



INSIDE STORIES

Burial Rites

by Hannah Kent

Teaching notes prepared
by Jan May



Victorian Association for
the Teaching of English



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Edited by Marion White

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INTRODUCTION

Hannah Kent, born in Adelaide in 1985, first heard about Agnes Magnúsdóttir, the last woman to be executed in Iceland in 1829, while a student on a Rotary Exchange to Iceland in her late teens. Intrigued and haunted by the story, Kent kept asking questions about Agnes and the Illugastadir murders. The dearth of personal information about Agnes's life fed Kent's curiosity as the material available mostly passed down through mythology, story telling as well as official documentation, portrayed Agnes as an evil, scheming woman.

Kent, mesmerised by Agnes Magnúsdóttir, toyed with the idea of writing a novel, of creating a re-imagination of her story. She was able to undertake meticulous research during return trips to Iceland and the novel, which was part of her PhD in creative writing at Flinders University, became a reality after Kent was awarded the Inaugural Writing Australia Unpublished Manuscript Award in 2011. Part of the prize was a mentorship by the famous Australian author and Pulitzer Prize winner, Geraldine Brooks, who penned *Year of Wonders*, *March* and *People of the Book*, all books that, like *Burial Rites*, are highly researched novels inspired by historical events. The front cover of *Burial Rites*, published in 2013, carries the words of Geraldine Brooks: '*Burial Rites* is an accomplished gem, its prose as crisp and sparkling as its northern setting'.¹ A later edition carries a different quote from Brooks: 'An original new writer, with a sharp and lively grasp of language and story'.²

The magic of Kent's writing lies in her deeply evocative description of the Icelandic landscape. We are drawn into the difficult poverty-stricken lives of characters living in some of the world's most forbidding climatic conditions. Kent brings this landscape and climate to life through her personification of the valleys, mountains and sea, the sun, rain, wind and snow, and of course, the bitter cold. Amidst Kent's breathtaking description, we meet the enigmatic Agnes, a character who is gradually revealed but not entirely. Agnes's ambiguity is deliberately controlled by Kent as she creates a blend of the historical documentation available and her own reimagining of this brave and intelligent woman, inescapably trapped in so many ways.

The multi-layered narrative also highlights the importance of story telling. While Agnes's life is dependent on the stories told by others, the reader is also enthralled by her own stories; stories of ravens, stones, mistreatment, love, poverty and oppression but also of Iceland, its history, mythology and people. Kent, however, never lets the reader forget that Agnes Magnúsdóttir has been sentenced to death for murder. There will be no happy ending to *Burial Rites* but Kent's humane portrayal of the doomed Agnes, whether guilty or not of the crimes for which she was executed, teaches us important lessons about the nature of the human condition.

'As my motivation to write Burial Rites came from a desire to represent Agnes as a human being rather than as the 'monster' or 'victim' criminal women are so often portrayed as, it was always important for me to create a very ambiguous character. People are rarely unequivocally evil, just as they are never categorically good. We are, all of us, inherently complex, and it was this complexity that I sought to represent in Agnes. I didn't want to paddle around in

¹ Kent, Hannah *Burial Rites*, Picador, 2013

² Kent, Hannah *Burial Rites*, Back Bay Books, April 2014

shallow notions of guilt and innocence, but explore the deeper waters of the human condition. Why are there contradictions between what we say and what we do? What about us is flawed, and what is redemptive, and how is the whole mess knitted together in an individual?’³

Burial Rites has been awarded and short-listed for a number of Australian and international literary awards, a stunning debut for Hannah Kent, who is also the co-founder and deputy editor of the literary journal, *Kill Your Darlings*. In 2014, Kent returned to Iceland for the launch of the Icelandic edition of her novel and is currently working on another historical novel, this time set in Ireland.

