tóti's shoes as he takes in the immense religious responsibility he has been asked to bear.



Kent's prominent use of letters in the beginning of each chapter reflects the extreme importance of written communication and literacy in the world of the book. Tóti and his father are both educated and literate, allowing them to read the letters that Blöndal uses to communicate.



The fact that Steina is piling dried dung when Blöndal approaches on horseback emphasizes their class difference. While Steina is dirty and wipes her hands on her apron to try to get clean, Blöndal is wearing a fashionable red coat. The difference in their clothing shows the difference in their economic status.



Blöndal's disgust as he walks through the house at Kornská shows how he disdains people who are of a lower class than he is. He refers to the house as a "hovel," lumping it in with the other dwellings of "peasants and farmers" to show his sense of superiority.



Lauga seems to accept Iceland's class system and recognizes the importance of treating Blöndal with distinction because of his high class status. Steina, meanwhile, seems to either not be aware of his higher status or to not respect it.



Lauga trots back to the house, tidies herself, and goes into the parlor to greet Blöndal. She apologizes for her sister's behavior and silently hopes that Blöndal has come to offer her father Jón a promotion. She asks Blöndal if he would like some skyr (an Icelandic dairy product) and then goes to fetch it and some coffee. In the kitchen, Steina tells Lauga they have no more coffee because she drank it all. Lauga chastises Steina, then tells her to get the skyr and bring Blöndal fresh milk. Lauga thinks better of this, though, and instead tells Steina to let their servant Kristín serve Blöndal, since Steina is so dirty.

Lauga returns to the parlor. To her annoyance, Steina (instead of Kristín) emerges from the kitchen carrying the food for Blöndal. Blöndal asks which of the two of them is older, and Lauga tells Blöndal that she is younger by one year. Blöndal tells them that they are both very pretty. Blöndal sniffs the food and the milk, but he does not eat it.

Blöndal tells the girls that he had intended to talk to their father, but that since their father is absent, he will tell the girls. Blöndal asks if they are familiar with the murders of Natan Ketilsson and Pétur Jónsson, and then updates them on the case, which proceeded to the Supreme Court in Copenhagen, where the King agreed with Blöndal's execution sentence. Lauga asks if the murderers are being sent to Denmark for execution, and Blöndal tells her no. Lauga, puzzled, asks him where they are to be killed.

Blöndal rises from his chair and walks to the window. Blöndal tells the girls that the criminals are to be executed in Iceland to serve as an example to the local community. Blöndal notes that important criminals are usually sent abroad for punishment, so there are no jails in Iceland. Blöndal has decided to place the criminals on the farms of government officials until they are to be killed. Lauga asks why they cannot be held in Reykjavík, and Blöndal tells her the cost is too high.

Steina grows angry as she realizes that Blöndal means to lodge one of the criminals in their house. Blöndal tells her he will compensate their family, and that their father's title requires certain responsibility. He then tells them they will only host one of the women prisoners. The narrative then cuts to Blöndal leaving, as Steina, furious, clears away his bowl of uneaten skyr.

As Lauga politely offers Blöndal food and coffee, Kent shows that she is adept at navigating the Icelandic class system. Her hopes that Blöndal will promote her father display her ambition to rise in class status by playing the necessary games. Steina, meanwhile, is clearly not interested in or good at navigating these social affairs, so much so that Lauga tries to hide Steina in the kitchen while Kristín serves Blöndal.



Blöndal again shows his disdain for the lower class family at Kornsó when he refuses to eat the skyr Lauga brings him. Throughout the book, food and drink show and reinforce class divides, as luxury goods are reserved for people with high status.



As Blöndal and Lauga discuss Agnes's case and trial, Kent highlights how the legal system worked in colonial Iceland, with Danish officials and monarchs reviewing the decisions of Icelandic officials like Blöndal. Although Blöndal thinks he is very important, and does possess a lot of authority in the book, he has much less power than his superiors on the mainland.



As Blöndal explains the lack of prisons in Iceland, he shows the reader how the lack of infrastructure makes it impossible for Iceland to have an autonomous justice system. Without jails in Iceland, people must depend on Denmark to house prisoners, shifting the power to punish out of Icelandic hands and into the hands of Danish colonial authorities.



Steina's reaction to Blöndal's decision again shows how Steina does not subscribe to the norms of politeness attached to speaking with an authority figure like Blöndal. Blöndal's uneaten bowl of skyr, meanwhile, represents his sense of superiority over and detachment from the people of Kornsó.



The chapter changes to the first person narrative of Agnes. Agnes wonders whether she is already dead. She is in a storeroom and the air is filthy and stagnant. She is alone, chained and without light. Agnes wonders if it is summer, hearing footsteps and laughter outside. She imagines the valley in summer and the bright blue sky.

Agnes's imprisonment in the storeroom is not only incredibly physically unpleasant, but it also denies her access to nature, something that Agnes clearly craves as she daydreams about the valley and the sky.



The narrative returns to the third-person as Jón Jónsson and Margrét set out for home, three days after Blöndal's visit to their daughters Steina and Lauga. Margrét coughs violently as they ride back. As they pass a neighbor's house, Margrét notices their new cow and says she would like another cow for the extra butter, as well as another servant. Jón tells her to be patient.

In this section, Kent introduces the reader to Jón and Margrét, Steina and Lauga's parents. Margrét, who goes on to be an essential character in the book and an important ally of Agnes, has ambitions to better her family by obtaining more wealth and extra help on the farm.



Meanwhile, at Kornsó, Lauga and Steina are silently collecting water from the stream, having ignored each other since Blöndal's visit. Lauga worries that Steina's impertinence towards him will hurt their family, while Steina worries about the criminal they must house and feels angry at Blöndal for subjecting them to danger. Lauga, seeing a horse in the distance, tells Steina that their parents are returning. She sends Steina to fill both water buckets while she goes to greet their parents. Lauga's mind races as she prepares broth for Jón and Margrét. She decides to tell them about Blöndal's visit while they eat together in the badstofa.

Lauga and Steina's relationship is very tense throughout the book. The two sisters have extremely different personalities, making it difficult for them to understand and connect with each other. As she does during Blöndal's visit, Lauga sends Steina away when her parents arrive at the house. Lauga seems not to trust Steina to behave appropriately considering the delicate nature of the news they have for Margrét and Jón.



When Jón and Margrét arrive, Jon greets Lauga with a kiss. Margrét and Lauga hug. Margrét asks where Steina is, and Lauga says she is fetching water. Margrét expresses surprise that she is not there to welcome them. Lauga turns to her father and says that she has something to tell him later, when they are alone, assuring him in the meantime that no animals have died. Margrét says that Lauga can say whatever she needs to tell him in front of her. The family heads inside the house.

It seems that Lauga has internalized some of the sexist standards present in Icelandic society, as she addresses her father as the "head of the household." Margrét senses this, as she makes obvious when she tells Lauga to just say whatever it is in front of both of them.



Once Jón and Margrét are settled in the badstofa, Lauga brings them bowls of broth. Lauga tries to tell them the news as Jón changes his clothes, but Margrét interrupts her. Finally, Lauga tells Jón that Blöndal paid a visit while they were away to deliver a letter. Jón asks for the letter, but Lauga tells him that Steina burnt it. As Jón and Margrét become agitated, Steina, sopping wet from her trip to get water, bursts into the room and tells them that they will have to house the criminal Agnes Magnúsdóttir.

Despite Lauga's best efforts, Steina ends up ruining her careful plans for informing her parents of the alarming news, as the more straightforward (and less diplomatic) Steina tells them the truth herself. The fact that Steina has burned the letter, in addition to her sudden intrusion and outburst, shows that Steina is a passionate and sometimes bold character.



Steina's news horrifies Margrét, as they all know that Agnes was convicted of murder. Lauga is angry with Steina for interrupting her plan to tell her parents, and begins to chastise her. Jón tells them to stop bickering. Lauga recounts the entire visit, and as Lauga finishes her story, Jón begins to dress again. Margrét implores Jón to reject the request, but Jón ignores her and rides to Hvammur to talk to Blöndal.

Several hours later, Jón returns to Kornsó. He confirms that Agnes will be moved to Kornsó. Jón explains that, as a District Officer, he is obligated to fulfill his responsibility to Blöndal. Margrét is angry, asking why he, of all the District Officers, must shoulder this responsibility. Jón tells Margrét that they will be compensated for the service. Margrét says that they should consider sending the girls away for their safety, but Jón rejects this idea. He then tells Margrét that she will have to receive Agnes when she arrives, since Blöndal has requested Jón's presence in Hvammur that night to discuss who the executioner will be. Margrét, Steina, and Lauga are dismayed.

The narrative then switches to Agnes's first person perspective as she describes her poor treatment in the days before she is to be moved. She emphasizes the quiet and the darkness, how no one ever speaks to her, and how she only hears her name on others' lips when they are saying bad things about her. Agnes stays quiet, reciting the sagas to keep herself sane. She closes herself off from the world so that she is "not there" when people curse her and see her in a bad light.

The narrative changes again to the third person, which now follows Tóti as he leaves church. He accepted Blöndal's offer to visit Agnes a month ago, and has lived in self-doubt ever since. As Tóti walks through the churchyard back to his house, he reflects on his father's coldness after his mother's death. When he gets to the house, Reverend Jón is boiling fish. Tóti tells him he is going to Kornsó, where Agnes is scheduled to arrive that night.

Tóti asks his father if he thinks he is ready, and Reverend Jón tells him that only he knows, but that since he has agreed to help Agnes he must. When Tóti asks his father if he will pray for him, Reverend Jón does not respond. Reverend Jón tells Tóti not to wake him when he returns, and then he leaves the room.

Agnes's very name evokes fantasies of her crime, upsetting the family and leaving them concerned about the prospect of housing such a presumably violent woman. Even before Agnes arrives at the farm, the news of her impending arrival creates a rift between Lauga and Steina.



As Jón explains that he is obligated to fulfill his duty to Blöndal, Kent shows the reader how the power hierarchy in Iceland can be abused, leaving families like the one at Kornsó without agency to make real choices for themselves. Margrét, meanwhile, is clearly disturbed by the rumors she has heard about Agnes, her deeds, and her capacity for violence. Agnes's reputation precedes her, causing Margrét to fear for her girls' safety.



As Agnes, who seems to be in a disturbed state because of the poor conditions she has been kept in, discusses how her name is being used, she draws attention to the importance of names, a common theme throughout the book. When other people refuse to talk to her and only say her name to say nasty things about her, it clearly hurts Agnes—and her very sense of identity—immensely. Note also that Agnes can recite the sagas to herself, showing her education and intelligence.



Reverend Jón, Tóti's father, is a very tough parent, as Kent makes clear from the very first time she introduces him. Reverend Jón and his son Tóti are both priests, but despite this commonality they exemplify totally different views of Christianity.



Despite Reverend Jón's highly religious disposition, he has trouble connecting with and supporting his son. This shows how his kind of Christianity may be somewhat hypocritical, as his piety does not help him actually love the people around him.



Tóti prepares his horse and rides towards Kornsó, rehearsing what he will say to Agnes and dreading the impending encounter. As he takes in the Icelandic landscape's beauty, Tóti feels more at ease and whispers to himself that he will save Agnes.

As Tóti rides across the Icelandic landscape, the view renews him spiritually, so he feels capable of ministering to Agnes. For Tóti, natural beauty compliments religion.



CHAPTER 2

Chapter Two begins with an entry from the Undirfell Ministerial Book, stating where Agnes was born, at what age she was confirmed, and proclaiming that she had an excellent intellect and knowledge of Christianity.

The exact nature of Agnes's spirituality as an adult is unclear, but Agnes does possess a strong knowledge of Christianity from her childhood.



The narrative then returns to Agnes's first person perspective as she describes her transfer to Kornsó. An officer of the court takes Agnes out of her wretched storeroom into the yard, where it is raining. Agnes thinks that, after months in prison, she must look like a monster. She gasps at the fresh air and falls to her knees. One of the men guarding Agnes reaches down and roughly pulls her to her feet.

After being cooped up inside, Agnes is ecstatic to enjoy the rain and the fresh air. For Agnes, the Icelandic landscape is a safe place where she feels free and can express herself openly. Later in the book, for example, Agnes often chooses to be outside during her conversations with Tóti.



Agnes notices that a crowd has gathered to look at her, and she thinks about how the crowd is not actually seeing her, but rather seeing the crime she represents. Agnes sees Rósa watching at a distance, and Agnes smiles. This makes the crowd furious, and people begin to yell at her. Then they all leave to continue their chores, including Rósa.

Agnes's frustration about the crowd reducing her identity to her crime echoes her earlier anxiety about people never speaking her name except to curse it. Agnes is disturbed that her identity has been redefined by rumors of her criminality.



Agnes and her guards begin their journey across the Icelandic landscape to Kornsó. Agnes is happy to return to the part of Iceland that she knows so well, but she knows she is going there to die and wonders how she will be executed. Despite the flies, Agnes is happy to be outside. Agnes hears the ocean and thinks about how Natan once told her that, "like a woman... the sea is a nag" while they were out boating.

Agnes expresses her connection to the Icelandic landscape (and particularly to the landscape around Kornsó) as she enjoys the ride from Stora-Borg. In this section, Kent also foreshadows the ugly fight between Agnes and Natan at the end of the book through the use of the word "nag."



Agnes hears the caws of **ravens** and thinks that, although they are cruel birds, they are smart. Ravens are supposed to predict death, and Agnes thinks of how she once watched a raven jerk its beak toward a farm where a boy later drowned. Agnes also remembers hearing a raven shriek with Sigga one night. She wonders where Sigga is now, and why they keep Sigga away from her.

Agnes's description of ravens as birds that are cruel but smart seems to reflect the way Agnes has been described throughout her life: as a woman who is too smart and so is mistrusted. Agnes also displays her own superstitious nature as she talks about ravens predicting death.



A man rides up next to Agnes and tells her that she is going to be held at Kornsó until her execution. He tells her to stop scowling, and then rides past her. Agnes thinks that she is being held at Kornsó to humiliate her, since everyone there will remember her as an innocent child, and seeing her now as a prisoner will ruin their image of her.

The narrative changes back to third-person to describe Tóti standing in the doorway with Margrét, watching the group of riders arrive with Agnes. Tóti asks if Lauga and Steina will join them. Margrét reiterates how much she does not want to host Agnes. When Tóti tells her that they must “all do [their] duty,” Margrét reminds him that, as a man, he does not have to worry about the danger Agnes poses as much as Margrét and her daughters do. She hopes an officer will stay with them to protect them.

Margrét points out a flock of **ravens** to Tóti and asks if he is a man of tradition. Tóti responds yes, but only if they are Christian traditions. Margrét tells Tóti that the name for a flock of ravens is a “conspiracy,” and Tóti responds that he thought it was called an “unkindness.”

A rider reaches the edge of the homestead, dismounts, and greets Margrét and Tóti. He tells Margrét that Agnes will not cause any trouble, and they will stay there that night to make sure of it. Tóti asks where Agnes is, and the rider points to her before adding that Sigga, the other convicted woman, has had her case appealed because people think that, unlike Agnes, she is “too young and sweet to die.” According to the man, Blöndal supports Sigga’s appeal but not Agnes’s. Tóti asks what he should call the prisoner, and the man says “just Agnes.”

The narrative returns to Agnes’s first person perspective as she describes watching her accompanying officer talk with the people at the Kornsó homestead. Agnes has not eaten or drunk all day, and she is “no longer a woman” because she is so malnourished that she no longer gets her period. Tóti approaches Agnes and introduces himself. Agnes seems to recognize him, but Tóti does not recognize her. Agnes says nothing and picks at her scabs when Tóti tries to talk to her. Finally Tóti says goodbye, then bows and walks away. Agnes, now alone, watches the **ravens**.

Agnes worries about how she will be viewed at Kornsó now that she is no longer an innocent child, and instead is a convicted criminal. She sees this blow to her reputation as a particularly unfair social and psychological punishment.



When Margrét tells Tóti that as a man he is not as physically threatened by Agnes’s presence as Margrét and her daughters are, she suggests that women must be more afraid of violence and cannot defend themselves as well against it. Margrét implies that women have to be constantly cognizant of danger in a way that men do not have to think about. (Yet it’s also worth noting that Agnes is accused of having murdered a man.)



As Margrét and Tóti discuss ravens, they leave unanswered the question of whether believing that ravens predict death is a Christian superstition. This suggests the possibility that Christianity and superstition may intersect in Icelandic culture. Both of the potential names for a flock of ravens show the negative stigma against the birds.



When the rider talks to Tóti about Sigga’s appeal, his opinion that Sigga is “too young and sweet to die” shows how male mercy and sympathy are heavily skewed towards women who possess qualities correlated to traditional femininity and “innocence,” like youth and “sweetness.” Agnes, unlike Sigga, is not a woman who exemplifies these qualities, and so she is automatically suspect.



When Agnes points out that she no longer gets her period because of how little she has been given to eat, she shows how the justice system has, at least according to Agnes’s definition of womanhood, stripped her of her femininity as they punish her for her crime. Kent tries to show that, based on how 19th-century Icelanders thought about women, criminality and femininity are fundamentally incompatible.



The narrative returns to the third-person as Margrét cleans up from dinner while Lauga and Steina sleep. The house at Kornská has begun to decay, causing dangerous mold that gives the residents lung problems. Margrét's persistent, worsening cough worries her. One of the officers goes to fetch Agnes from where she is tied up, and Margrét, who has not yet really met Agnes, is nervous. When the officer enters with Agnes, Margrét is shocked by how filthy and battered she is. Margrét expresses her discontent that Agnes has clearly been beaten, and asks for Agnes's handcuffs to be taken off.