³ Q & A with Hannah Kent, <http://www.indies.com.au>, page 1 PDF

WAYS INTO THE TEXT

- Get to know the landscape of Iceland. Using the map at the start of the novel, create a collage, PowerPoint or similar using Google images of places on Hannah Kent's map. Google Earth is also a fascinating way to view the landscape. Alternatively, the class could draw an outline of Iceland on a large sheet of paper for the classroom wall, mark key locations and then pin images to the 'map'.
- Following on from the previous activity, students can view a photo essay on the publisher's website. It includes photos of the ruins of Natan's workshop and other places mentioned in the novel
<<http://www.picador.com/blog/august-2013/burial-rites-a-photo-essay-from-iceland>>.
- As a class, discuss what has been learned about the Icelandic landscape and the difficulties that would face those who lived and farmed in the area. A possible extension activity could be to create a list of words and images that describe the landscape. Ask students, without referring to their copy of the novel, to create some of their own similes and metaphors.
- Research the real Agnes Gudmundsdóttir. What records exist of her life and the executions?
- Create a glossary of unfamiliar terminology in the novel: for example, specific Icelandic names and references.
- Research the Icelandic way of life in the early 1800s. Possible focus topics could be farming, housing, religion, government and the emphasis on literacy.
- Read several of the sagas especially the ones mentioned in the novel. This website has a number of the sagas published online <<http://www.sagadb.org>>.
- Listen to Bjork sing 'Vísur Vatnsenda-Rósu' (English: 'Verses by Rósa of Vatnsendi') that is a traditional Icelandic song. The lyrics are taken from a poem written by Rósa Guðmundsdóttir (1795–1855)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TiN_YTyaNtl>.
- Check out Hannah Kent's Facebook page. She toured Iceland in 2014 to promote *Burial Rites*. An article describing northern Iceland and written by Hannah Kent can be found here:
<<http://www.theguardian.com/travel/2014/sep/20/hannah-kent-north-iceland>>.
- Listen to Hannah Kent being interviewed at the 2014 Sydney Writers' Festival. There are also other interviews to be found online as well as plenty of reviews of *Burial Rites* <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uOVQ0aCE2Us>>.

- Listen to this traditional Icelandic song dedicated to the raven. The accompanying slideshow will reinforce the novel's raven imagery for the reader <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tq4seuBFxIM>>.

RUNNING SHEET AND THE STRUCTURE OF THE TEXT

Timeline—events in *Burial Rites*

1795–1827	
1795	Agnes born, illegitimate, at Flaga to Ingveldur Rafnsdóttir and Magnús Magnússon.
≈ 1798	Agnes Magnúsdóttir and her mother at Beinakelda.
≈ 1800	Litla-Giljá farm. Illugi the Black, her uncle. Mother pregnant again.
1801	Half-brother Jóas born at Brekkukot when Agnes is five. They stay a year. Mother abandons Agnes at Kornsa when she is six.
1803	Inga dies when Agnes is eight.
1806	Half-sister Helga born.
1809, 22 May	Agnes confirmed at thirteen. (Although recorded as fourteen.)
1810 March	Agnes working at Gudrunarstadir.
1816	Helga dies.
1819 May	Agnes walks from Gudrunarstadir to Gilsstadir in a freezing spring. Steina remembers passing Agnes on the road to Kornsa.
≈ 1821–22	Tóti helps Agnes over flooded river pass near Gönguskörd.
c. 1825	Poem about Búrfell-Agnes.
1825 Summer	Natan Ketilsson leaves home of Poet-Rósa at Vatnsendi after two years.
1826–27	Agnes working at Geitaskard. Meets Natan there.
Early 1827	Natan treating Björn Blöndal's wife.
1827 May	Agnes goes to work at Illugastadir during Flitting Days.
c. 1827	Poet-Rósa's poem to Natan Ketilsson.
1828	
≈ March 13–14	Natan Ketilsson and Pétur Jónsson murdered and burned.
March 20	Letter to Reverend Jóhann Tómasson from Blöndal saying Pétur Jónsson buried with Christian rites beside Natan despite criminal conviction.
24 March	Auction of Natan Ketilsson's valuables.
29 March	List of possessions of prisoners, Agnes and Sigga valued.
13 April	Poet-Rósa appears in court.
19 April	Bjarni Siggurdsson, Fridrik's brother appears in court.
3 May	From P. Bjarnason, Reverend at Undirfell—Agnes' birth listed 1795, confirmation 1809.