Margrét sends the guard away and steers Agnes into the kitchen, where she tells Agnes to take off her dirty clothes and wash in the water of a large kettle that Margrét takes off the fire. Agnes drops to the ground and begins drinking the greasy kettle water with her hands. Margrét pushes her away from it and, as Agnes cowers, Margrét tells her to ask for a cup next time.

The narrative then jumps to Tóti, who arrives back at his father's house on horseback. After taking care of his horse, Tóti walks to the church and reflects on his meeting with Agnes. He remembers how dirty, beaten, and sick she looked, and berates himself for wanting to flee from the sight of her since, as a priest, he should be able to stand the sight of suffering. Tóti arrives at the church and lets himself in. He gazes at the mural of the Last Supper painted behind the altar. Tóti thinks the mural is ugly and remembers how, after the former mural faded, his father commissioned this ugly, cheap one. Tóti sinks to his knees and prays for guidance in helping Agnes. He stays there for a long time before going to put his horse to stable.

The narrative switches back to following Margrét, who wakes early to the snoring of the officer who was supposed to stay awake and protect them. Margrét looks over at where Agnes is sleeping and silently mouths her name, thinking it feels wrong to call her by "a Christian name." Margrét thinks about how the only murderesses she has ever encountered were in the Icelandic sagas. However, Margrét thinks, those women verbally ordered murders but did not commit them themselves.

Margrét, still in bed, thinks of her former servants, imagining them killing her like Agnes killed Natan. She thinks of Lauga's belief that murderers have outward marks of evil (harelips, snaggleteeth, etc.). She also thinks of the rumors that Agnes caused Natan to end his affair with the beautiful, talented Rósa. Margrét notes that while Agnes's dark hair is striking, she is not especially beautiful.

When Kent describes Margrét's cough and how it stems from the mold of the decaying house, she shows how poverty can not only be uncomfortable, but also can create unsafe living conditions and pose a real threat to health. Kent also shows Margrét's soft side in this section, as Margrét is obviously appalled by how the men guarding Agnes have beaten her during her incarceration.



Although Kent shows Margrét sympathizing with Agnes in the preceding section, this sympathy clearly has its limits.



As Tóti thinks about his encounter with Agnes, he seems to realize how his own repulsion from Agnes's suffering contradicts the Christianity that he has been taught. Throughout the book, Tóti struggles to follow his understanding of his religion, sometimes prevented from doing so by his own limitations and other times warned against doing so by other priests. The repainted mural in this section seems to represent the more hollow versions of Christianity that Tóti tries to avoid.



As Margrét thinks over Agnes and her crime, she, like many other characters, expresses discomfort with calling Agnes by her "Christian" name because of how incompatible Agnes's alleged actions are with Christianity. Margrét also tries to process Agnes's crime by referencing the sagas, using literature to help herself understand Agnes.



Lauga's belief that murderers possess marks of evil shows the unfair truth that perceptions of innocence are often related to people's physical appearances. Appearances that are other-than-normal or beautiful are more likely to be mistrusted and understood as markers of guilt.



Margrét thinks of how dirty Agnes's body looked as she had helped her wash the previous night. Despite herself, Margrét had looked for marks like the one Lauga insisted would be present. Margrét was shocked by how badly Agnes had been abused. When Agnes's wounds bled, Margrét put ointment on them, and told Agnes that Natan had made the medicine. Agnes did not respond. When Agnes was washed, Margrét gave her clothes and bedding.

Margrét's thoughts dissipate and she looks around the badstofa at everyone else sleeping. The officer is still snoring, to Margrét's amusement and annoyance. Margrét gets up to prepare breakfast, and as she does she glances at Agnes again. Agnes, to Margrét's surprise, is staring at her.

CHAPTER 3

Chapter Three opens with a document from the Supreme Court trials of Agnes's case in 1829. The document states the allegation that Fridrik, Agnes, and Sigga entered Natan's house with the intention of robbing him. According to the District Commissioner, they acted together to kill Natan and Pétur with a knife and hammer before burning the farm and the bodies.

The narrative then resumes Agnes's first person perspective as she describes how at Kornsó, she has **dreamed** for the first time since her imprisonment. In Agnes's dream, she and Natan were brewing herbs together. Agnes, feeling deeply in love with him, reached out to embrace him, causing him to drop the beaker, which then smashed on the floor. When Agnes awakes the next day, she remembers with grief that Natan is dead.

Agnes thinks of happy memories of her mother to try to counteract her sadness, but the memories feel hollow. Agnes opens her eyes and sees Margrét lying awake. Margrét turns and sees Agnes watching her. Margrét tells Agnes to get up and the two women go outside. Margrét makes it clear that she does not want Agnes living with them, but says she is obligated to keep her. Margrét tells Agnes that her husband will return that morning, and warns her not to act up.

Margrét does not see any marks of evil on Agnes, instead finding the bruises and cuts from where Agnes was beaten. The presence of these marks instead of genetic "marks of evil" could be a symbol of how evilness is projected onto Agnes rather than being an innate quality she possesses.



Clearly, the officer assigned to protect Margrét and her daughters is not especially devoted to his job, reflecting Margrét's earlier sense that the men around her do not really understand or care about the danger she and her daughters potentially face.



At this point, Kent has presented the reader with several different descriptions of the crime that Agnes has allegedly committed. Kent's repetition of the events of that night suggests how the facts of the murders may differ depending on who is talking about it.



Throughout the novel, dreams are important windows into characters' psychology as well as sometimes predicting the future. Here, Agnes's dream reveals that she was not only close with Natan, but also was, in fact, in love with him. When her embrace causes Natan to drop the beaker, the dream takes on a sense of foreboding.



Margrét seems to believe that Agnes is guilty of her crimes and treats Agnes with a strictness that shows that Margrét does not trust her. Margrét also reveals her anxiety as a woman left alone without a man for protection when she tells Agnes Jón will be home soon as a warning not to act up.



Margrét then asks Agnes about her work experience as a servant and whether she can do household tasks and wield a scythe. Margrét is pleased with Agnes's affirmative answers, and tells Agnes she has no use for a "criminal," but she can use a servant. Agnes mentally objects to the word "criminal," thinking it does not fit her, but does not say anything. Margrét tells Agnes she will not tolerate any misbehavior. As Margrét brings Agnes outside to show her the livestock, they see Margrét's neighbors Snaebjörn, Páll, and Róslín approaching the house.

Margrét quickly tells Agnes to go into the house. When Snaebjörn gets closer, he greets Margrét. Snaebjörn tells Margrét that they had heard about Margrét's situation and wanted to make sure she was all right. As Róslín, who is pregnant, comes within earshot, she greets Margrét and gives her a loaf of homemade rye bread.

Snaebjörn asks where Jón is, and when he hears that he is out, Snaebjörn excuses himself and Páll to do some work, leaving Róslín to chat with Margrét. Margrét falls into a spell of coughing. Róslín says she worries about her and that she has heard strange rumors. She says she thought she saw someone else in the doorway with Margrét as she approached and, feigning innocence, asks Margrét if it was a new servant.

Margrét tells Róslín that Agnes has been placed in their care. Róslín says that she actually came by because she heard a rumor that Blöndal had moved Agnes to Kornsó. She says it is because the family Agnes was with before was too important to be put in such dangerous proximity to a murderess. As Róslín says this, she realizes how offensive it is, and tries to take it back, but Margrét simply says that the rumors of Agnes staying with them are true, and she does not know the reasons behind the decision.

Róslín tells Margrét that she feels sorry for her, and warns her that the murderers of "good" Pétur and Natan are extremely wicked. Margrét reminds Róslín that Pétur was a thief and Natan a womanizer. Róslín asks if Margrét thinks that they deserved to die, and Margrét says of course not. Róslín then says Agnes is rumored to be the worst of the murderers, and the mastermind.

As Róslín describes the graphic rumors about the murders, Margrét wishes that she would leave. Róslín continues to talk dramatically about Agnes and to ask Margrét probing questions, clearly hoping to get a glimpse of her, as Margrét grows more and more annoyed. Finally, Margrét pointedly says goodbye to Róslín and Róslín leaves.

Agnes's objection to being called a "criminal" shows her attention to how nuances of different names can either accurately reflect or obscure someone's or something's essence. Margrét, meanwhile, shows that she sees Agnes as a two dimensional criminal by the way she talks to her, but suggests that, through obedient work, Agnes might elevate herself from a criminal to a "servant."



Agnes is a curiosity in the neighborhood, and although Margrét's family did not have a choice in housing her because Blöndal demanded it, Margrét clearly worries about how Agnes's presence will affect their reputation in the community.



Róslín exemplifies how stories and rumors can become toxic in the small communities of rural Iceland. Róslín, who is a dramatic busybody, thrives on gossip. Although later she professes to despise Agnes, she is also extremely curious about her, and, as Agnes fears, sees Agnes as a criminal rather than a human being.



When Róslín lets slip that Blöndal decided to move Agnes because she was staying with a more important family before, Kent makes it clear that Blöndal sees people who are not powerful or influential as expendable. This shows how class differences and hierarchies can allow more powerful people to place those less powerful in real danger.



Róslín clearly sees morality in a way that is very black and white—Natan and Pétur, for example, who were never especially good in life, are "good" now that they are murder victims. Róslín's interpretation suggests that innocence can be projected onto someone retrospectively.



Kent shows Róslín's simultaneous fascination with and hatred and fear of Agnes as she describes her looking for Agnes as she says terrible things about her. To Róslín, Agnes's name and identity are highly sensationalized.



The narrative switches back to Agnes's first person perspective as she, having been sent back to the badstofa by Margrét, sees that the sleeping officer, Lauga, and Steina are now gone. She realizes with exhilaration she is unguarded for the first time in months. Her thoughts jump to escape. She thinks, though, of the harsh Icelandic landscape, knowing that the wilderness would mean certain death.

Agnes stumbles to her bed and looks around the room, which needs repair. She wonders if the family sings hymns or recites sagas in the winter, noting that she has a great love for and excellent knowledge of the sagas. As a child, Agnes's foster mother Inga encouraged reading, but her foster father Björn did not, saying books other than the Bible were "not for [her] kind."

The traditional furniture and everyday objects in the room make Agnes think of the **stone** that her mother Ingveldur gave her. Ingveldur said the stone would allow Agnes to talk to birds if she put it under her tongue. Agnes put the stone under her tongue for days, but nothing came of it. She remembers being abandoned by her mother at Kornsó at age six.

Agnes tries to reconcile herself with the idea that she will spend her last days in the town she knew as a child. Agnes chants the names of all the different farms she lived on throughout her life. The last one, Natan's farm, carries strong and negative feelings for Agnes, and she thinks of the farm burning.

Agnes notices a silver brooch hidden under the bed across from her. She picks it up, and then, suddenly, Lauga appears beside her and tells her to put it down. Agnes drops the brooch and Lauga calls for Steina, who comes running in. They both yell for Margrét. When Margrét appears in the doorway, she screams at Agnes not to touch anything in the house, and then drags Agnes off to do chores.

The narrative switches back to third-person and follows Tóti as he completes chores and gets ready to head to Kornsó again. As Reverend Jón sees Tóti herding sheep and doing laundry, he tells Tóti that he doesn't have to do that, and commands him to get to Kornsó to talk with Agnes.

As Agnes contemplates the possibility of escape, she realizes that she could never survive in the Icelandic wilderness. In this way, the Icelandic landscape is its own kind of prison, forcing Agnes to depend upon other people and keeping her from setting out on her own.



Agnes's love of literature is obvious throughout the book. Her foster father Björn did not encourage this passion, as literature was, according to him, "not for her kind." It's not clear what "kind" he objected to exactly—Agnes's gender, class, or something else.



Agnes introduces the stone her mother gave her as a child. The stone is a symbol of one of many ways Ingveldur failed Agnes, as it did not seem to work the way Ingveldur said it would (though it may explain Agnes's fascination with ravens, language, and understanding secrets).



As Agnes chants the names of the farms she lived on, each evokes specific feelings, and the name of Natan's farm evokes negative feelings in particular. Names carry intense resonance for Agnes.



Here Kent makes a point about the precarious nature of innocence. Although Agnes does not have a history of stealing, the family at Kornsó assumes she is a thief because she is a "criminal" overall. Since Agnes's innocence has been taken away, she is presumed guilty of everything.



While Reverend Jón is not always a warm and supportive father, he takes Tóti's religious obligations to Agnes very seriously, encouraging him to go to her at the expense of chores on the farm.



The narrative moves back to Agnes's first person perspective. Agnes and Margrét milk sheep together and then burn Agnes's old dress, which she had sewed with Sigga. Memories of this trigger Agnes's regret as she watches the dress smolder. The dress was the only possession Agnes had left.

Margrét and Agnes go to do work in the herb garden to escape the smoke of the burning clothes. As Agnes weeds, she remembers Natan's workshop. Agnes enjoys the weeding, but Margrét's lungs give her trouble and she struggles to breathe. Margrét tells Agnes to go fetch her daughters in the house. When Agnes goes to get them, Lauga immediately leaves to go help her mother, but Steina lingers behind.

Steina tells Agnes that she thinks they met once before, while they were both travelling. She remembers that Agnes plaited Lauga's hair and gave them each an egg. Agnes begins to vaguely remember the day Steina is referring to. She remembers seeing three **ravens** flying in a line—a good omen—but also remembers that one hundred whales washed ashore that year—a bad omen. Agnes, however, does not confirm Steina's memory. Margrét comes in to fetch Steina, telling her to shovel the ashes from Agnes's dress into the garden.

The narrative, still in third person, cuts to Tóti, who, having arrived at Kornsó, is sitting with Agnes outside the house and asking if they should begin their session with prayer. Agnes says nothing, and when Tóti asks again, Agnes responds by asking him what he means when he talks about her "absolution." Tóti explains that he received a letter from Blöndal saying Agnes had requested him to be her spiritual guide, and that they all want Agnes to "return to God." When Agnes quips that she will be returning to God soon enough by execution, Tóti is caught off guard.

Agnes tells Tóti that they have met before, but Tóti is confused because he doesn't remember her whatsoever. Agnes tells him that he helped her cross a river seven years ago, but Tóti still does not recall the event. Tóti asks if that is why Agnes asked for him specifically to be her counselor, and when Agnes does not respond, Tóti tells Agnes she might be better off with a more qualified clergyman. Agnes tells Tóti that she has never met any clergymen that she liked.

As Agnes watches her very last dress burn, Kent emphasizes how Agnes is now truly at the lowest rung of the class system in Icelandic society. This also means that there are no longer any physical bonds tying Agnes to earth, as her execution inevitably approaches.



Agnes continues to enjoy any work that allows her to be outside and spend time in nature. Agnes's special connection to the outdoors may be partly a result of her time with Natan, who had a particular love for the natural world and who used natural remedies to make his living.



As Agnes begins to vaguely remember meeting Steina, she also vividly remembers the omens she saw around that time. While the ministerial book stated that Agnes possesses a strong knowledge of Christianity, it seems that Agnes also has a rich spiritual life comprised of symbols that she sees in nature. Agnes's spirituality privileges the role of the Icelandic landscape and the symbols she finds there.



When Tóti tries to minister to Agnes, he begins by using traditional Christian religious techniques like prayer. As Tóti tries to explain his role to Agnes, it becomes clear that his approach is not working. Agnes staggers Tóti with references to her impending death and questions about Christian concepts that Tóti takes for granted. Traditional Christianity, it seems, does not work for Agnes.



As Agnes tells Tóti about why she chose him instead of someone with more experience to guide her, she implies that she is unhappy with Christianity as taught by society and other priests. Agnes seems to be looking for something other than dogma from her interactions with Tóti.



A few ravens land on the stone fence nearby and Margrét chases them away. Tóti takes a breath and recites a rehearsed speech about how, if Agnes does want him for a spiritual advisor, he will come visit her and guide her prayers. When he's done, Agnes tells Tóti that perhaps it would be better if he did not come to visit her, saying she'd forgotten how young he is. Tóti, unsure how to respond, looks at her for a moment and then bids her goodbye.

The narrative switches back to the first person as Agnes describes the rest of her day doing garden work alongside Margrét. They work silently, and Agnes thinks that she made a mistake in asking Tóti, who is practically a boy, to coach her through her impending death. Agnes thinks the only person who could understand how she feels is Natan, because he knew her so incredibly well. Agnes thinks Tóti can do nothing for her, since God already had the opportunity to free her. Instead, she is condemned.

CHAPTER 4

Chapter Four begins with a letter from Blöndal to the Deputy Governor of North-East Iceland, informing him that Blöndal has decided to purchase an axe from Copenhagen for the impending executions rather than having a local blacksmith make one. Blöndal asks whether the money for the axe should be withdrawn from the funds for the case, and what to do with the axe after the execution.

The third person narrative resumes to follow Tóti after he leaves Kornsa, feeling unsuccessful. He intends to write a letter to Blöndal relinquishing his responsibilities with Agnes, but he is too embarrassed, and so does not write for two weeks. One night, Reverend Jón asks him if Agnes has been praying. When Tóti responds equivocally, Reverend Jón tells him to make sure she does, and not to disgrace himself.

The next morning as he milks the cow, Tóti thinks about his father's comment and wonders what he could possibly do for Agnes and why she asked for him specifically. Tóti ultimately realizes that Agnes, having no one, might have asked for him as a friend to talk to. As Tóti finishes milking, he resolves to return to Kornsa and try again.

When Margrét shoos away the ravens, it could be seen as a metaphor for how Tóti is dismissing Agnes's desire for a nontraditional approach to spirituality. Tóti's stiff prayers and ministerial condescension do not work for Agnes, who dismisses Tóti and suggests that his youth is the reason he is ineffective.



After Tóti leaves, Agnes feels pessimistic about the Reverend's ability to help her. She longs for Natan, whose nature-focused spirituality moved Agnes more than Christian-based prayer and ministering. Agnes's lack of faith in Christianity is exacerbated by her sense that God has betrayed her by condemning her to death.