June	Poet-Rósa's poem to Agnes Magnúsdóttir.
June	Agnes Magnúsdóttir's reply to Poet-Rósa.
30 December	Blöndal's letter of suggestion about make and size of axe to be used for the execution.
1829	
30 May	Blöndal's letter to Reverend Thorvardur Jónsson asks him to be Agnes's spiritual advisor.
Late June	Agnes transferred from Stóra-Borg to Kornsó.
	Tóti rides to Kornsó to meet prisoner on arrival.
Summer	Execution axe, made in Copenhagen, brought to Blöndal.
5 September	Blöndal's letter to Tóti enquiring about his progress with Agnes.
October	Tóti becomes ill.
22 December	Blöndal receives Supreme Court ruling from Denmark, King's letter pardoning Sígga from execution, document instructing execution take place near crime and the sanction of execution including specific instructions about how it is to be carried out.
1830	
6 January	Tóti receives Blöndal's letter with execution date.
7 January	Reverend Pétursson's letter to Blöndal.
12 January	Agnes executed, aged 34.

INTRODUCTORY ELEMENTS OF THE NOVEL

- Note on Icelandic surnames.
- Note on Icelandic pronunciation.
- Map of Iceland and the region in the novel.
- 'I was the worst to the one I loved best': A quote from *Laxdæla Saga*.

A symbol is used throughout to denote shifts in the narrative perspective. Each chapter is broken into approximately eight of these shorter sections, which move the reader between Agnes's first person narrative and the third person narrative that reveals perspectives of other characters in the novel.

PROLOGUE

The opening five words of the prologue shock the reader. The first person narrator bluntly announces, 'THEY SAID I MUST DIE' (p. 1), and lays down some clues about the plot. 'They said that I stole the breath from men, and now they must steal mine' (p. 1). A burning farm, flames, the ocean, smoke, and the narrator looking back to watch the fire, suggest what the crime may be. The ominous repetition of 'I hear footsteps' helps to hook the reader into turning the page to see what happens next.

CHAPTER ONE

The District Commissioner, Björn Blöndal, has posted a Public Notice advertising the auction of valuables left behind by Natan Ketilsson and written two letters. The first, written on 20 March 1828, informs Reverend Jóhann Tómasson about the burial details of Pétur Jónsson ‘who is said to have been murdered and burned on the night between the 13 and 14 of this month, with Natan Ketilsson’ (p. 4). The second, written fourteen months later, requests the services of Assistant Reverend Thorvardur Jónsson. After introductory remarks about the Illugastadir murders and his intention to execute the murderers, Blöndal provides more information about the crime and the ensuing trial where the three persons charged were convicted and sentenced to death. He informs the Reverend that one of the convicted, Agnes Magnúsdóttir, has asked that he be the clergyman responsible for her spiritual preparation for meeting the Lord. He is to visit the condemned woman at Kornsó, where she will be temporarily kept until her execution.

These real historical documents provide the detail needed by the reader to move forward with the story, as well as establishing that District Commissioner Blöndal will be a controlling force in the novel.

We are taken to a small farmstead next to the church of Breidabólstadir where the Assistant Reverend lives with his father, the Reverend Jón, who alerts him to the arrival of a messenger from Hvammur carrying the letter from Blöndal. Tóti (his ‘nickname’ will be used hereafter) is taken aback at the letter’s contents, seeking his father’s advice while the impatient servant waits for his response. ‘That’s your choice’ says his father, adding that Tóti will need to ask ‘her’ why she asked for him (p. 9). The servant is surprised to hear the answer he must bear to his master: ‘Tell Blöndal that I will meet with Agnes Magnúsdóttir...I’m to be her spiritual advisor’ (p. 9). As the servant leaves muttering, ‘Good Lord...They pick a mouse to tame a cat’, Tóti holds the letter away from him as though it were about to catch fire.

The author, in her introduction of Tóti, has highlighted his inexperience and his need to take advice from his father. She foreshadows through the reactions of the servant that Tóti is a young man given a highly difficult role that may perhaps be beyond his capabilities.

We shift to Steina Jónsdóttir piling dried dung at her home in Kornsó. She experiences a ‘flicker of panic’ (p. 10) at the arrival of the red-coated District Commissioner, who announces his name as Björn Audunsson Blöndal in an authoritative tone, while showing an ‘air of bemusement’ at Steina, in her filthy skirt, wiping her nose on her sleeve. His graceful dismounting of his horse contrasts with the ‘thick crescents of dirt’ he observes under Steina’s fingernails (p. 11). His position of superiority is juxtaposed against the nervous Steina whose parents are absent from the farm.