Blöndal's decision to buy an axe from Copenhagen rather than having one made in Iceland, despite the fact that the two choices cost about the same, means that Blöndal is supporting Denmark's economy rather than keeping the money in Iceland.



Tóti feels overwhelmed by his responsibility to help Agnes prepare for her death, so much so that he intends to write to Blöndal giving up his responsibility. Reverend Jón, however, pressures Tóti to continue ministering to Agnes in the typical Christian way in order to uphold his reputation as a priest.



As Tóti meditates on Agnes and on his father's insistence that she pray, he realizes that the typical version of Christian ministering is not what Agnes is looking for. Instead of structured prayer and preaching, Agnes needs someone to listen to her.



When Tóti does ride to Kornsó, he passes through the same stunning, misty landscape that he did the first time. On the way, Tóti stops to see the Reverend of Undirfell. When he knocks on the door of the homestead where he believes he will find him, a farmer named Haukur Jónsson opens the door. He tells Tóti that the Reverend lives close by. Haukur invites him inside and Tóti follows him into the large house's badstofa, where he sees a little girl holding a toddler and an elderly woman that Haukur introduces as Gudrún.

Haukur goes to fetch the Reverend while Tóti waits, and Haukur's wife comes into the badstofa and introduces herself as Dagga. She asks if she can bring Tóti anything while he waits. Dagga tells Tóti that their baby is sick, and they have no medicine now that Natan Ketilsson is dead. The little girl tells Tóti that Natan cured her of whooping cough.

Guadrún says that Natan was a sorcerer named Satan who deserved his end. Tóti asks what she means, and Dagga tells him that Guadrún believes a rumor that Natan's mother was prophetic and that, when she was pregnant with Natan, she **dreamed** that a man appeared to her and said she would have a boy. In the dream, she agreed to name the baby after the man, who then told her his name was Satan. Natan's mother changed it to "Natan." Many people believe Natan dealt with the devil, which is why he had so much money. Dagga, on the other hand, simply believes that Natan made his money with his remedies.

Dagga asks what brings Tóti to the area. Tóti explains that he is Agnes's priest and that he has come to the place where she was born to learn about her life from the ministerial record book. Dagga tells Tóti that Agnes has always been selfish, conniving, and not content with her lot in life. According to Dagga, people liked Agnes when she was younger, but as Agnes aged she grew bitter and developed a bad reputation for promiscuity and backtalk. Haukur, who is suddenly standing in the doorway, interrupts and introduces Tóti to Reverend Pétur.

The narrative then cuts to Tóti and Reverend Pétur in the local church. Reverend Pétur is trying to unlock the chest that contains the ministerial records. Reverend Pétur asks about the family at Kornsó and comments that Lauga is very beautiful and smart, and "runs circles around" Steina. Reverend Pétur heaves the record book onto the altar. He asks how old Agnes is, telling Tóti he has only been the priest in that parish for one year, so he does not know. Tóti, disappointed, says he was hoping to learn about Agnes's character from him. Reverend Pétur tells him that he can learn about that from her crimes.

As Tóti rides again towards Kornsó, he once more takes in the beautiful Icelandic landscape. Although the landscape is familiar to Tóti, he still finds it breathtaking, showing how the landscape is awe-inspiring even though Kent's characters experience it daily. Tóti uses the view of the landscape as a means of centering himself.



As Dagga and her daughter long for Natan's medicine, the reader sees Natan's good side as a healer. Throughout the book, Kent shows how Natan is a complex person whose true character cannot be reduced to good or evil.



When Guadrún talks about Natan, she offers the alternative view of Natan as an anti-Christian sorcerer. Guadrún tells Tóti the rumors about Natan being named after Satan, and in doing so reinforces the idea that names indicate the essence of something or someone. She also shows how superstitious thought can intersect with traditional Christianity as she mixes prophetic dreams with the Christian devil.



As Dagga explains why she does not like Agnes, she complains about Agnes being unhappy with her sexuality and her status as a servant. Later in the book, Kent reveals that Natan, whom Dagga admires, has this same open sexuality and discontent with the class system as Agnes. However, as a man and a landowner, Natan is not nearly as demonized for these qualities as Agnes is.



When Kent introduces Reverend Pétur, she portrays him as somewhat unmotivated and unfocused, more interested in longingly discussing Lauga's good looks than in helping Tóti learn more about his spiritual charge. When Reverend Pétur discusses Lauga's superiority to Steina, he shows how women in the book are valued based on their beauty and their performances of femininity rather than their individual qualities.



The two men find Agnes's entry in the record book. Tóti takes interest in the fact that Agnes's parents were not married. Agnes was confirmed at age fourteen. The priest who confirmed Agnes wrote that she had an "excellent intellect" and "strong knowledge and understanding of Christianity." The entry ends there. Reverend Pétur suggests they go back to "Haukur's pretty wife" for breakfast.

The narrative jumps to when Tóti eventually arrives at Kornsó and Margrét opens the door to welcome him in. They make small talk and Margrét offers coffee to Tóti, who is surprised they have any. Margrét explains that trading went well recently. As Margrét goes into the kitchen, she breaks into a coughing fit.

Tóti hears Agnes say his name as she enters the room to get her knitting. Tóti implores Agnes to stay and talk as Margrét enters the room with the cup of coffee and bread with butter. Margrét gives Agnes permission to suspend her chores for the moment and speak with Tóti. She then leaves the room. Tóti offers to share his bread and coffee with Agnes. Agnes refuses the coffee but takes the bread.

Tóti asks Agnes how she likes being at Kornsó. Agnes says the family tolerates her. Tóti tells Agnes that she was wrong about him being just a boy, that he is well educated, and that Agnes should let him help her. Agnes tells Tóti to talk to her in a "common way" unlike other clergymen, who Agnes felt spoke with insults and accusations. Tóti agrees to talk to her in an ordinary way. Then Tóti tells Agnes about his trip to find her entry in the ministerial book, and he asks about her family history. Agnes bristles, tells him that she has no family. Then Steina appears and tells Tóti that Margrét wants Agnes back at work. Agnes invites Tóti to come again the next day.

The narrative switches back to Agnes's first person perspective as she remembers how, at her trial, the interrogators manipulated her words to make her seem evil before declaring her guilty. Afterward, a priest told Agnes that if she did not repent, she would burn in hell. Natan, on the other hand, did not believe in sin. Agnes remembers him telling her this after a two-headed lamb was born at a nearby farm and Natan took the body home to dissect it. Agnes and Sigga did not eat the meat out superstition that it was tainted by the devil. Agnes wonders if Tóti sees her like the two-headed lamb— interesting, but evil.

Reverend Pétur readily objectifies not only Lauga and Steina, but also Dagga, referring to her as "Haukur's pretty wife" rather than by her name. In a book where names are extremely important, referring to Dagga as only someone's wife reduces her individuality and importance.



Coffee is one of the more expensive "luxury" goods that characters in the novel use to mark class. Rather than revealing that she is being compensated for keeping Agnes, Margrét, perhaps embarrassed, simply says that trading went well.



Unlike many of the other Christians in the book, Tóti seems to actually exemplify Christian forgiveness and kindness, even going so far as to split his food and coffee with Agnes. Although coffee is a luxury reserved for upper class visitors, Tóti offers it to his condemned spiritual charge.



When Agnes tells Tóti to speak to her in a "common way," she shows that she objects to the power hierarchy of Christianity, in which the priest is supposed to be the knowledgeable instructor and the parishioner is supposed to take everything the priest says as true. Agnes sees the condescending way that clergymen talk to her as "insults and accusations." When Tóti agrees to talk to her like a normal person, Agnes feels more comfortable.



Agnes's description of Natan's alternative belief system compared with mainstream Christianity sheds light on Agnes's own spirituality, as she is caught between Natan's aggressive atheism and her Christian upbringing. As Agnes tells the story of the two-headed lamb, she shows the pervasiveness of Christian superstition in the Icelandic community of the book.



The narrative changes to the third-person as the narrator describes the Kornsa household preparing to cut the hay together. Jón says a prayer and then assigns the groups to cut together, putting Agnes and Kristín with two hired farmhands Gudmundur and Bjarni. When Gudmundur hands the scythe over to Agnes, he refuses to let go. As Agnes is trying to pull it out of his grasp, Gudmundur suddenly lets go of the tool so that Agnes stumbles backwards, nicking her ankle. Everyone laughs except Steina, who asks if Agnes is hurt.

The narrative changes to the first person as Agnes describes falling into a rhythm when she cuts hay. She enjoys the feeling, which resembles her delirious happiness in her first romantic months with Natan. Suddenly, Agnes realizes that Gudmundur is leering at her. She is used to men looking at her like that, as they have since she was a teenager. Agnes feels her scythe ensures Gudmundur will not threaten her.

The third person narrative resumes, describing Tóti riding to Kornsa the next morning. He passes Blöndal's house and wonders how Agnes felt during her trial there. When Tóti arrives at Kornsa, he greets Jón, who is standing on his doorstep. Jón tells Tóti that one man offered to serve as executioner, but that Blöndal rejected him because he wants Gudmundur Ketilsson, Natan's brother, to do the honors.

The narrative jumps to Tóti and Agnes sitting next to the stream near Kornsa, because Agnes prefers to talk outside. Agnes begins to tell Tóti about her family, confirming that her mother was unmarried and so was her father, Magnús. She tells him that her mother left her when Agnes was six, and that she's unsure if she's alive or dead. Agnes says her mother, Ingveldur, had a bad reputation. When Tóti asks what she did, Agnes tells him that knowing what someone has done and knowing who they are are two different things. She laments how mistakes ruin reputations forever. Agnes thinks that her mother was unfairly condemned for having Agnes out of wedlock, even though plenty of people have sex outside of marriage.

Tóti asks about Agnes's father, and Agnes tells him that her real father was Jón of Brekkukot, but that since he was married, her mother said it was Magnús to create less scandal. Tóti asks Agnes if she ever asked Magnús about it to try to get the truth out of him, but Agnes says there is no such thing as truth. When Tóti tells her there is truth in God and it will set her free, Agnes tells him that she told the truth already, but clearly it has not helped her very much.

Following Agnes and Tóti's discussion about evil and sin, Gudmundur bullies Agnes and causes her to hurt herself. However, because Agnes is seen as a criminal, no one except Steina objects to Gudmundur's actions, and they all even laugh. This goes to show how what might normally be considered unchristian is permissible because of Agnes's dehumanized status.



As Agnes describes Gudmundur's lecherous gaze, she reflects on how her life has been full of undesired male attention. Since Gudmundur has just hurt Agnes before staring at her, this scene also links Gudmundur's capacity for violence with his objectification of women.



As Blöndal has previously stated, he wants to make an example of Agnes and Fridrik's executions in order to show his authority and the power of the government over the Icelandic people. To do so, Blöndal has made the dramatic choice to use Natan's brother as the executioner—making the execution seem even less like an act of justice, and more like a personal attack.



In this conversation, Tóti and Agnes discuss how to know the "truth" of someone's character. While Tóti sees someone's true character as defined by their actions, Agnes thinks that who someone is and what they have done are two different things. Agnes's comment about her mother's unfair condemnation for her pregnancy shows how the blame for having sex outside of marriage falls unfairly on women, whose sexual escapades, unlike men's, are made public and condemned if they fall pregnant.



Agnes expresses her skepticism towards the idea of truth as she tells Tóti about the likelihood that her father was not Magnús, but Jón. Agnes's skepticism about truth itself reflects the fact that, in her experience, people in power heavily influence what "truth" is commonly accepted.



The narrative switches back to Agnes's first person perspective as she thinks that Tóti's attempt to learn about her in the ministerial book was useless, since the facts do not get at who Ingveldur really was. One of Agnes's few memories of her mother is the day she left, but she feels she cannot totally trust her memories or tell if they're true or not. Agnes wonders what her mother was thinking when she lied about her father and abandoned her.

Agnes's mistrust of the idea of "truth" resonates in her first person narrative as she thinks that the "facts" of her mother's life do not really reflect her personhood. Likewise, Agnes does not know which of her own memories are accurate.



CHAPTER 5

Chapter Five opens with a poem that Rósa writes to Agnes in June of 1828, in which Rósa tells Agnes not to be surprised by her pain, accuses Agnes of stealing Natan away from her, and says that Agnes gave her soul to the Devil. This poem is followed by Agnes's reply to Rósa, also in verse. In her poem, Agnes warns Rósa not to cause her even more pain and tells Rósa that she is seeking God's grace. Agnes reminds Rósa that they both belong to Jesus.

Agnes and Rósa's poetic exchange shows how, for both of these women, poetry is a preferred means of expression. This reflects the important place of literature in their community in general, and it also suggests that poetry might be an appropriate medium for conveying the strong emotions that both women feel.



The chapter then changes to third person narrative as it describes Margrét and her friend and neighbor Ingibjörg Pétursdóttir, stacking wood and talking about what it's like to have Agnes living in Margrét's house. They laugh at Róslín's gossip about Agnes and her theatrical concern for Margrét. Ingibjörg asks what Agnes is like and Margrét tells Ingibjörg that Agnes is quiet, but she talks to Tóti when he visits. Margrét mentions that Agnes's mother was Ingveldur, who was known for being a "loose" woman.

Unlike Róslín, who falsely expresses concern for Margrét in order to get a closer look at Agnes, Ingibjörg genuinely seems to care about Margrét's wellbeing. The two women's conversation about Ingveldur reflects the high standard of chastity for women, which is so profound that, even years later, Margrét and Ingibjörg still remember Ingveldur's sexual transgressions above all else.



Ingibjörg then asks about Lauga and Steina. Margrét tells Ingibjörg that Steina thinks she has met Agnes before, and she worries that Steina has started smiling at Agnes and acting friendly toward her. Margrét thinks that Agnes might have the same bad influence on Steina that she allegedly had on Sigga. Lauga, on the other hand, hates Agnes. Jón and Margrét try to keep the girls separate from Agnes, but it is impossible.

Margrét worries about Agnes's corrupting influence over Steina, as if Agnes's criminality could erode Steina's innocence. Although Steina shows Agnes compassion while Lauga is cruel to her, Margrét endorses Lauga's approach and discourages Steina from speaking with Agnes.



The story switches back to Agnes's first person narration as she describes **dreaming** about crawling through the snow to her own execution. The dream frightens Agnes awake. She gets up to go to the bathroom, trying not to wake anyone. Agnes's terror lingers and she thinks of how Natan, although he did not have much respect for Christianity, believed strongly in the power of dreams.

For Agnes, as well as for many other characters in the book, dreams carry a special, sometimes prophetic significance. Natan saw dreams as an alternative to Christian faith, highlighting the tension throughout the book between Christianity and superstition.



Agnes had begun to think of herself as a servant in the Kornsó household, but the dream reminds her that she is actually a prisoner. Soon, winter and her execution will arrive. Agnes worries about whether Tóti can help her and thinks how hard it has been to make him understand her. Tóti does not know what to do with the information about her family, and Agnes has not yet even told him about her siblings. She wonders what she will say, since Helga is dead and Jóas is so irresponsible.

Agnes remembers moving with Ingveldur from farm to farm in her early childhood. One of these farms was owned by Illugi the Black, a married man who fathered Jóas. Illugi died of disease soon after. Jóas was born at the next farm where they lived before being thrown out. The family then returned to Kornsó, and Agnes's mother gave her the **talking-stone** and abandoned her, taking only Jóas. Agnes only learned later that her mother had another daughter, Helga. By that time, Agnes was living with her foster family, Inga and Björn, at Kornsó.

The narrative switches back to the third person as Steina, now awake, finds Agnes outside emptying the chamber pot. Steina stays to keep Agnes company, but Agnes worries that Jón and Margrét will be mad at her. Steina asks Agnes what Tóti comes to talk about and Agnes snaps that it is her own business. Steina tells Agnes that Jón has told her to leave Agnes alone, but that, unlike the others, she does not believe that Agnes killed Natan and Pétur.

Steina wants to make a petition or an appeal to help Agnes, and tells her that Blöndal made an appeal to commute Sigga's sentence. Agnes, shocked and upset, walks away from Steina toward the river and drops to the ground. Suddenly, it starts to pour. Steina apologizes and begs Agnes to come inside. Eventually she gives up and goes back to the house while Agnes stays out in the rain.

When Steina enters the house, Margrét asks where she has been, thinking, at first, that Agnes has hurt her. Then Steina tells Margrét that Agnes is by the river and needs help. Steina finds Jón in the badstofa and tells him to go down to the river and help Agnes. Jón leaves to go find her. When Lauga comes in and says something snarky about Steina trying to be friends with Agnes, Steina yells at her. Lauga tells Steina that if she's not careful, she will end up as wicked as Agnes. Steina starts to cry.

Although Agnes has become comfortable with the people at Kornsó, her dream reminds her that she is still in bondage. Unlike Tóti's insistence that the "truth will set you free," Agnes seems to find freedom in illusion when she can ignore the reality of her impending execution and pretend to be a normal servant at Kornsó.



As Agnes describes her family moving from place to place and her mother sleeping with farmers in order to have a place to stay with her children, she shows the reader how precarious the life of a servant woman could be. Agnes refers again to her mother's abandonment, which clearly traumatized young Agnes and left her economically and socially unstable.



Steina's belief that Agnes is innocent (although it turns out later to be more or less the truth) is one of the many things that make Steina an outcast in her community. This shows how, rather than being a product of objectivity, reason, or real experience, truth is often established by group opinion and norms.



Agnes finds the news of Sigga's appeal upsetting, perhaps because it highlights how, compared to how it has treated Sigga, the public has shown Agnes no empathy and is convinced that she could not be innocent. Agnes seems to find this just as unbearable as her sentence itself.