Through Blöndal’s judgemental eyes, the reader is introduced to the interior of a simple farmer’s home, the croft that will become a familiar setting as the story progresses.

Blöndal thinks of it as a damp, dusty, cramped and unhealthy hovel but it is a home to those who live there. Lauga, the younger sister, is mortified when she hears that Blöndal is sitting by himself in their parlour. ‘He’ll think us peasants!’ Steina mumbles, ‘We are peasants’ (p. 12). When Blöndal asks for coffee, he is told they have none; it is a luxury that when obtained, is saved for special occasions. When

provided with food, he sniffs it and doesn't eat, rather than graciously accepting what is hard come by at the farm. Blöndal decides to tell the daughters why he is there, giving them the letter to their father to read. Lauga, after hearing some of the background to the murders and reading the letter, questions Blöndal: 'Then, sir, excuse my ignorance, but where are they to be...?' (p. 16). She suddenly realises why he is there. As he continues to talk about the formalities of the sentence, Lauga and Steina react in shock. 'You're putting them *here*? With us? ...to avoid the cost of sending them abroad?' (p. 17). 'Your family will be compensated' responds Blöndal, his tone making it clear the family have no choice; their father, as a district officer, must fulfil his duty to Iceland. 'Your father's title comes with responsibility. I'm sure he would not question me' (p. 17). He departs, leaving Steina recoiling at the touch of his hand on her shoulder, her anger evident as she holds the bowl of uneaten skyr rejected by Blöndal.

The perspective shifts to Agnes, her opening line, 'THERE ARE TIMES WHEN I wonder whether I'm not already dead', signalling Kent's use of the first person to enable the reader to view the world through the condemned woman's perspective.

The descriptive language emphasises the squalor of her current conditions: 'dark', 'squalid', 'chamber pot not emptied'. Agnes is fettered and imprisoned in a storeroom at Stora-Borg, the lack of light forcing her to rely on sound as she has no sense of time in the dark. She recalls that they were all imprisoned together in winter but now in spring, she is left alone with her thoughts: 'And I close my eyes and I imagine the valley in the long days of summer...bright, bright blue, so bright you could weep' (p. 19).

Jón Jónsson and his wife, Margrét, set out for home three days after Blöndal's visit to their daughters at Kornsó. Margrét, on the horse, is unwell and wearied, her fits of coughing and spitting are debilitating. She notices some neighbours have acquired another cow and tells her husband, who responds 'We could do with many more things...In good time, Margrét, love' (p. 20). **Her frustrated comment, 'In good time I'll be dead' positions the reader to see her as a character who has wanted more from life. The descriptions of the valley through which they are travelling link to Agnes's imaginings in her storeroom cell. It is summer in the valley, the sheep are bleating and birds darting across the fields—a scene of bright freedom as opposed to Agnes's dark imprisonment.**

Steina and Lauga are not speaking; their silent immersion in their tasks means they don't notice their parents returning along the valley trail until they are nearly home. Lauga is angry at Steina's ungracious reaction to Blöndal's news, believing it could affect their social standing, while Steina is furious at Blöndal's callous manner and the younger Lauga's criticisms of her. Lauga wants to be the one to tell her parents of the visit, wondering how her father will react to the news. It is also revealed that Steina has thrown Blöndal's letter in the fire in anger. She organises the meal, her mother crossly noticing Kristin the maid is absent as Steina had allowed her a half-day holiday. Just as Lauga starts to explain about Blöndal's visit and the letter, Steina's voice rings through the corridor: 'You'll never guess who we have to keep locked up in our house!' 'Pabbi, Blöndal's forcing us to keep Agnes Magnúsdóttir in *our* home' (p. 25). Jón wants to hear the story from the start, asking Lauga to tell him. Margrét is distraught: 'Surely this is not something we are obliged to do!' (p. 26). Jón decides to ride immediately to Hvammur, determined to find out more even if he

wakes them. His wife and daughters are left shaken behind him. ‘What shall we do, Mamma?’ says Lauga’s small voice. Her mother’s action of closing her eyes and taking a deep breath signals that the family are about to experience great upheaval. Their powerlessness against the authority of Blöndal has already been implied.

Jón’s return some hours later brings confirmation that Agnes is to be ‘brought to us’ (p. 26). Lauga wonders what they have done wrong while her mother sourly thinks that there are plenty of ‘*authorities*’ at Stóra-Borg. Jón has been told there was an incident at Stóra-Borg, telling Lauga, ‘I am sure it was nothing to worry about’ (p. 27). Margrét’s anger boils over: ‘Are we just going to yield to this? Like a dog rolling over? ... This Agnes is a *murderess*, Jón! ... We are responsible for others!’ (p. 27). He tells her there will be remuneration for Agnes’s custody and disagrees that the girls need to be sent away. ‘The girls will be safe enough with you, Margrét’ (p. 28). He has further news to shock his wife. Blöndal requires him in Hvammur on the night of the prisoner’s arrival. ‘You mean to make *me* meet her?’ (p. 28). Margrét can’t believe that she and the girls will be left alone with the woman who killed Natan Ketilsson. Jón tries to reassure them that there will be officers and a Reverend present but the description of a furiously knitting Margrét and Steina feeling sick to the stomach leaves feelings of palpable anger and fear in the room.

We return to Agnes’s perspective and learn the Stóra-Borg men sometimes tie her legs together in the evening, like a horse, make her feel treated like an animal. No one speaks to her, she’s left in the dark and bound when led somewhere else. Agnes feels depersonalised as her captors refuse to meet her eyes when reading out letters or proclamations to her. ‘You, Agnes Magnúsdóttir, have been found guilty of accessory to murder... You, Agnes. Agnes’ (p. 29). She withdraws into herself, thinking of poems she has composed and the sagas she has read: ‘I remain quiet. I am determined to close myself to the world, to tighten my heart and hold on to what has not yet been stolen from me. I cannot let myself slip away. I will hold what I am inside, and keep my hands tight around all the things I have seen and heard, and felt’ (p. 29). Agnes thinks of herself drowning, sinking under the water where they will no longer be able to see her, a metaphorical allusion to her execution, perhaps.

Tóti has questioned every day for a month his decision to visit the condemned woman. He is troubled; ‘his stomach crowded with nerves’ and wishes he were too ill to ride to Kornsó (p. 30). This line of thinking is ironic as later in the novel, Tóti is in fact too ill to ride to Kornsó when he desperately wants to. He remembers his mother and the flowers she grew around the edges of graves in the churchyard, later to be ripped out by his father after her death. A coolness exists between Tóti and his father. Tóti wants advice or approval but all his father gives him are platitudes such as ‘You know your own heart’ or ‘A man must be true to his word’ (p. 31). The ride to Kornsó gives Tóti time to reflect on what he might say to the condemned, and the tone of voice to be used. A small thrill flickers through his body as he mouths the word ‘*murderess*’ to himself while riding through the soft red light of the late June sun. As the landscape calms him, Tóti whispers ‘I will save her’ (p. 32).

CHAPTER TWO

Hannah Kent starts the chapter with a listing in the Undirfell Ministerial Book on May 3 1828. The entry reveals Agnes was born at Flaga in the Undirfell parish in 1795, confirmed in 1809 and recorded as ‘having an excellent intellect, and strong knowledge and understanding of Christianity’ (p. 33).

Agnes is taken from the storeroom and put in irons. She is ‘scabbed by dirt’, conscious of ‘the accumulated weeping’ of her ‘body: blood, sweat and oil’ and hair that ‘feels like a greased rope’. Yet her soul blossoms as she is led out of doors, able to breathe fresh air again and see light. As a crowd gathers to observe her, Agnes realises what they see as they stare at her: ‘I was two dead men. I was a burning farm. I was a knife. I was blood’ (p. 34). She is strapped to the saddle of a horse ‘like a corpse being taken to the burial ground’ (p. 35) and they set out to ride across Iceland’s north towards Kornsó. Agnes recalls the brutality of the watchmen at Stóra-Borg, the bruises on her body that ‘chronicled their hatred towards me...I suppose some of them had known Natan’ (p. 36). Her irons cut into her wrists, she is unable to swat away flies, but Agnes finds consolation from the warmth of the sun as she recalls the first spring at Illugastadir and Natan rowing a boat on a calm sea. ‘Don’t think of him’, Agnes warns herself (p. 37). She realises they are travelling south, perhaps towards Vatnsdalur, a part of the country she hasn’t seen for a long time. ‘This is as close to home as I’ll ever be now’ (p. 37).