Margrét's initial assumption that Agnes has hurt Steina shows the extent to which she harbors prejudgments of Agnes. These prejudgments prove wrong as Steina reveals that, rather than being a threat, Agnes is the one in distress. Lauga expresses the sense that Agnes's guilt will corrupt Steina's innocence if they spend too much time together.



The perspective changes to Agnes's first-person narrative. She is sitting on the bed waiting while Margrét, Jón, Lauga, and Steina talk in the other room. Agnes is nervous and keeps thinking about Sigga's appeal. She believes that, while Sigga will get off, she herself will never be freed.

Although now inside and calmer, Agnes is still obviously very affected by the way that the public and Blöndal view Sigga's capacity for innocence while assuming Agnes's necessary guilt.



The narration changes back to the third-person and jumps to Tóti, who is at his house and who has just received a letter from Jón asking him to come see Agnes. Tóti leaves for Kornsó over Reverend Jón's objections. By the time Tóti gets close, he is drenched with the rain. Tóti runs into Gudmundur on his way, who tells him that Agnes had a fit, screaming and scratching at him and Jón when they approached her. Tóti is surprised.

Because the narration does not actually show Agnes's fit, it is unclear whether Gudmundur's perception of the "fit" is accurate or whether, like many other rumors about Agnes in the novel, it is exaggerated to make Agnes seem more violent than she actually is. Tóti, surprised, sees this aggression as out of character.



The two men ride together the rest of the way to Kornsó, where Tóti finds Agnes handcuffed and in bed. He asks Agnes what happened and Agnes tells him about Sigga's appeal, saying that everyone pities Sigga because she is pretty and dumb, but no one pities her because they think she is too smart. Agnes tells Tóti that people think smart women cannot be trusted because they can't be innocent. Agnes also points out that, if God commanded people not to kill, then Blöndal is going against God's law.

As Agnes talks to Tóti about Sigga's appeal, she lays out one of the major ideas of the book: that women who are too smart are not trusted and are presumed to be guilty, while women who fulfill the norms of femininity (submissiveness, beauty, sweetness) are given a pass. Agnes also points out how her execution may contradict the laws of Christianity.



Margrét, Lauga, Steina, and Kristín enter the badstofa to talk amongst themselves while Tóti and Agnes converse. Margrét removes Agnes's handcuffs at Tóti's request. Once the other women are distracted, Tóti quietly tells Agnes not to give the family any more reason to hate her. Agnes then tells Tóti about her **dream** the night before. Tóti prays for Agnes. Afterward, Agnes asks if Tóti thinks it is her fate to be executed. Tóti says that is beyond knowing.

The fact that the family at Kornsó has put the handcuffs back on Agnes serves as a reminder to the reader and Agnes of her lack of freedom. She seems to be struggling with how her sentence fits in with the "big picture" and God as she asks Tóti if he thinks she execution and incarceration are her "fate."



Tóti asks Agnes if there is anyone from her past that he can bring to talk with her. Agnes tells him about her siblings: Helga, who died, and Jóas, whose whereabouts are unknown to her. Agnes also tells him that Rósa visited her before to give her a poem, in which she berated her for killing Natan. Agnes, growing agitated, says that, because Rósa was a married woman, Natan was not hers to love.

Agnes tells Tóti about the poem that Rósa delivered to her blaming Agnes for Natan's death. Agnes reveals that Rósa gave her the poem in person, so she could have just said those things to Agnes's face, suggesting that the poem form was important to Rósa in itself.



Tóti notices that the other women have stopped knitting to listen. He changes the subject to Agnes's siblings so Agnes will calm down. Agnes says she only saw Helga a few times and she was separated from Jóas when he was one year old. Agnes quietly asks Tóti to talk to Blöndal about creating a petition for her, as Steina suggested. Tóti hesitantly agrees and asks Agnes again about her childhood. She begins to tell him about her foster family, Inga and Björn, who raised her until Inga died in childbirth. Tóti asks Agnes if she remembers Inga's death, and she says she does, and vividly. Tóti asks Agnes to tell him what happened.

CHAPTER 6

Chapter Six begins with a clerical record of Agnes and Sigga's possessions at the time of their imprisonment. The list includes clothing, books, knitting tools, odds and ends, and a sheep.

The narrative then returns to Agnes's first-person perspective as she begins to tell Tóti about Inga's death. It was winter. Agnes had been living at Kornsó for several years with Inga, Björn, and their son Kjartan. Inga, who Agnes called "Mamma," had taught Agnes to read in secret, because Björn did not approve of women learning. One night, Björn summoned Kjartan and Agnes outside to look at the northern lights. Inga, who was pregnant, stayed inside embroidering. Björn told them that the northern lights forewarned of bad weather.

The next day it began to snow, and Inga, not feeling well, stayed in the badstofa. Björn went to check on her while Agnes made porridge. Agnes peeped outside and saw a storm fast approaching. The blizzard struck, and continued for three days. On the second day of the storm, Inga went into early labor. Björn sent a farmhand to ask the women from the nearby farms to come help, but the blizzard was so strong that he did not even make it far past the door. Björn tended to Inga in the loft and told Agnes to take young Kjartan to the badstofa. The two children sat and waited together for a long time, until Björn came down, handed Agnes a bundled infant, and then returned upstairs.

Agnes, little Kjartan, and the infant huddled together as the room grew colder and colder. Agnes tried her best to keep the baby warm. Meanwhile, Inga's moans continued in the loft. The children fell asleep, and when they woke Björn was standing over them. He informed them that Inga was dead. Agnes offered him the baby, but Björn told her the baby was dead too. Agnes realized she had been holding a lifeless infant.

Although the family at Kornsó stated that they were not listening to Tóti and Agnes's conversation, they are clearly curious about Agnes's past. Unlike Steina, who is hopeful that other people will come to see Agnes as potentially innocent like she does, Tóti seems skeptical about the prospect of starting a petition to change Agnes's sentence. This suggests that, unlike Steina, Tóti is not himself convinced of Agnes's innocence.



The list of Agnes and Sigga's possessions shows how little they own and how they are of a lower class than, for example, the family at Kornsó.



As Agnes describes how Inga taught her to read against Björn's wishes, Kent suggests that Björn objected to Agnes learning to read because of her gender. In doing so, Kent shows one of the many ways that antiquated understandings of gender roles can disempower women. Inga teaches Agnes anyway, however, giving Agnes a skill that she enjoys and benefits from for the rest of her life.



As Agnes describes the impossibility of leaving the farm in such bad weather, Kent shows how profoundly the Icelandic climate can affect daily life, sometimes exacerbating the profound isolation of individual farms in Iceland. Without neighborhood women to come to help Inga through labor, Björn must help Inga himself. Because of the gender roles at the time, Björn likely had not assisted with births before, so the danger of childbirth is worsened by Björn's inexperience.



Agnes's terrible experience of holding the dead child for hours without realizing it contributes to her intense trauma surrounding Inga's death. Agnes later refuses to hold Róslín's infant, as she seems to superstitiously believe that babies she touches will certainly die.



Agnes threw a fit, screaming that she wanted to die. Björn, meanwhile, sat with his head in his hands. Agnes then went up to see Inga's body, which was lying on the blood-covered bed. Agnes pulled Inga's dress down to cover the lower half of her body and then kissed her. Agnes pushed her face into Inga's hair until the farmhand carried her down to bed.

Agnes, back in the present, wants to ask Tóti if she is now going to be executed as punishment for saying she wanted to die. She also wants to ask him if she killed the baby. But she doesn't, since she thinks the other women are listening now. Agnes thinks that it's a good thing she has no one left to love, since everyone she's loved has died.

The narrative switches to the third person as Tóti asks what happened next. Agnes tells him that after Inga died and the storm ended, the farmhand was sent to fetch Björn's relatives. Björn told Agnes to put the baby's body in the storeroom, which she did. Then Björn's brother Ragnar and the farmhand carried Inga's body downstairs, where Aunt Rósa cleaned Inga's body. Rósa's servant, Gudbjörg, cleaned the loft. Agnes talked to Gudbjörg about her trauma from the deaths, and Gudbjörg comforted her.

After everything was clean, the family stood together around Inga's body and Björn's brother passed around a flask. The farmhand fetched a priest, and Aunt Rósa told Agnes a story while the men talked with him. The men carried Inga's body to the storeroom, where they laid it next to the baby's body because the ground was too frozen for a burial until the spring. Agnes remembers seeing the bodies every time she had to fetch lamp oil.

One day in the early spring, Agnes was in a bad mood and she went outside, picked up a shovel, and tried to dig Inga a grave. Uncle Ragnar asked what she was doing. Agnes explained, referring to Inga as "Mamma," and Ragnar told her not to call Inga that. The two exchanged tense words. Later, Ragnar told Agnes that Björn was moving away and could not afford to keep her. Her foster brother Kjartan went to live with Ragnar and Aunt Rósa, and Agnes was given to the parish to be taken care of.

As Agnes describes the bloodied sheets and Inga's body, the graphic description of the room depicts childbirth as a gruesome, violent ordeal, and even a deadly one. Agnes's love for Inga, meanwhile, is incredibly poignant.



As Agnes thinks about asking whether she killed the baby and expresses fear that she hurts the people she loves, it is clear how profoundly the loss of Inga has traumatized her, leaving Agnes with a warped perception of her guilt in Inga and the baby's death.



After Inga's death, no one except Aunt Rósa's servant comforts Agnes. As a child, Agnes did not receive the emotional support that she needed in order to healthily cope with the loss of Inga, and as a result Agnes blames herself for the death, despite the fact that Inga's death was due to inevitable childbirth complications.



The ground in winter is too cold to bury Inga and the baby's bodies, meaning they will have to be stored until spring. This shows how daily life, including religious services like burials, can be subject to change depending on the hostile Iceland climate.



When Agnes refers to Inga as "Mamma," Ragnar thinks that this name is inappropriate because Inga was not Agnes's real mother. This is another instance that shows distinctions in names as very important. Agnes's use of "Mamma" for Inga makes Ragnar dislike her so much that he gives her up to the parish rather than take her in.



The narrative switches back to Agnes's first person in the present as she wakes the next day. She thinks someone whispered her name in her ear, and believes she sees Natan's face in front of her. It seems to have been a dream, however, as no one else is awake. She whispers Tóti's name, since he is sleeping in the badstofa with her. Agnes then begins to tell him about the **dream**, but Tóti falls back asleep. Agnes thinks of Inga's death again. Agnes, perhaps dreaming again, imagines her foster mother trapped in the storehouse and calling to her. Agnes enters the storehouse and finds that Inga is really dead, and then sits on the floor while the wind howls outside.

As Agnes's sleep is plagued by dreams, she imagines someone whispering her name. This may be Natan, since Agnes sees Natan's face before her, reflecting Agnes's disturbed state of mind. Agnes then dreams that Inga is calling to her. As Agnes imagines her loved ones calling her name, the reader realizes how profoundly Agnes has been traumatized by the loss of so many people that she loved.



CHAPTER 7

Chapter Seven begins with a testimony about Fridrik from the Reverend who is now the priest at his parish. According to the priest, Fridrik was smart as a child. However, he was disobedient, which the priest thinks was the result of too much freedom as a child. This testimony is followed by a letter from Blöndal to Tóti, asking to meet with him next week to deliver a report on Agnes's spiritual progress.

The letter from Fridrik's priest shows how, like Agnes, Fridrik seems to have been too smart for his own good. Blöndal's letter to Tóti suggests that the authorities are carefully monitoring Agnes and Tóti. Both letters, like others in the book, emphasize the importance of literacy.



The chapter then resumes its third-person narrative as Tóti arrives at the Blöndal homestead to give his report. He greets Blöndal and his servants and Blöndal welcomes him inside. A servant named Karitas shows Tóti through the house. Tóti compliments the house's fine decorations, and Blöndal explains that, as District Commissioner, his family enjoys many of the luxuries usually only afforded to people on the mainland (Denmark).

When Tóti goes to Blöndal's house to give his report, he is struck by how fine the house's furnishings are. Kent shows how Blöndal's authority and wealth allow him to enjoy luxury goods usually only available in Denmark, emphasizing the discrepancy between Denmark's wealth and Iceland's relative poverty.



Blöndal dismisses Karitas and brings Tóti to his study. Tóti begins to give his report on Agnes and Blöndal expresses surprise that Tóti uses Agnes's Christian name. When Tóti tells Blöndal that Agnes has been helping with the hay harvest, Blöndal is surprised that the family doesn't keep Agnes chained.

Blöndal clearly prefers a stricter approach to Agnes's incarceration, including not using her Christian name. Blöndal seems intent on dehumanizing Agnes and preventing her from enjoying any small freedoms at all.



Blöndal draws Tóti's attention to a jar of swan feather quills on his bookshelf. He offers Tóti one of them, telling him that a "true man" is recognizable by his writing implements. Blöndal then asks Tóti to give a summary of his religious work with Agnes as Blöndal writes it down. Tóti tells him that he selected passages from the Corinthians to administer to Agnes and told her to pray. Blöndal says that the priest working with Fridrik is reading him the Passion Hymns and suggests that Tóti do the same. Tóti says he feels that Agnes needs more than a simple religious rebuke, and admits that he has been talking to Agnes like a friend. Blöndal is somewhat scandalized.

Blöndal's statement that a "true man" can be told from his writing equipment implies that he thinks that "true men" must be rich, since the quill he then offers Tóti is an expensive swan feather. As she does elsewhere in the novel, Kent suggests here how the idea of "truth" is not objective, but rather is the product of social norms and values. Blöndal, although not a clergyman, also tries to use his political authority to control how Tóti ministers to Agnes.



A maid knocks on the door and brings in food and coffee, interrupting the conversation. As Blöndal eats, he tells Tóti that his methods show his inexperience. Blöndal describes the murders in detail to try to convince Tóti to stop empathizing with Agnes. Blöndal tells Tóti how Natan and Pétur had gone to bed and Fridrik and Agnes murdered them in their sleep in a plot to steal their money. Blöndal tells Tóti how Fridrik confessed to killing Pétur with one blow of his hammer and then striking Natan with a hammer several times, missing his skull. Natan begged Fridrik and Agnes to stop before he was killed with a knife.

Tóti points out that Agnes did not actually kill them, but Blöndal thinks that Agnes killed Natan. Blöndal believes that, after Fridrik killed Pétur, he lost the nerve to murder Natan. Blöndal thinks Agnes is the one who stabbed him in the belly. Tóti asks Blöndal why Sigga could not have wielded the knife, and Blöndal tells him that Sigga, sixteen, had burst into tears and told him everything about Agnes's jealousy toward Natan. He points out Agnes's older age and says he believes that Agnes had expected Natan to marry her, but that Natan had preferred Sigga. Tóti is shocked. Blöndal tells him that Agnes is manipulating him to gain sympathy and that he needs to be sterner.

Blöndal then begins to tell Tóti about Fridrik's spiritual process. When he was first arrested, Fridrik was violent and vulgar. After he worked with his Reverend, however, Fridrik confessed to the murders. Blöndal says that he and the priest both believe Fridrik was raised with too much freedom. The Reverend was able to use prayer and ministering to help Fridrik repent his crime and accept his execution as "God's justice."

Blöndal asks if Agnes is similarly repentant, and Tóti tells him she does not talk about repentance. Blöndal tells Tóti that moral boundaries have been deteriorating and it is his own responsibility to fix that. Tóti suggests that Blöndal means to make an example of Agnes and says that he heard Blöndal has appointed Natan's brother as executioner, and Blöndal tells him that they are there to discuss Tóti's work, not his. Blöndal tells him to stop listening to Agnes and to start ministering again.

Tóti leaves Blöndal's office, now doubting Agnes's words. Karitas, Blöndal's servant, then approaches Tóti and tells him that she needs to speak with him. She says that she worked for Natan just before Agnes arrived. Karitas says that Natan had told Agnes she could be his housekeeper, but then gave the position to Sigga. She explains that Natan was virulently anti-Christian and when she was working for him, she saw Natan manipulate people for fun.

Interestingly, Blöndal tries to get Tóti to empathize with Agnes less, despite the fact, as a priest, Tóti's job is to have compassion for everyone in society. As Blöndal describes his version of events, Kent offers yet another account of the murders. Through these many different versions of what happened, which all differ slightly, Kent troubles the idea of objective truth and the capacity of the justice system to discover it.



As Blöndal describes his theory of why he thinks that Natan's murderer was Agnes, rather than Fridrik or Sigga, his logic reflects the truth of Agnes's earlier comment that Sigga is not being punished because she is too young and stupid and pretty, while Agnes's age and intelligence make Blöndal believe she is guilty. When Blöndal tells Tóti that Agnes is manipulating him, he imagines Agnes as a criminal mastermind who is tricking Tóti into helping her.



As Blöndal describes Fridrik's priest's technique, it becomes clear that Blöndal and Tóti have different goals for Agnes. Blöndal seems to be hoping that Agnes will admit her moral depravity, while Tóti is more interested in Agnes's well being and helping Agnes work through her past to prepare for her death.



As Blöndal asks about Agnes's repentance, it becomes even clearer that Blöndal and Tóti see Tóti's role as Agnes's priest very differently. When Tóti implies his disagreement with Blöndal's use of Agnes as an example, Blöndal shuts down the conversation, showing how their power difference prevents Blöndal from accepting criticism.



Just as Tóti is beginning to believe Blöndal's perception of the murders, Tóti's conversation with Karitas further complicates the truth. Notably, Karitas seems to associate Natan's anti-Christian sentiment with his abusive and manipulative behavior, perhaps unfairly linking the two things.



Tóti tells Karitas that he knows opinions about Natan are divided. Karitas tells him that Blöndal liked Natan because Natan healed his wife. Karitas asks Tóti not to tell Blöndal she talked to him, and Tóti agrees. Tóti asks if Karitas would visit Agnes, and she says no, as she would be in too much trouble. The two say goodbye and part ways.

The perspective changes to Agnes's first person narrative as she helps Margrét prepare food for the harvest celebration. Steina and Lauga are away picking berries and moss. Agnes thinks of how Steina told her that they were "alike" before she left. She thinks that she is, in fact, nothing like Steina. Agnes's childhood was so much more difficult than Steina's, as she was alone and working for her keep.

When Agnes was Steina's age, she remembers trying to avoid the man who raped her several times and deciding whether it is worth sleeping with the owner of the farm where she was living so as not to be thrown out in the snow. Agnes thinks that Steina has never been subjected to that kind of degradation. Agnes remembers the children she helped deliver at one farm dying. It was just after she left that farm that she met Steina and Lauga on the road and gave them eggs, as Steina remembers. Lauga reminds Agnes of Sigga.

Ingibjörg and Róslín appear at the farm for the feast and they all come inside. Margrét introduces Róslín to Agnes. Róslín furiously asks Margrét why she invited them over with Agnes there. Margrét tells Róslín to calm down. Agnes then glances at Róslín's belly and tells her that the child will be a girl because of the shape of the bump. The women are horrified, and Róslín calls Agnes a witch.

Ingibjörg and Margrét quickly calm down, and Ingibjörg asks how she knows that. Agnes says that she learned this from the poet Rósa. The food finishes cooking and the women bring it outside, leaving Agnes in the kitchen. Agnes stays there except to bring out butter and milk to the guests as more and more arrive. She wishes she could stay inside and not be looked at.

The narrative switches back to the third person as Tóti walks into the kitchen and asks Agnes if she is going to be joining them. Agnes, who is churning butter, says no. Tóti listens to Agnes breathe as she churns, feeling that it is somehow intimate. Tóti thinks again about everything Blöndal said to him. Once the butter is finished, Tóti suggests that they go outside. Agnes picks up her knitting and follows Tóti to a spot away from the party but within sight of it.

Karitas not only offers information about Natan's bad side that Blöndal did not take into account, but she also suggests that Blöndal's perception may be biased toward Natan because of their personal connection.



Although Steina finds commonality with Agnes based on the fact that neither woman fits well into society, Agnes thinks her class difference makes her fundamentally different from Steina. Unlike Steina, who is relatively financially secure, Agnes never had a stable home or income.



Because of her lack of a family as a child and personal wealth, Agnes suffered from sexual violence at the hands of other servants and sexual coercion from farm owners who threatened to otherwise throw her out in the cold Icelandic winter. Agnes's memories display the particular difficulty of being a poor servant woman at the time.



Agnes's knowledge of midwifery and medicine disturbs Róslín, who sees her knowledge of the baby's gender as witchy and anti-Christian. This shows one of the many ways that characters in the book are skeptical, afraid, and mistrusting of intelligent women.



Although Ingibjörg and Margrét are initially as disturbed by Agnes's comment as Róslín is, they soon calm down and Ingibjörg rationally asks how Agnes learned this. When Agnes explains, it becomes clear that she is not a witch, but simply a knowledgeable woman (and they certainly wouldn't have condemned Rósa if she had said the same thing).



As Tóti and Agnes become closer, Tóti sometimes expresses a sense of intimacy towards Agnes that verges on romantic feelings. Tóti continues to struggle with his mixed emotions about Agnes after his meeting with Blöndal, trying to reconcile the woman he knows with the deeds that Blöndal described.



Tóti tells Agnes that he talked with Blöndal. He tells her that Blöndal wants them to change the structure of their meetings, and he asks if it is true that Natan healed Blöndal's wife. Agnes confirms that it is true. Tóti tell Agnes that Karitas says hello, and that she told him that Natan was manipulative. Others, Tóti says, have told him that Natan was a sorcerer who got his name from Satan. Agnes says she does not know whether she believes those stories or not, but confirms that Natan's mother's **dreams** were prophetic.

Agnes reminds Tóti that she asked him to be her priest because, as she said earlier, she had met him before and he helped her across a river, though Tóti did not remember this. Agnes then admits that this was not their first meeting, because they also met in one of her **dreams**. Agnes tells him that when she was sixteen she dreamt that she was walking barefoot across a lava field covered in snow. Agnes's feet were bleeding and she was afraid. Tóti appeared, took her hand, and helped her across. Then Agnes suddenly fell into a dark and silent chasm and woke up.

Agnes tells Tóti that, when he helped her cross the river, she recognized him and knew they would meet again. Agnes says that it was not the darkness of the chasm that scared her, but the silence. Tóti tells her that God can take the fear away. Tóti takes her hand, and Agnes smiles.

Tóti asks Agnes to tell him about Natan, and Agnes says that she met Natan when she was working on Worm Beck's farm. Before that, Agnes had gone in search of her father. Magnús had become furious when Agnes said Ingveldur's name. Although Magnús said Agnes could stay, she felt uncomfortable there, and so she went to work for Worm.

On her way to Worm's farm, Agnes ran into her little brother Jóas. Jóas was excited to see her. Agnes was too, although she noticed that Jóas smelled like alcohol. As they rode to Worm's farm, Agnes learned that Jóas also had a hard childhood, having been left by their mother soon after Agnes was. Worm took both Jóas and Agnes as servants. Agnes remembers that the farm was a nice place to work. At the farm, Agnes became close with María Jónsdóttir, another servant.

As Tóti comes clean about the rumors he has been hearing about Blöndal, Agnes, and Natan, he seems to be hoping that Agnes will clear up what is true and what is false. Although Agnes gives Tóti some answers (like about Blöndal's wife), she is unsure of others. As usual, Agnes seems uncomfortable with the idea of objective truth.



When Agnes reveals to Tóti that she believes that she met him in a prophetic dream, Agnes suggests that her interest in working with Tóti has less to do with her need of specific Christian teachings, and more with her belief that Tóti has some abstract spiritual role to play in her life. Elsewhere, Agnes brings up the idea of destiny, and her dream seems to support the idea that her execution is fated.



As Agnes describes the fear she felt in the dream, Tóti, reframing the spiritual energy that Agnes expresses in a Christian context, promises that God will remove her fear. Agnes and Tóti seem to bridge their difference in this moment.



When Agnes describes Magnús's fury at the mention of Ingveldur's name, she offers the reader another example of the power of names to evoke powerful emotions. Clearly, Magnús is still extremely upset that Ingveldur lied about him having fathered Agnes.



When Agnes finds her brother again, it is clear that their poverty and instability as children has taken a toll on him as well. Agnes's description of the friends and community that she found at Worm's farm makes her later decision to leave with Natan for his isolated farm seem like an even worse choice.



Agnes tells Tóti that, although Jóas liked working on the farm, his friends were troublemakers. Jóas and Agnes became closer. Jóas said he'd tried to find her before, and they talked about their dead half-sister Helga. One night, though, they fought because Jóas talked badly about Ingveldur. The next morning, Jóas was gone and Agnes's money was missing. Agnes never saw him again.

Agnes said she had been saving that money for marriage, and she talks about how a servant named Daniel Gudmundsson had wanted to marry her. After Jóas left, Agnes enjoyed María's friendship on the farm. María was her first friend, since Agnes generally preferred reading to socializing. As Agnes talks, Tóti remembers for the first time helping Agnes across the river. He thinks that Agnes is beautiful. Agnes tells Tóti that she loves the sagas and used to read as much as she could.

Tóti asks Agnes if she writes poems, and Agnes says that, unlike Rósa, she does not brag about her poems. She tells him that Natan loved Rósa's way with words and they spoke to each other in verse. Agnes then tells Tóti that she met Natan at a harvest celebration. María had come to the cowshed where Agnes was working, and told Agnes that she had seen Natan arrive on horseback. Agnes already knew of Natan's reputation. There were lots of rumors about how Natan had obtained his wealth.

Agnes had no opinion of Natan at that point. María told her that Natan had left Rósa and bought his own farm near Worm's. Natan had also tried to change his last name from Ketilsson to a Danish one, Lyngdal. Agnes and María then left the cowshed, and outside, Agnes saw Natan for the first time. He was not handsome. Natan saw them and walked over to introduce himself. He said his name was Natan Lyngdal, and María asked if it wasn't Ketilsson. Natan told them he had many names. Worm then called Natan over to him, and Natan said goodbye.

That afternoon, Agnes and María worked hard to get ready for the feast. Later that night, the servants celebrated amongst themselves, and Natan asked to join as they told stories. He sat next to Agnes. Natan later told her he sat next to her because he felt he could not read her, and was intrigued.

Jóas, as a man, cannot understand the choices that Ingveldur made, and is angry with his mother. Agnes, on the other hand, feels that she better understands her mother's decision and attempts to defend her. This causes a fight between the two siblings and their estrangement.



Agnes and Tóti find common ground in their mutual love of literature. As Agnes describes how she preferred spending time with books rather than people, Tóti again expresses nearly romantic sentiments for Agnes and admires her beauty. Literature humanizes Agnes for Tóti, and allows him to forget about her crimes and even think about her romantically.



The capacity of literature to encourage passionate, romantic feeling recurs as Agnes describes how Rósa and Natan used to speak to each other in verse. On the other hand, Agnes also shows the more insidious role of stories in Iceland as she describes the many rumors about Natan at the time she met him. It is unclear whether these rumors were true.



Natan's name change is never fully explained in the novel. However, the fact that Natan has various names seems to reflect the fact that there are many different aspects of his identity and many different ways of looking at him as a person. Natan's name change to a Danish name, "Lyndal," may reflect Natan's conviction that he is superior to other people in Iceland.



Although the servants' storytelling is not written, their oral literature shows another medium that is important to the literary culture in the world of the novel.



The narrative switches back to Agnes's first person perspective as she thinks that Tóti is probably wondering about the nature of her relationship with Natan. Agnes thinks it is strange to try to remember a time when she did not know and love Natan. Agnes does not tell Tóti that she and Natan stayed up late talking together that night they met. Natan looked at her palm and told her that her hollow palm was like his own. The hollow palm, according to Natan, meant that there was something secret and dark about them. Natan then took Agnes's hand and held it in his own.

As Agnes tells Tóti about the first time she saw Natan, she withholds the romantic nature of their relationship from him. It is unclear why exactly Agnes feels the need to do this—perhaps she still treasures their romance so much that she doesn't want to “spoil” it by sharing it with others. When Natan reads the symbolism of Agnes's palm, he offers another example of the world of spiritual knowledge and culture outside of the Christian culture that dominates Iceland.



CHAPTER 8

Chapter Eight begins with a poem Rósa wrote to Natan in 1837. In the poem, Rósa thinks of how happy she was with Natan even when everyone looks down on her for the relationship. She then calls Natan a traitor and says that a “rose of Kidjaskard” (i.e. Agnes) has poisoned him.

Again, Kent repeatedly uses poetry in the novel both to emphasize the prominent place of poetry in Icelandic culture and to show how poetry can be a good form for expressing difficult or intense emotions.



The chapter then returns to the third-person narrator, who describes Margrét lying awake in the badstofa at Kornsó. A few days before, Margrét had stayed behind with Agnes while everyone else went to round up the sheep for winter. That day, Margrét had had a sense of foreboding. As she and Agnes were cooking, they talked about the people they'd known who died in the mountains. Margrét had the sense that by naming death, they could prevent it.

When Margrét and Agnes discuss all the people they knew that died in the mountains, Kent reminds the reader of the hostility of the Icelandic landscape and weather patterns. Meanwhile, Margrét's belief that by talking about death she can prevent it is yet another example of superstition in the novel.



As it turned out, Róslín went into labor that day, and Margrét, Agnes, and Ingibjörg went to Róslín's farm to help her. It quickly became clear that something was wrong, and Agnes told them the baby was in a bad position for delivery. Agnes instructed Ingibjörg to make a tea from angelica root to help ease the delivery. As predicted, the baby came in breech position, but it survived. Agnes refused to deliver it. When asked why she would not touch the newborn, Agnes said that she wanted it to live.

During Róslín's delivery, Agnes shows the vast extent of her knowledge of childbirth methods, embodying the intelligent womanhood that the authorities find so threatening. Agnes's interest in methods of safe childbirth may be related to her memory of Inga's death and holding her dead baby, as Agnes refuses to hold Róslín's newborn.



That night everyone celebrated the round up of the sheep and the baby's birth. The next day, Margrét spoke Agnes more than usual. Lauga had come in and complained about Agnes staring at her possessions, despite the fact that Agnes had proven by then that she was no thief. Margrét wondered if Lauga hated Agnes so much because she was jealous of her, though she did not know why Lauga would be.

Kent never thoroughly explores why Lauga might be jealous of Agnes, leaving the reader to guess. It is possible that Lauga resents the attention that Agnes receives, especially from Steina. Or Agnes may make Lauga, who is a people-pleaser, jealous of her independence.



Margrét stops thinking about Róslín's delivery and finally gets out of bed. She looks out at the animals, remembering that it is slaughter day. Margrét thinks back on the day that Agnes arrived at Kornsó and how hostile she felt toward her. Now, though, she appreciates Agnes's help. Margrét decides to try not to think about what she will do on the day of the execution.

Margrét seems to have grown fond of Agnes and has begun to think of her as any other servant. However, when Margrét remembers that Agnes is actually a prisoner, she struggles with how she feels about Agnes's crimes and how she will feel when Agnes is executed.



The narrative switches back to Agnes's first person perspective as the family begins the slaughter of that year's animals for the winter. Agnes wonders if she is included in the calculations of how many mouths to feed. She also wonders if the animals know that they are going to die. The farmhand Gudmundur catches and slaughters the first sheep, catching the blood in a pail. Agnes brings the pail inside to Margrét before returning outside. Agnes watches as Gudmundur skillfully skins the sheep. He reminds her of Fridrik. Together, Jón, the other farmhand Bjarni, and Gudmundur skin all the sheep and gut the carcasses.

Agnes seems to also be thinking of her state of bondage and her impending execution, as the slaughter of animals reminds her that winter and her own death are approaching. Agnes empathizes with the sheep, wondering whether they know if they are doomed like she does. Gudmundur's violence reminds Agnes of Fridrik, suggesting that the capacity for violence is more common than people may think.



Agnes remembers the previous autumn on Natan's farm, when Natan made a mistake gutting a sheep and Fridrik laughed at him. Agnes returns to the kitchen where she and the other women make sausage. The men come in later to eat the sheep kidneys. When Agnes serves Jón his food, he looks her in the eyes and says "thank you Agnes." Agnes thinks this is because she helped deliver Róslín's baby.

Ever since Agnes helped Róslín safely birth her baby, Agnes has risen in the esteem of the family at Kornsó. Even Jón, who never says anything to Agnes, thanks her and calls her by name, effectively acknowledging her humanity for the first time.



When the men finish eating, Agnes prepares the mixture used to salt the meat. It makes her think of how she used to help Natan mix medicines. Agnes remembers Natan talking to her as she made blood sausage the year before. Agnes shows Steina how to salt the meat, and Steina asks her why they're salting it and where salt comes from. Agnes asks why she asks so many questions, and Steina, blushing, says it is because Agnes gives her answers.

Steina's incessant questions for Agnes and her response that Agnes is the only person who gives her answers suggest that Agnes is a kind of role model for Steina. Like Agnes, Steina's intellectual curiosity and willfulness have made her an outcast. In Agnes, Steina finally finds someone she sees as a kindred spirit.



They poach the sausage in a kettle over the fire. As Agnes holds a sheep head close to the fire to burn away the hair, the smell reminds her of Natan's farm burning with the bodies in it. Agnes gets upset and goes outside. Margrét finds her, and instead of chastising her, she makes small talk with her. Then they sit silently before Margrét says they should go see what Lauga and Steina are doing. Margrét holds out her hand to Agnes, who takes it. They go inside.

In contrast to the earlier incident when Agnes supposedly threw a fit after hearing about Sigga's appeal, Margrét now approaches Agnes's emotional turmoil with respect, and as a friend. Unlike before, when Agnes was forcibly put in handcuffs, Margrét offers her hand to help Agnes up, giving Agnes a freedom of choice.



The narrative switches to third-person as Lauga and Steina work together in the kitchen to finish making the sausage. Steina mentions how quickly Agnes works, and Lauga says that she probably poisoned the whole barrel of meat. Steina doubts this and says that Margrét seems to be becoming fond of Agnes. Lauga, exasperated, asks Steina why she is always talking about Agnes. She expresses her frustration that everyone else seems to be acting like Agnes is a normal servant rather than a convicted murderer.

Steina realizes that Lauga is very upset and asks her what is wrong. Lauga tells her that she thought that Agnes would just be a prisoner in their house, not a constant part of their family. She worries about how the other people in the valley will see their family now as a result. Lauga thinks that she and Steina will never find husbands and accuses Steina of treating Agnes more like a sister than Lauga. Steina insists that she only pities Agnes and empathizes with her. Lauga tells her that Agnes is nothing like them, and leaves the room.

The narrative, still in third-person, jumps to follow Tóti as he decides to travel to Kornsó to talk with Agnes despite the bad weather. As Tóti prepares for his trip, Reverend Jón implies that Tóti is romantically interested in either Lauga or Steina. Tóti tells his father not to wait up for him, and his father hands him the Bible he has forgotten as he leaves. Tóti rides toward Kornsó in the cold.

The narrative jumps to Agnes and Tóti sitting in the badstofa as Agnes tells him that, after first meeting Natan, Agnes did not see him for days. Then Natan turned up while she was cutting meat down from the rafters of an outbuilding and began talking with her. Natan told Agnes that he needed a new housekeeper. They walked together back to the house, passing María and Pétur on the way.