The reader realises Agnes is heading to a place where she has previously lived and that there are stories of the past yet to be revealed.

Ravens, an important motif in the novel, are heard for the first time. These birds are omens to Agnes; cruel but wise birds reminding her of an incident at Undirfell when she was younger. Sigga is mentioned for the first time as Agnes recalls her as being ‘unschooled in nightmares and ghosts’ (p. 37) and having to be told never to call out to or feed a raven at night. The plot is foreshadowed as Agnes thinks of how she alarmed Sigga: ‘I scared her, I’m sure, or she wouldn’t have said the things she said later’ (p. 38). A harsh-toned rider pulls his horse alongside Agnes, informing her that she will be kept at Kornsó until the time of her execution and reminding her that as a condemned criminal, her right to freedom has been forfeited. ‘Have they done it on purpose? Kornsó, of all places’ (p. 38). She dreads the humiliation of being kept in a place of her childhood where all will know her.

Reverend Tóti is at Kornsó, standing with Margrét, as they watch the horses approaching. Tóti observes Margrét’s ‘hard face’ as she hopes that some of the men will be left behind to make sure Agnes doesn’t kill her family while they’re asleep. She has put on a clean apron and sent her daughters to bed, telling Tóti, ‘I do not like to share my home with the Devil’s children’ (p. 39). ‘We must all do our duty’, he responds as he uses his snuff horn for the first time. Margrét observes ravens flying silently across the mountain range: ‘They looked like ashes whirling in the sky’ (p. 40). To her the right name for a flock of ravens is a ‘conspiracy’ while Tóti thinks of them as an ‘unkindness’. The lead rider tells Margrét he doesn’t think the prisoner will trouble them but informs her the men are staying the night to make sure of it. Her words make the man snigger: ‘...Just make sure the bitch stays away from the knives in my kitchen’. New information about Sigga is revealed; she is awaiting the result of an appeal. ‘Too sweet and young to die’ observes the man while claiming that ‘this one...has a right temper when she fancies’ (p. 41). Blöndal won’t allow Agnes an appeal whereas Sigga apparently reminds him of his wife. Agnes is to be used to set an example. Tóti asks if the prisoner has a proper name. ‘Just Agnes...She’ll answer to Agnes’ (p. 41).

Agnes sees the crooked farmhouse of Kornsó and also observes a woman ‘coughing and spitting like a crone’ (p. 42). She craves food and water, remembering the feeling of starvation from childhood. When the Reverend greets her, Agnes

thinks: ‘Don’t look up. It’s him. It is the same voice’ (p. 42). The reader becomes aware of some past connection but Tóti does not recognise her, leaving Agnes uncertain whether to be relieved or disappointed. She senses his uncertainty, also noticing his red hair and nervous use of snuff. Her swollen tongue prevents words so that she is unable to let him know her understanding of his predicament. Tóti awkwardly takes his leave, leaving Agnes to reflect upon her situation: ‘Now I am alone. I watch the ravens, and listen to the horses eat’ (p. 43). **The reader is left pondering this first meeting between Agnes and Tóti, and the imagery of the ravens. How does each character appear to be thinking and acting?**

Margrét, suddenly invigorated by anger, asks: ‘Is it necessary to keep her bound like a lamb ripe for the slaughter?’ (p. 46). She wants some time alone with Agnes and ignores the officer’s safety warning. Grasping Agnes’s arm to make her follow, Margrét feels her bones, crusted blood and the smell of stale urine. She insists Agnes must wash if she is to sleep in the Kornsa blankets: ‘I won’t have you infesting this house with any more lice than already plague the place’ (p. 46). However, Margrét’s heart lurches when she sees Agnes fall to the ground and urgently start drinking the warm washing-up water brought in to clean the prisoner. While she thinks Agnes looks like those ‘driven out of their minds by drink, or by haunting, or by grief...’, she issues a terse reminder to ask for a cup next time. **We can already sense on this first night that Margrét’s responses to Agnes will be important in understanding the relationship that forms between them.**