Tóti asks if she is talking about the same Pétur that was murdered when Natan was, and Agnes confirms that she is. She says they were all afraid of Pétur, who told them about his strange **dreams**. Agnes says that Natan also told her some of the strange dreams he'd had. Across the room, Lauga pipes up, saying that Róslín told her about Natan's dreams.

Unlike the rest of the family, who have come to view Agnes as a servant or even a family member, Lauga cannot get over Agnes's criminal status. Throughout the book, Lauga strictly adheres to norms of class and social standing, as is evident from the beginning when she ingratiates herself to Blöndal. Agnes's transcendence of her status infuriates Lauga.



As Lauga explains why she is upset about Agnes being viewed more favorably than before, it still does not seem to totally account for her disproportionate coldness to Agnes. Lauga's concern about their marriage prospects, however, reflects the fact that being a single woman is a much more difficult path than being a married one.



When Tóti's father hands him his forgotten Bible on the his way out the door, it seems to metaphorically represent how far Tóti has deviated from the Christian literature and formal ministering that he is supposed to be using to help Agnes repent.



As Agnes tells Tóti about the beginning of her relationship with Natan, it becomes clear that their romance was tied up in Agnes's employment and class status. In part, Natan uses the fact that he is hiring a housekeeper to attract Agnes to him.



As has already been consistent throughout the book, many characters, especially those on the margins of society, believe in the prophetic and psychological power of dreams and harbor superstitions about their meanings.



Jón tells Lauga to let Tóti speak with Agnes without interference. This infuriates Lauga, who says that it is Agnes who has been interfering with *their* lives. Margrét tells Lauga to go back to her knitting. Agnes asks Lauga what Róslín told her about Natan's **dreams**. Lauga says that Natan had a dream that an evil spirit stabbed him in the stomach and another in which he saw his own body in a grave. Tóti then asks Agnes to continue with her story.

Agnes continues, talking about Pétur's bad reputation for having been arrested for killing animals for fun. Agnes says she walked Natan to Worm and then rejoined María in the field. Agnes told her about Natan's visit and María told Agnes to be careful, and that she was worried for her. Suddenly Jón interrupts and asks Tóti to speak with Agnes away from his family. Tóti says that, unfortunately, their discussion cannot help but being overheard in such close quarters. Margrét says that it doesn't make a difference, since anything the girls did not know before, Róslín has since told them.

Tóti and Agnes resume their talk. Agnes says she thought that María was jealous because Agnes was the one getting Natan's attention, and because they both knew that Natan was looking for a housekeeper. Whenever Natan came back to the farm, he and Agnes would talk. They quickly became friends. Soon, María started ignoring Agnes. When Agnes told them that Natan had asked her to work for him, the other servants were angry. Then Agnes goes silent. Jón suggests that they go to bed, offering Tóti the spare bunk, and they all go to sleep.

The narrative switches to Agnes's first-person perspective as she describes how sometimes her mouth aches after talking with Tóti. No matter what she says to him, though, it is impossible for him to understand what it was like to be with Natan. She remembers walking in the snow in the evenings and talking with Natan about how he didn't believe in God. Natan had said that they were two of a kind, and they were better than the other people in the valley.

Natan had then asked Agnes what the name was for the space between the stars, and when Agnes said "soul asylum," Natan told her that was another way of saying "heaven." Agnes disagreed. It was only later, Agnes says, that they could not have these kinds of discussions without arguing. That night, Agnes and Natan had sex in the cowshed. Afterward, Agnes wanted to cry with happiness. Natan left, but he came back to see her again and again that winter.

Like the many rumors circulating about Natan and his murder, it is unclear whether the story about Natan's dream of being stabbed in the stomach is true or not. Again, characters believe in the power of dreams to predict the future, as Natan's dreams (or at least the rumors of those dreams) seem to prophesize his death and condemn Agnes as guilty.



Jón's request that Tóti talk with Agnes away from the family reflects the worry that many characters express throughout the book that Agnes's presence will corrupt Lauga and Steina, stripping them of their innocence. Tóti, who ignores Jón's request, seems unswayed by this concern. Margrét, likewise, seems to have gotten over her concern for the girls' innocence now that she is more comfortable with Agnes.



At the beginning of her friendship with Natan, Agnes believed that María stopped talking to her out of jealousy that Natan was interested in her. She also believed María was jealous that Agnes might get a better job than she had before, raising her social class. It is unclear whether María is actually mad at her for this or whether María was concerned about Agnes's safety and emotional wellbeing.



Agnes describes feeling like Natan understands her better than anyone else. This seems to be linked to Natan's alternative experience of spirituality, as Natan is firmly anti-Christianity. Natan and Agnes also both resent their place in the Icelandic class system and feel that they are different from and better than other people.



When Agnes says that the space between stars is a "soul asylum" and that it is different than "heaven," she asserts the importance of differences in naming— to Agnes, "heaven" and "soul asylum" are very different things. Agnes's comments express her preference for spirituality outside of Christianity.



Agnes fell in love with Natan and felt flattered that he had chosen her. She would look with satisfaction at the bruises she'd gotten during sex and feel sad when they faded. Agnes tried to keep her love a secret from the other servants. Finally, Agnes and Natan decided Agnes would go live with him. However, Natan also had Sigga the whole time.

Although Agnes's memories of the early days with Natan are extremely happy, Agnes's retrospective comment that Natan "had" Sigga the entire time suggests how the truth of their romance was very different than Agnes believed at the time.



CHAPTER 9

This chapter opens with an anonymous poem about Agnes from before the murders, which calls her "good" and "a poet." The chapter then resumes the third-person narrative, starting the day after Agnes and Tóti's last meeting. Tóti is still at Kornsó because the weather is not good. While fixing Steina's knitting, Agnes tells Tóti about Natan's farm, which was far from everything. She describes her long journey along the coast to get there. When Agnes finally arrived, Sigga came out to greet her.

This anonymous poem about Agnes, which was written before Natan was murdered, praises Agnes for her poetry. Like many other instances in the novel, this poem suggests how highly valued literacy and writing skills are in this community. Agnes also emphasizes the isolation of Natan's farm, which exacerbates the abuse she experiences there.



Sigga led her to the house and asked about her journey. Sigga let Agnes get settled in the badstofa while she made them coffee. Agnes looked around the badstofa and noticed that only Sigga's bed and her bed were made up. When Sigga came back, Agnes asked where Natan was, and if he had gone to church. Sigga said no, Natan was not a church-going man—he was out foxhunting.

Agnes only retrospectively realizes that the fact that Natan's bed was not made up should have tipped her off to the truth of his relationship with Sigga. Sigga once again states that Natan is not a part of the Christian church, further establishing that his spirituality is unconventional.



Agnes then describes Sigga showing her the farm. Agnes tells Tóti that the farm was next to the mountain on one side and the shore on the other. There were seals, ducks, driftwood, and constant sea fog. Natan's workshop was out on a little island in the water that faced the mountain so he could see if anyone was coming.

Agnes's description of Natan's farm shows how closely her sense of the place is linked to its spot in the landscape, between ocean and mountains. The area is isolated, seemingly intentionally, as Natan is concerned about uninvited visitors.



Sigga told Agnes a little about her personal history, and then said that she had never been a housekeeper before. This surprised Agnes, since Natan told Agnes that *she* would be the housekeeper. Agnes thought that there was some mistake, but kept quiet. Agnes and Sigga had coffee and Agnes told Sigga about herself. Natan came back to the farm after Agnes was asleep, so she didn't have time to ask about her position.

The promise of a better position was one of the things that Natan promised Agnes in order to convince her to leave her life at Worm's farm. For Agnes, being housekeeper is an economic step up. She is then bewildered when Sigga says that she, not Agnes, is housekeeper.



The day after she arrived, Agnes saw Natan walking along the shore. Sigga told her that he'd arrived the night before. Agnes did not think to ask where he'd slept. Agnes did not talk to Natan about her position until later that day, when she explained to him that Sigga told her she had taken over Karitas's position. Natan told Agnes that Sigga was just young and simple. He showed Agnes his medicinal workshop.

Natan's dismissal of Sigga's claim that she is his housekeeper later turns out to be an outright lie, reflecting Natan's tendency to abuse and manipulate the women who work for him. Agnes's hostility toward the idea of "truth" may be in part due to Natan's constant lying.



Suddenly, there is a knock at the door. Lauga answers it and returns to the badstofa with Reverend Pétur Bjarnason, who has come to register them with the parish. Tóti introduces the Reverend to Agnes, who identifies herself as “Agnes Jónsdóttir.” Lauga, thinking she is referring to her own father Jón, begins to object, but Tóti confirms her name.

The priest speaks with each family member to determine their reading skills and knowledge of Christianity. Afterward, Reverend Pétur speaks with Agnes. Reverend Pétur then thanks them and says goodbye. Tóti walks him out. On the way, he asks Reverend Pétur what he wrote about Agnes. Reverend Pétur shows him the book, where he wrote that her character is “mixed”. Reverend Pétur says she is well educated, but that Jón had said she was prone to fits. Reverend Pétur leaves.

The narrative changes back to Agnes’s first-person perspective as she revels in the fact that she has changed her name to “Agnes Jónsdóttir,” the daughter of Jón of Brekkukot and not Magnús. She feels like the new name belongs to a happier, more pious life in which she would never have fallen for Natan.

Agnes thinks again of her first day at Natan’s farm, when she spent all day with Natan in his workshop. Natan told her about his foxhunting techniques, which required using baby foxes as bait. Afterward, Natan killed the baby fox rather than leaving it to die, and they agreed it was the “only decent thing to do.” Natan showed Agnes his books, telling her that Sigga did not like reading. Agnes tried to read Natan’s papers, but they were full of plant names she did not recognize.

Natan and Agnes then had sex in the workshop. Agnes thinks Sigga must have known that she and Natan were sleeping together, though they waited until she was asleep to have sex in the badstofa and Natan always went back to his own bed before Sigga woke up.

The narrative switches back to the third person. Agnes resumes telling Tóti about her first days at Natan’s farm. Natan had been happy that she was there. Agnes worked and talked with Sigga all day long. Sigga said Natan usually did not spend so much time at home. Natan showed Agnes medicinal tricks and Agnes read from Natan’s books. Natan brought Agnes and Sigga gifts from his travels.

Agnes changes her name to Agnes Jónsdóttir, reflecting her belief that her real father was Jón of Brekkukot, not Magnús. Agnes’s name change is an especially important adjustment because of the power of names to create and define identity in the book.



The fact that a priest from the local parish comes to Kornsó and the surrounding farms every year to determine their literacy and knowledge of Christianity shows both how important literacy is to this society and how it is often taught in conjunction with Christian beliefs, meaning that the church controls one of the most important culture mediums.



Agnes not only associates her new name with the truth about her father, but also with the prospect of an entirely different life. In this respect, the truth about her past sets Agnes free emotionally.



Natan and Agnes’s discussion of Natan’s foxhunting techniques and his merciful killing of the fox kit at the end foreshadows Natan’s own death, in which Agnes kills Natan to ensure that he will not suffer from the wounds that Fridrik inflicted on him. This conversation may even have informed Agnes’s decision, as she thought that Natan would prefer death to suffering.



As Agnes revisits her time on Natan’s farm, it is clear to her that Natan was lying to her the entire time about the specialness of their bond and was sleeping with Sigga from the beginning.



The beginning of Agnes’s time at Natan’s farm is pleasant, with Natan being more or less present and Agnes striking up a congenial rapport with Sigga. Natan and Agnes bond over Natan’s books because they both have a fondness for literature that they feel Sigga does not share.



It was an isolated life, but Agnes loved Natan and tolerated Sigga. Agnes asks Tóti if Sigga had been granted her appeal. Tóti is unsure. Agnes says that Sigga has probably become more pious since their arrest, but that at Natan's farm she was gossipy. She resumes her narrative, saying that Sigga called herself the housekeeper and ordered Agnes around.

Soon after Agnes arrived, Fridrik visited for the first time. Natan introduced Fridrik and his lover Thórunn and they stayed for dinner. Fridrik was the son of a nearby farmer. Sigga seemed to like Fridrik, but Agnes always thought he was a little off-balance. Both he and Natan were moody, but Fridrik was violent, while Natan was more superstitious. Unlike Natan and Sigga, Agnes did not like Fridrik at all.

After Fridrik left, Natan disappeared briefly to check if he had stolen anything. According to Agnes, Natan and Fridrik's friendship was strained by rivalry. Fridrik seemed to want Natan's money. This made Agnes nervous. When she told Natan that Fridrik could overpower him, Natan was furious with Agnes for talking to him like that in front of Sigga. Agnes found Natan's temper somewhat disturbing.

Tóti prompts Agnes to tell him about Sigga. Agnes tells Tóti how Sigga clearly hoped to marry Fridrik, but she worried that Fridrik was engaged to Thórunn. Agnes told Sigga that, in order to get married, she needed permission from a priest, from the authorities, and from Natan. Sigga seemed worried about Natan's approval. Sigga asked Agnes if she thought Fridrik was a thief, and Agnes said no. When Agnes told Natan about the conversation, Natan laughed.

During lambing season, Natan was away traveling. Neither Agnes nor Sigga could deliver the lambs themselves because they were not strong enough, so Sigga went to get Fridrik to help. Fridrik helped them deliver the lambs for a week, during which time Agnes would not let him sleep in the house. One day, Agnes saw Fridrik digging holes in the ground near the front door. Agnes knew he was looking for Natan's money.

Meanwhile, Sigga adored Fridrik, who soon forgot about Thórunn. When Natan returned to the farm, Sigga told him Fridrik had helped with the lambs and Natan became angry that they had let him on the farm. This made Sigga cry. Agnes told Natan that they could never have managed without a man to help them with lambing, which required lots of strength. Eventually Natan calmed down and said he would hire Daníel Gudmundsson to help with the harvest so they could avoid Fridrik.

Agnes is still thinking about Sigga's appeal and asks Tóti about whether it has been granted. Agnes imagines that Sigga is now conforming to Christianity as a ploy to be granted mercy and free herself.



In Fridrik, Agnes sees violent tendencies from the beginning. Perhaps her foresight is due to Agnes's large amount of experience with violent men on the other farms she worked on. Agnes sees a similarly volatile moodiness in Natan, but Agnes thinks Fridrik is more violent.



Although Agnes does not avoid Natan like she does Fridrik, she encounters many warning signs of Natan's own capacity for violence. Natan's temper, for example, scares her. Although Agnes recognizes this, she stays with Natan.



When Agnes tells Sigga about all the people she must receive permission from before marrying Fridrik, Agnes shows the reader how little power servant women have over their own fate and romantic lives. Notably, the people Sigga has to ask (the clergy, authorities, and her boss) are all men.



Although Agnes and Sigga are hardy, capable women who are used to hard work, neither of them has the strength to deliver the lambs themselves. Even for many independent women like Agnes and Sigga, the extreme physical demands of Icelandic farm life may require extra help.



When Natan gets mad at Sigga and Agnes for letting Fridrik on the farm, it is clear that Natan cannot understand Sigga and Agnes's female perspectives, and so fails to understand why they asked for Fridrik's help. Natan also does not trust Fridrik, despite the fact that the two men are supposedly friends.



CHAPTER 10

Chapter Ten opens with a clerical report describing Rósa's response when asked to testify at court. Rósa declined to do so. Rósa told the clerk that, after Natan left her, Fridrik made advances on her. According to Rósa, Fridrik thought that Natan had hidden money on Rósa's property and he was hoping he could find it. Fridrik later broke into her storeroom. Rósa also mentioned that, while Natan was living with her, he sometimes buried his money for safekeeping.

The narrative switches to the third person as it describes Tóti waking up in his home and feeling very ill. Tóti gets up to get some water and falls back asleep on the pantry floor. Reverend Jón finds him, wakes him up, and gets him back to the badstofa. Tóti is standing and sweating when he suddenly faints into his father's arms.

The narrative switches back to Agnes's perspective as she describes the endless winter days. Agnes wonders where Tóti is, as he has not come by recently. Agnes worries that he is tired of talking with her. Agnes is sick of waiting for her execution. She wonders why it is so delayed, thinking that Blöndal must want her to suffer with anticipation. Agnes thinks that maybe she will go to church the next Sunday, as she misses the community of the church. Agnes wonders if she would have had a stronger support network if Natan had allowed her to go to church.

Agnes wonders if she and Rósa could have been friends under different circumstances. Agnes had heard a lot about Rósa from Natan, who described their romantic relationship to Agnes. Natan told Agnes he had sent Rósa letters ending their affair unequivocally. But when Rósa showed up at Natan's house one night unexpectedly, Natan seemed extremely happy to see her. Rósa introduced herself and her daughter, Thóranna, to Agnes. Agnes sensed Rósa's hostility towards her.

Natan had invited Rósa inside, but Rósa said she only came to drop Thóranna off. Agnes was surprised and Natan explained that Thóranna lived with him in the winter. Rósa, Agnes, and Natan exchanged tense words. Rósa got upset and then left. Once she was gone, Agnes asked Natan what he had told Rósa about her, and Natan said nothing. Agnes did not believe him, and Natan got angry and left the house. Agnes asked Natan if he was following Rósa, and Natan gave no response.

From Rosa's account, it seems that Natan was right not to trust Fridrik. Later, when Agnes describes Fridrik's house, Kent makes it obvious that Fridrik grew up in profound poverty, suggesting that Fridrik's greed may be the result of this destitution during his childhood.



Tóti's sudden illness serves mostly as a twist in the plot, preventing him from spending time at Kornsa ministering to Agnes at the worst possible time. During Tóti's illness, Reverend Jón reveals his softer side as he nurses Tóti back to health.



With Tóti gone, Agnes misses his companionship. Her desire to attend church suggests that she may also miss the presence of Christian spirituality in her life. With Tóti providing both friendship and Christian teachings, Agnes seems to be developing more positive associations with the Christian church, even imagining that Natan's atheism may have kept her from forming relationships.



As Agnes thinks about the fact that Natan's aversion to the church prevented her from forming a support network, she imagines what other friendships Natan's jealousy and abusive tendencies inhibited. Agnes feels that she and Rósa had a lot in common and may have been friends if not for the fact that Natan pitted them against each other.



As Agnes remembers when Rósa showed up at Natan's house with Thóranna, she gives the reader another example of the emotional abuse that led up to Natan's physically abusive behavior. Natan lies to Agnes, neglecting to tell her about Thóranna and saying that he told Rósa nothing about Agnes even though he obviously did.



The narrative switches back to follow Tóti. He is still very ill, and dreams feverishly that Agnes has come to visit him. She kisses him, but then tries to choke him. Tóti tosses and turns, feeling incredibly uncomfortable.

Tóti's fever dreams reveal how he is physically and emotionally attracted to Agnes but is also afraid of her rumored capacity for violence.



The perspective jumps to Steina and Lauga, who are talking as they clean the badstofa. The sisters are bickering when Margrét comes in asks why Steina is upset. Lauga tells her that she heard a story from Róslín about Agnes and told Steina, who did not like it. According to the story, Agnes received a prophecy as a child that an axe would fall on her head. Margrét is overtaken by a coughing fit, and she coughs up blood. Suddenly, Agnes appears in the doorway and asks if Margrét has tried lichen jelly for her cough. Lauga tells her they don't need her potions, but Agnes tells Margrét she will make her the jelly. Margrét agrees over Lauga's objections.

Lauga and Steina debate the truth of the story that Lauga heard from Róslín about a prophecy in Agnes's past. Despite Lauga's rumors, Margrét and Steina are trusting in Agnes more and more, as Kent shows when Margrét agrees to let Agnes make her a jelly to sooth her cough. Agnes's intelligence and knowledge as woman is no longer a reason to distrust her among the family at Kornsó, and rather is a highly valued asset.



The narrative changes back to Agnes's first person perspective. She is disappointed that Tóti still hasn't come. Winter, meanwhile, has arrived in full force. Agnes wonders if she would tell Tóti about sleeping with Natan if he were there. Agnes remembers Natan's jealousy towards her and how Natan would go through spells of bad moods, during which he would be cruel to her. Agnes felt he was falling out of love with her. Agnes hated being Natan's servant and answering his commands.

Agnes is unsure of why Tóti is no longer visiting. Her worry that he has grown tired of her implies that Agnes has become attached to Tóti and looks forward to his company. In contrast to Tóti's gentleness, Agnes remembers Natan's uncontrollable mood swings and his cruelty, which prefaced his later violence toward her.



The relationship became more and more toxic until one day Daniél talked to Agnes about Natan. Daniél mentioned that he had noticed that she and Sigga both received special presents from Natan. He then expressed his romantic interest in Agnes and told her that he, Sigga, and Fridrik all knew that Natan and Agnes had sex. The conversation then got heated. Daniél implied that Natan would never marry Agnes, and the conversation ended when Agnes told Daniél that he disgusted her.

As Natan's behavior becomes increasingly concerning, Daniél, who has a soft spot for Agnes, intervenes in an attempt to make her realize that Natan is manipulating her. Daniél's approach, however, does not work. He becomes frustrated that Agnes is choosing Natan over him, rendering his intervention ineffective.



Agnes wonders if she would tell Tóti this if he were there. She thinks about another day on Natan's farm. Daniél and Natan had gone fishing and Agnes saw them out on the water, heading back early. When they reached shore, it was clear that Natan was in a terrible mood. Agnes asked Daniél what happened, and Daniél told her that Natan thought some waves that they encountered were a sign of death. Natan got irritated and made Daniél turn back.

Natan's volatility is obvious as Agnes describes some of the incidents that came to pass. Natan's belief in signs and symbols exacerbates his bad moods, as Natan imagines he is being forewarned of his own death. Natan's prediction, as it turns out, is correct, since he later is killed.



Agnes went to talk to Natan. She found him yelling at Sigga, and Agnes told Sigga, who seemed upset, to leave, saying she would help him undress. Natan angrily told Agnes that she was forgetting her place. Later, Agnes followed Natan to his workshop. Natan found the door of his workshop open and accused Agnes of stealing from and taking advantage of him. Agnes told Natan that he was the one who was taking advantage of her, since he had lied to her about the fact that she would be the housemistress and had given the position to Sigga instead.

Natan did not find anything missing in the workshop but still refused to speak to Agnes. Eventually he went outside and stared at the sea. Agnes followed him. She hugged him and told him she was sorry, and then tried to kiss him. Natan pushed her away from him. Agnes asked Natan what was wrong. He grasped her shoulders hard and told her he had been seeing omens, like the waves and his **dreams**, that he thought foreshadowed his death.

Natan told Agnes that he saw her nailed to the wall by her hair in his **dreams** of his death. Natan then grabbed Agnes by the hair, causing her to cry out. Agnes told Natan that no one was trying to hurt him. Natan struck Agnes in the face and told her never to speak to him like that again, then shoved her away. Agnes ran away from him up to the house.

That night, Agnes lay awake waiting for Natan to return to the house. Eventually she fell asleep, but the rattle of Natan coming into the badstofa later woke her. Agnes hoped Natan would come sleep in her bed. Instead, though, he went and crawled into Sigga's. Agnes, hearing them having sex, finally understood that Natan had been sleeping with both of them all along. Natan went back to his own bed after they finished and Natan and Sigga fell asleep. Agnes was furious and wanted to leave that night, but she had nowhere to go.

CHAPTER 11

Chapter Eleven opens with a clerical report from 1828 that summarizes Fridrik's brother Bjarni's testimony. He stated that Fridrik killed two of Natan's sheep the previous year. According to Bjarni, his mother told him not to mention that in the trial.

As Natan yells at Sigga, it is clear that he's not only hostile towards Agnes, but also towards Sigga. Natan's comment that Agnes is "forgetting her place" shows how Natan uses Agnes's lower class status to control her and to prevent her from confronting him about the truth of his cruel behavior. Agnes, however, does not back down and accuses him of lying about her position in the house.



When Agnes follows Natan to his workshop to comfort him after he accused her of stealing, Natan becomes physically violent towards her for the first time. Although this is the first instance of physical violence from Natan, he has repeated patterns of emotional abuse throughout the book.



As Natan describes Agnes's role in his dreams, his violence towards her increases and he pulls her hair and hits her in the face. Natan's jealousy and lies seem to have been warning signs that culminate in his physical violence toward Agnes.



To add insult to injury, the night that Natan attacks her, Agnes hears Natan and Sigga having sex. Agnes then realizes that Natan had been lying to her and sleeping with Sigga the entire time. Kent makes it clear to the reader in this moment that Natan's lying is linked to his violence, as his abusive lying and emotional manipulation are tied up in his womanizing.



Kent again links lying and violence when she provides a clerical report describing how Fridrik's mother tried to get her son to lie in order to protect Fridrik.



The third-person narrative then resumes as Margrét wakes up to the sound of Agnes crying. Margrét gets out of bed and lights the fire in the kitchen. She approaches Agnes and sees that she is asleep, but seems to be having bad **dreams**. As Margrét reaches down to pull her blanket up, Agnes awakes and accuses Margrét of watching her. Margrét explains that Agnes's cry awoke her.

Agnes makes room for Margrét to sit on the bed as Margrét has a coughing fit. Margrét asks what Agnes was **dreaming** about. Agnes tells her she was having a nightmare about Fridrik's farm, where she stayed for a few days before Natan died after he threw her out. Agnes then asks Margrét why she hasn't asked her about the murders, and Margrét says she thought that was between Agnes and Tóti. Margrét invites Agnes to come into the kitchen with her.

In the kitchen, Margrét heats milk and tells Agnes that her mother had a superstition that if there was always a fire burning in the house, the devil could not get in. Agnes tells Margrét about one farm she worked on where the fire went out in the winter and she thought they would all die of the cold. Margrét hands Agnes a cup of hot milk. Agnes comments that they have lots of supplies for the winter, and Margrét tells her it is because of the compensation Blöndal is giving them for keeping her.

Agnes apologizes for waking Margrét, who says she often wakes up anyway to check on the girls. Agnes is sorry that, with her there, Margrét is afraid for her children, but Margrét says mothers always are anyway. Agnes tells Margrét that Ingveldur left her when she was a child. Margrét says all mothers think of their children—including Agnes's, Fridrik's, and Sigga's. Agnes tells Margrét that Sigga's mother is dead and Fridrik's mother, Thórbjörg, is going to be arrested because she knew about Fridrik's plans.

According to Agnes, the judges at her trial thought that Thórbjörg and Agnes had plotted the murders together, but in fact, Agnes only went to Thórbjörg for a place to stay after Natan threw her out. Margrét asks Agnes how the farm burnt down and Agnes insists it was a kitchen fire. Margrét, though, thinks it was Fridrik's doing, and that Agnes is protecting her friend. Agnes insists that Fridrik is not her friend, but says that he did have a romance with Sigga.

In this section, Margrét, who is trusting Agnes more and more, acts affectionately towards her, pulling up her blanket as she watches her have fitful dreams. Considering the importance of dreams in the book, the reader might anticipate that Agnes's dream is significant.



Agnes, realizing that she has only told Margrét part of the story, asks why Margrét has not asked about the murders. Unlike other characters in the book, Margrét does not seem especially curious about the crimes. Rather than feeling that knowing the "truth" is necessary, Margrét is content to only know her own business.



Even Margrét, who is not anti-Christian like Agnes and Natan, reveals that she indulges in superstition as she tells Agnes about her mother's keeping a fire burning to keep the devil out. Once again, for many people in the book Christianity and superstition are not in opposition, but rather are intertwined.



As Agnes and Margrét talk, Agnes apologizes for the fact that her incarceration at Kornsá caused Margrét to fear for her children, though Agnes obviously had no choice about where she was kept. Margrét then tries to comfort Agnes about her mother's abandonment. Margrét and Agnes express compassion for one another and grow closer.



Although the court system is supposed to have found the "true" version of events on the night of the murders, as Agnes speaks with Margrét it seems that the court got certain details wrong (like Agnes's visit with Thórbjörg). Although these details don't exonerate Agnes, they cast Agnes in a more sympathetic light.



Agnes mentions how profoundly lonely the farm could be in the winter with so few neighbors. Natan went away often and did not seem to enjoy being back. Natan also did not like them seeing Fridrik because of their tense relationship. They had had a fight after Natan bought part of a whale carcass and Fridrik began taking part of his share. Agnes tells Margrét that, after that incident, Natan spent even less time at home. When he was home, Natan was very critical and suspicious of Agnes and Sigga.

Later, Natan and Fridrik got into another fight. Afterward, Natan took his anger out on Sigga, yelling at her and threatening to throw her out in the snow. Natan then told Agnes to follow him outside to the beach. There, Natan told Agnes that Fridrik had asked for permission to marry Sigga, and even offered him money, which Natan took. Agnes tells Margrét that Fridrik proposed to Sigga the next day.

Agnes deviates from her story to tell Margrét how the sea near Natan's farm was different than other places in Iceland. She remembers once seeing two icebergs rubbing together so that a piece of driftwood on each of the icebergs suddenly burst into flames. Margrét said this sounds like something in the sagas.

The narrative shifts to Agnes's first person perspective as she remembers the events that followed Fridrik's proposal to Sigga. That night it snowed so hard that Fridrik had to stay at Natan's farm. Agnes realized that Natan hated Fridrik not because he thought Fridrik was going to steal his money, but because he thought Fridrik was going to steal Sigga. That night, a sound outside woke Agnes. When she went to investigate it, she found Fridrik kicking a dead sheep. Agnes asked what he was doing. Fridrik laughed and did not explain himself. Fridrik went back to the farm and Agnes, disturbed by his violence, followed.

Agnes went into the badstofa and found Fridrik and Sigga sitting together. Sigga looked upset. Agnes told them that two sheep were missing. Sigga said Fridrik killed them, and then sobbed. Fridrik, furious, told Agnes that Natan had been raping Sigga. Sigga was upset and said that she wanted to tell Agnes before. Agnes told her that she already knew, and had thought their sex was consensual. Agnes asked Sigga if it was true that he raped her, and she said she did not know. Fridrik, though, was convinced.

As Natan's spirits change and he becomes moodier, the isolation of his farm leaves Agnes without people to turn to for companionship. Natan slowly reveals the extent of his jealousy and greed, and the fact that he and Fridrik fight so often about money shows how class differences may drive a wedge between people who may otherwise be friends.



As Natan describes the transactive way Fridrik asked for Sigga's hand in marriage, the fact that Sigga must ask for Natan's permission to marry Fridrik comes across as even more concerning. Sigga is being traded like an object rather than a person.



As Agnes describes the landscape surrounding Natan's farm and the two icebergs igniting into flames, Kent displays the wonder of the Icelandic landscape and its capacity to inspire literature.



As Agnes describes how Natan covets Sigga's attention and is possessive of her, she shows how Natan's objectification of women and his consideration of women as his possessions puts those same women in danger and restricts their freedom. Natan is not the only man who displays a harrowing capacity for violence, however, as Agnes makes clear when she describes Fridrik kicking the dead sheep.



Again Agnes shows Fridrik's capacity for violence when she describes how Fridrik killed Natan's sheep out of anger towards him. Then, as Fridrik gets worked up about the idea of Natan raping Sigga, Fridrik seems not to be actually listening to Sigga or concerned for her wellbeing as a person—only as a possession.



Fridrik said he was going to kill Natan, and when Agnes asked why, since Fridrik was going to marry Sigga anyway, Fridrik told Agnes that “a woman like [her]” would not understand. He then said that Sigga told him Natan had sex with Agnes too, but that Agnes actually enjoyed it. Daniél then entered the badstofa and told Fridrik to go home. Agnes told Daniél that Fridrik killed some sheep, and Daniél said he would talk to him later, once he had calmed down.

Three days later, after Fridrik had left, Natan returned to the farm. Natan was angry about Fridrik and Sigga’s engagement and he accused Agnes of being happy about them getting together. Natan then apologized to Agnes for having hit her before he left and told her he was glad to see her. That night, Natan and Agnes had sex.

The narrative then switches back to third person. Margrét, having apparently gone out to get more milk, returns to the kitchen and asks Agnes to continue her story. Agnes tells Margrét that Natan apologized to Sigga for being unreasonable and said she could marry whoever she wanted. Christmas came and went and Daniél returned to Worm’s farm. Sigga had become moody since her engagement, and seemed worried about what might happen if Fridrik and Natan were to encounter each other.

The narrative returns to first person. One night, Agnes told Natan she knew he had been sleeping with Sigga. She said that she forgave him. Natan thought for a second and then told Agnes that he knew that she saw them have sex one night. The words pained Agnes immensely. Agnes told Natan he was cruel, and guessed that he never planned on making her the housekeeper, either. Natan told her to go to sleep and Agnes became more upset. She asked if he loved her, and Natan refused to answer directly.

When Agnes persisted in asking him, Natan called her a nag. Agnes exploded, calling him a dog and telling him to go to hell. Natan continued to goad Agnes. She told him she hated him. Natan continued to say cruel things to her, telling Agnes she was cheap and manipulating her emotionally. The fight ended with Natan physically dragging Agnes outside and throwing her in the snow.

Agnes sought shelter in the cowshed to keep from freezing. Eventually, Sigga brought Agnes clothes and shoes. Sigga told Agnes that Natan wouldn’t let Agnes inside, and said “I’m so sick of living here.” The next morning Agnes resolved to leave before Natan came out to feed the cows.

As Agnes probes Fridrik’s feelings about Natan “raping” Sigga, Fridrik does not seem especially concerned about Sigga’s feelings, but rather feels that Natan has infringed on his property. Fridrik implies that Agnes does not understand because of her loose morals and promiscuity.



As Natan apologizes to Agnes for having hit her and then pays her special attention, Kent shows how Natan gets Agnes back after his abuse by manipulating her and making her feel like he still loves her.



As Margrét comes back from getting more milk, Kent reminds the reader that Agnes is recounting and remembering her past, not the present, making her narrative slightly less reliable. Meanwhile, in Agnes’s story, Sigga seems to be just as concerned by Natan and Fridrik’s explosive tempers as Agnes is.



When Agnes confronts Natan about sleeping with Sigga, she frames the confrontation as forgiveness. Natan, however, clearly feels entitled to sex with both Agnes and Sigga and shows no remorse. He even goes so far as to say that he did so knowing that Agnes saw, suggesting he was intending to hurt her.



The relationship worsens as Agnes asks if Natan, in whom Agnes has invested so much time and energy, loves her back, and Natan calls Agnes a “nag.” Natan’s behavior during the fight could be considered both emotional and physical abuse of Agnes.



While Natan’s emotional violence reaches new heights in his fight with Agnes, so does his physical violence, as throwing Agnes out in the snow puts Agnes in danger of freezing to death.



The narrative switches back to third person and shifts to following Tóti as he wakes up in his bed. He calls out for his father, who tells him he has yet another fever. Tóti says he needs to go to Kornsó and asks what month it is. His father tells him it is December. Tóti tries to get up, but Reverend Jón refuses to let him up until he is better, saying Agnes is not worth the amount of time he is devoting to her.

Although Reverend Jón is the more experienced minister, he does not have the same compassion for Agnes that Tóti does. Rather than viewing her, as Tóti does, as a fellow “sister in Jesus,” Jón thinks that Agnes is not worth Tóti’s energy. Jón does show love and care for his son, however.



The narrative, still in the third-person, moves back to describing Margrét and Agnes’s conversation. Margrét is shocked to hear that Natan threw Agnes out in the snow. Agnes tells her to continue her story. She tells Margrét that she walked for hours to Fridrik’s farm, where Thórbjörg took her in. Fridrik’s farm, according to Agnes, was very poor and dirty. When Fridrik saw Agnes, he asked what Natan had done, and if Natan had decided to marry Sigga. Agnes told him that she had been thrown out.

When Agnes arrives at Fridrik’s farm, Fridrik’s mother immediately takes Agnes in. Fridrik’s home shows how poor his family is, which seems to shed light on Fridrik’s money-grubbing and theft. Kent seems to be suggesting that, after growing up in such extreme poverty, Fridrik longs for financial security like Natan’s.



Thórbjörg then told Fridrik that Natan was trying to steal Sigga from him. Thórbjörg said that, as long as Natan was alive, Sigga would never be Fridrik’s. Agnes went to sleep, during which time she thinks that Thórbjörg and Fridrik plotted to kill Natan. Margrét suggests that they should go to bed, but Agnes asks if she does not want to hear the rest.

Thórbjörg is a complicated character in the novel, and one that the reader only experiences through Agnes’s narration. Although Thórbjörg shows Agnes kindness when she takes her in immediately, she also may have incited Fridrik’s murders.



CHAPTER 12

Chapter Twelve begins with a translated passage from one of the Icelandic Sagas, the Laxdoela Saga. In the saga, Gudrún is unhappily married to a close friend of Kjartan, the man she really loves. Kjartan, who is angry that his friend married Gudrún before he could, quarrels with Gudrún and her husband and humiliates them. In the scene from the saga in the novel, Gudrún goes into the badstofa where her brother Ospak is lazing about and encourages him to go seek revenge on Kjartan. Ospak does as Gudrún says and gets ready to fight Kjartan to the death.

Like Burial Rites, the Laxdoela Saga features themes of unrequited love and murder. Both pieces of literature prominently feature women characters navigating toxic relationships and using what little power they possess to fulfill their emotional desires and needs. Both Gudrún and Agnes end up bringing about the deaths of the men they love, though in entirely different ways.



The narrative then switches back to Agnes’s voice. She describes how she and Fridrik arrived at Natan’s farm together. Sigga answered the door and let them in, though Natan had told her not to. Sigga said that Natan left to treat Worm, who had fallen ill. Fridrik then began looking through the house for money. After failing to find any, Fridrik sat next to Sigga and called her his wife. Sigga, starting to sob, told him that Natan changed his mind and wouldn’t let them marry. Sigga told them that Natan said that if anyone married her, it would be him.

As Agnes and Fridrik return to the farm to find Sigga, Sigga informs them that Natan has gone back on his word to let her marry Fridrik. This, of course, is consistent with Natan’s lying throughout the book. Again, this shows how dangerous life is for poor women, because they are not allowed to make their own choices.



Fridrik, Sigga, and Agnes spent the next few days together preparing to leave. Sigga planned to go back to Stóra-Borg, where she was born, and Fridrik suggested a farm where Agnes might find work. As they were planning, the trio saw Natan arriving with Pétur. When Natan got to the house and saw Agnes, he told her to leave. Sigga begged for him to let her stay the rest of the winter, but Natan insisted that Agnes go. Agnes, though desperate for his love, said nothing. Fridrik broke the silence by telling Natan that Natan was not going to marry Sigga. Natan conceded that Agnes could stay, but said she couldn't sleep in the badstofa. He told Fridrik to leave.

That night, Agnes slept in the cowshed again. She woke up in the night and heard footsteps. It was Fridrik, who had walked all the way there from his farm. Fridrik told Agnes he had come to finally take "what's [his]." In the moonlight, Agnes saw that Fridrik was carrying a hammer and a knife. Agnes did not believe Fridrik would actually do anything, so she went back to sleep. When she woke again, she entered the house and found Sigga cowering with Thóranna. Sigga told Agnes to go look in the badstofa.

Shaking, Agnes went to the kitchen for a lamp, where she found Fridrik. Fridrik told her he did not know if Natan was dead or not. Agnes's heart dropped. She found a lamp and then went to the badstofa. Agnes saw Pétur, whose head was crushed, and then Natan, who although not dead, was extremely mutilated. They heard Natan groan, and Fridrik told Agnes he had hit them both with the hammer. Natan then became conscious and said Agnes's name. Next he saw Pétur, realized what was happening, and began to panic.

Agnes, furious with Fridrik, asked him what he was going to do now. Natan, who tried to get out of the bed, fell. Agnes realized that Natan was too badly hurt and would not survive the night. Natan tried to talk to Fridrik, but Fridrik turned away. Natan said Agnes's name again, but then began choking on his own blood. Agnes told Fridrik to kill Natan so that he would not die slowly, but Fridrik refused. Agnes then stabbed Natan with a knife in the belly, and as Natan looked Agnes in the eyes, she thought she saw forgiveness.

Fridrik then told Agnes that she killed Natan. Fridrik began sobbing, then took the knife out of Natan's stomach and walked out. Agnes told Fridrik he would be hanged for this, and Fridrik responded that she would be burnt alive. Agnes realized that her hands were covered in blood, and that's when she thought of Natan's large quantities of whale oil.

As Fridrik, Sigga, and Agnes intend to flee, Natan arrives and asserts his control over his farm. Again, this shows how women like Sigga and Agnes have few options, since Sigga cannot choose for herself who she will marry and where she will go without Natan's permission, and Agnes has nowhere else to stay. The Icelandic landscape and climate comes into play here as well, since it is simply too hostile for Agnes to strike out on her own.



As he does throughout the book, Fridrik displays a sense of entitlement to Sigga, calling her "his." It is unclear at this point in the narrative whether Agnes truly believed that Fridrik would not hurt Natan, or if Natan had so badly abused her that she did nothing to stop Fridrik in order to prevent Natan from hurting her again.



Agnes enters the badstofa to a scene of incredible violence. In yet another example of how names are repeated and given prominence throughout the book, Natan speaks Agnes's name as he regains consciousness and sees her. As Natan realizes that he has been attacked and Pétur has been killed, he confronts the possibility of his own death—which he has been dreaming about and dreading—and panics.



When Agnes stabs Natan in the belly to prevent him from further suffering, she may be thinking of her conversation with him about the fox kit, in which both she and Natan decided that it was better to kill it quickly than to let it suffer. According to Agnes, killing Natan was an act of love and mercy, not an act of malice as the court suggests.



Although Fridrik is truly responsible for Natan's death, Fridrik knows, as Agnes does, that because Agnes is covered with blood and because, unlike Sigga, she is not young and submissive, she will be blamed for the murders.



CHAPTER 13

Chapter Thirteen opens with a letter to Blöndal from a representative in Copenhagen. The letter presents several documents to Blöndal, including the court's ruling on Agnes's case, the King's letter granting Sigga's appeal, the document confirming that the sentence should be carried out in Iceland, and the sanction for Gudmundur Ketilsson to serve as executioner.

The secretary lays out certain requirements pertaining to the execution, including that Fridrik and Agnes must have a priest visit them each day, that the execution should occur near Natan's farm, that the platform should be made of turf, that Gudmundur Ketilsson be trained for the execution, that the local farmers must attend, that the prisoners cannot see each other's executions, and that the bodies should be buried without Christian burial rites. The secretary also reminds Blöndal that he must return the axe to Copenhagen after the execution.

Next, Kent shows a letter to the District Officers from Blöndal, confirming the date of Fridrik and Agnes's executions for January 12. Blöndal reminds them that local farmers must attend. After this letter, there is a letter from Sigga's priest to Blöndal thanking him for obtaining Sigga's pardon and saying Sigga is praying to God. Kent then presents the "Icelandic Burial Hymn," which describes knowing Jesus will help people to not be afraid of death, and even to welcome it.

The chapter then resumes its third-person narrative as it describes Tóti being woken by a knock on his door. He answers it to find a messenger from Blöndal. Tóti reads the letter then quickly dresses. His father, concerned about his health, asks Tóti where he is going. Tóti says that the letter announced Agnes's execution in six days, and so he must go see her. Reverend Jón objects, saying he is too weak and that it is not worth it to help a murderer, but Tóti insists, saying it is God's will. On his way out, Tóti stops in the church to pray for pity.

The narrative jumps to Tóti's arrival at Kornská. Margrét greets Tóti at the door and is surprised by his sickly appearance. Tóti asks to speak with Jón, and Margrét leads him into the kitchen to warm up. Tóti explains his recent illness and Margrét goes to get Jón. Once Jón arrives, Tóti hands Jón the letter from Blöndal proclaiming the date of Agnes's execution. The family at Kornská had not yet heard about it. Margrét goes to fetch Agnes.

As with all the letters in the book, these show the importance of writing and literacy in Icelandic society. The letters also show that, as expected, Sigga was granted her appeal (perhaps because, as Agnes thinks, Sigga is young and beautiful and innocent-seeming). Here, the logistics of Agnes and Fridrik's execution are also confirmed.



Although Blöndal seems like the most powerful character in the book, this letter from the secretary in Denmark shows that he is being carefully controlled by authorities in Denmark. As the secretary details all the rules that Blöndal must follow, it is obvious that Blöndal does not actually have much choice in the orders he carries out.



As Tóti suggested during his meeting with Blöndal, Blöndal is using Agnes and Fridrik's executions as a way to show his power and authority in the region. This is especially obvious in Blöndal's letter, as he is requiring all the farmers in the area to attend the executions. Sigga, meanwhile, has apparently undergone a religious rebirth after her appeal, as Agnes predicted.



This scene stands in contrast to the earlier moment when Tóti first received the letter asking him to be Agnes's spiritual guide. Tóti clearly has more self-confidence and sense of purpose than when he started his spiritual journey with Agnes, as he now springs out of bed to go help her. Tóti's father is skeptical, but rather than asking his father's advice, Tóti rejects his interference, saying he knows that what he is doing is God's will.



Tóti delivers the news of Agnes's impending execution, but Kent neglects to depict the scene when Agnes is actually told that her execution date has been set, only portraying the moments before and after. Kent's choice not to narrate these moments seems to reflect a sense that certain scenes are better left to the imagination rather than literature.



The narrative switches to Agnes's first person perspective as she talks with Tóti, trying to process the fact that Tóti has just told her about her execution date. She feels like she is suffocating as Tóti says kind, reassuring things to her. Agnes feels that no one can understand how she feels as a "barren," "dry," condemned person. She thinks that when her head is cut off she will not bleed.

The narrative switches back to the third person as Tóti tries to get through to Agnes, who is staring at the floor. Jón calls for some brandy. Agnes asks how many days until the execution, and Tóti tells her six. Agnes asks if Tóti could beg Blöndal for an appeal, and Margrét backs Agnes up, saying the crime was not her fault. Tóti, surprised, asks if Agnes talked to Margrét, and Margrét confirms that they did have a conversation about Agnes's role in the murders. Agnes says she cannot move her hands, and Tóti tells Agnes, futilely, that he is there for her.

The narrative switches back to Agnes's voice as she tries to cope with her impending death. She thinks about the dark sky and a cold wind, which will still be there after she is gone, and the freezing and thawing of the soil with the seasons. She imagines herself buried in that soil, and how over time her body will become part of the landscape.

The narrative returns to the third-person, describing how Tóti and Agnes both stay awake late, and then fall asleep. Margrét is still awake and knitting. She looks around the badstofa and notices that Lauga is missing from her bed. Margrét gets up and eventually finds Lauga in the pantry. Margrét asks what she is doing there, and if she is upset. Lauga says she just wanted some alone time. The two women go back to bed.

The narrative returns to Agnes's first person perspective, as she remembers how Fridrik never found Natan's money after his death, before they burned the farm with the whale oil. At Kornsa everyone tries to make Agnes eat, but she does not want to. What she wants is the **stone** Ingveldur gave her to talk to birds. Agnes imagines herself lost and lonely in the silence that will follow her execution. She thinks that there is no afterlife and no way home from death. She worries that, if no one says her name, she will be forgotten.

Agnes's comments about the incomprehensibility of being condemned and the particular way that it makes her feel suggests that incarceration and condemnation to death affect her psychological state profoundly and in ways that can't be understood by anyone who has not experienced it.



Although Agnes expresses a last-ditch hope that she may be able to get an appeal like Sigga did, her belief that the truth would not set her free seems to prevail. Although Agnes has now told the true story to Margrét, and Margrét believes her, Margrét's faith does nothing to change the court's decision. It is unclear whether anyone seriously inquired about an appeal on Agnes's behalf, although it is unlikely it would have been granted in any case.



As Agnes thinks about her impending death, she finds comfort in the idea that, even if she does not know what the fate of her soul will be in the afterlife, her body will surely become a part of the Icelandic landscape that she so loves. Clearly, the landscape carries important spiritual meaning for Agnes.



As Agnes's death approaches, Lauga's behavior becomes stranger and stranger. When Margrét finds her, Lauga seems to be unable to sleep, suggesting that Lauga is feeling guilty about something. For Lauga, who always follows social norms to the letter, her budding sympathy for Agnes contradicts the things she has held to be true.



As Agnes's death approaches, she attempts to imagine the afterlife. Rather than Christian heaven, Agnes pictures the afterlife as darkness and silence. Agnes again shows how important names are to her, as she worries that if no one says her name she will be totally forgotten. But Agnes's worry is clearly unfounded, since, two hundred years later, Kent has written this novel and spread Agnes's name around the world.



On the eve of the execution, the family of Kornsó spends time together in the badstofa. They all watch as Tóti and Agnes hold hands and talk. Margrét pulls a chest out from under the bed. They open the chest, which is full of clothes, and Margrét takes out a wool shawl, a skirt and a white embroidered shirt and apron and give them to Agnes. Margrét asks Lauga to hand her the silver brooch. Lauga hesitates, teary, and then hands it to Margrét to add to Agnes's execution outfit.

The narrative returns to Agnes's first person perspective. Margrét holds Agnes's hand and tell her she is not a monster. Agnes says "they're going to kill me," and Margrét promises they will remember her. Agnes starts to cry and Margrét comforts her. Agnes suddenly feels she has something in her mouth and spits it out. She sees that it is a **stone** (though it's unclear whether the stone is actually there or Agnes is hallucinating it).

Agnes says goodbye to Steina, who hugs her and sobs. Agnes apologizes, though she isn't sure why. Lauga says Agnes's name, and Agnes notes aloud that it is the first time she has done so. Lauga collapses, clearly pained by this realization. Tóti says they should go, and someone lifts Agnes onto a horse. Agnes feels like she is underwater.

The perspective changes back to the third-person as Tóti and Agnes ride towards the spot where Agnes will be executed. Agnes is so afraid that she pees herself. She apologizes, but Tóti seems unbothered. He tells her he is with her. Jón is riding with them, as are several other men. One of the men brings a flask of alcohol for Agnes to drink. Agnes drinks the alcohol and thanks them.

Finally, the riders arrive at Agnes's execution place. Tóti helps Agnes down. She is so drunk that she has trouble standing and feels she cannot move her legs. Jón comes to help Tóti with Agnes, but Tóti insists on lifting her himself. He holds Agnes's hand and hauls her out of the snow. People start gathering to watch Fridrik's execution, which is first. Tóti and Agnes sit in the snow. Jón takes a sip from his flask.

Whereas when Agnes first arrived at Kornsó, Margrét helped her burn her dress (which was also her last possession), Margrét now gives Agnes clean clothes to wear on her execution. This act of kindness suggests that the fine clothes give Agnes a sense of dignity as she goes to her death. Meanwhile, Margrét's kindness reflects how highly Agnes has risen in her esteem.



Kent does not clarify whether Agnes's mother's stone is really there or not. Because no other characters notice it, it seems likely that it is a hallucination. However, Agnes's imagination of the stone seems to suggest that she has finally been able to make peace with her past and find a home at Kornsó, and even, in the moments before her death, to have accessed some secret truth about life or nature (since the stone was supposed to allow her to talk to birds).



Throughout the book, the reasons behind Lauga's feelings toward Agnes are opaque. Lauga's pain when she realizes that she has never called Agnes by name may be her guilt that, by only seeing Agnes as a criminal, Lauga never acknowledged her humanity.



Although Agnes has a bad reputation following her crimes, the men riding with her show her kindness by giving her alcohol to drink before her execution. Tóti, meanwhile, continues to support Agnes as promised. Rather than using Christian teachings, he continues to use his strategy of acting as an equal and friend to her.



As Agnes confronts her impending execution, her prophetic dream about Tóti helping her across a field of snow comes true. The snow prevents Agnes from walking alone, seeming to represent the impossibility of confronting her difficult existential crisis without people to help her through it.



As the minutes go by, Tóti suggests that they pray. Agnes hears the burial hymn being sung, and she and Tóti sing along. Jón, meanwhile, says the Lord's prayer. Agnes, panicked, tells Tóti she is not ready, and asks if they can wait. Tóti tells her that he will not let go of her and holds her hand. They hear the axe fall, executing Fridrik.

Although Agnes has expressed skepticism towards Christianity at various points throughout the book, in her final hours she and Tóti sing a Christian burial hymn to keep her calm—a reference to the “burial rites” of the book’s title, which could also refer to the sum of Agnes’s final days at Kornsó. Although Tóti initially doubted his ability to help Agnes, he seems to successfully provide her with true comfort here.



EPILOGUE

The epilogue takes the form of a document written by Blöndal confirming that Fridrik and Agnes were both led to the execution place. Fridrik was killed first, then Agnes was brought in and her head was cut off. The heads were put on stakes at the execution site and the bodies were buried.

Kent’s presentation of Blöndal’s final letter contrasts the flatness of the objective account that Blöndal describes in the letter with the subjective account in the rest of the book, showing how each presents a different kind of “truth.”





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