Tóti has arrived back at his church feeling shaken by his first meeting with Agnes. ‘He felt like a wet rag wrung out dry and left distorted upon the ground’ (p. 48). Tóti tries to understand his reactions to this woman, this criminal, this Agnes. He is also unnerved by what he noticed and smelt; her legs splayed over the horse so she wouldn’t slip, the pungency of her neglected body and ‘...something else from between those spread legs. A stench peculiar to women. He blushed at the thought of it’ (p. 48). He had wanted to run away from Agnes whose ‘leprous colours’ made her look like ‘a new corpse, fresh dug from the grave’ (p. 49). Tóti questions his ability as a priest if he can’t cope with the sight of damaged flesh, the vivid bruise on Agnes’s chin particularly disturbing him. He wonders how it was caused—an accident or self-inflicted? Tóti doesn’t raise the reason most obvious to the reader. As he prays for strength in front of the altar, the ugly mural of The Last Supper, reminds him of the mural he misses, an Old Testament illustration of Jacob wrestling the angel, which his father had allowed to be painted over. Tóti prays for Agnes’s soul and the words he can provide to inspire her to repent. ‘Please guard my heart against...the *horror* this woman inspires in me’ (p. 50). **This first meeting has left Tóti feeling like a coward and the reader wondering at the effect Agnes has had upon this young, naïve reverend. What is the ‘horror’ to which Tóti refers?**

Margrét is awakened early the next morning by an officer’s snoring. She watches Agnes sleeping, wondering how she was addressed in Stóra-Borg. She mouths Agnes’s name, feeling it wrong to call her by a Christian name. Was she called ‘Prisoner’, ‘Accused’, ‘Condemned’? ‘Perhaps it was the absence of a name, the silence where a name should be, that they had summoned her by’ (p. 51). Margrét feels strange now that she has finally seen Agnes after a month of fearful anticipation and imaginings. Her musings about the nature of murderesses lead Margrét to memories of the sagas: ‘Those women murdered from a distance and kept their fingers clean’ (p. 52). Agnes is a ‘landless work-maid’, not a saga woman.

Margrét even tries to imagine her favourite but now dead servant, Hjördis stabbing her as she slept, as Agnes helped stab Natan and Pétur. Lauga had wanted to know if murderers had some outward sign of evil such as a physical defect. Her superstitiousness reminds Margrét that some thought Natan a sorcerer, and that Agnes had come between Natan and his affair with Poet-Rósa. Agnes's physical appearance intrigues her; the long dark hair, her very blue and clear eyes, the 'animal way' she drank from the kettle and the appalling condition of her clothes and body. We learn that Margrét scrubbed dirt off Agnes herself: 'The woman's body was a terrain of abuse' (p. 54). She uses some of Natan Ketilsson's own medicine to dress the broken and weeping sores on Agnes's skin and provides old clothes of Hjördis's for her to wear. As Margrét rises to prepare breakfast for the officers with the family's low food supplies, she is taken aback to realise Agnes has been calmly watching her.

We can see Margrét's conflicted sense of justice here. While she thinks the condemned Agnes 'would be dead soon enough', nevertheless she is shocked enough by the way Agnes has been treated to dress her wounds—she sees Agnes as a human being, not a monster.

CHAPTER THREE

An historical report from the Supreme Court Trials of 1829 outlines the crime. Fridrik, with the assistance of Agnes and Sigridur, entered Natan's home, stabbed and thrashed Natan and Pétur to death with a knife and hammer, then burnt the farm to hide the murders. He hated Natan and desired to steal from him. Blöndal believed 'those three had been a gang' (p. 57).

Agnes found sleep at Stóra-Borg 'like a thin tide of water' (p. 58). She never slept deeply enough to dream, always awoken by something, wondering if her dreams had been taken along with her belongings to pay for her custody. However, she has dreamed of Natan during her first night at Kornsó, remembering her happiness when she finally escaped the valley and was able to breathe in the bittersweet scent of Natan's herbs. 'Natan stepped through the pool of sunlight and I opened my arms to him, laughing, feeling like I might die from love, but as I did the beaker slipped from his grasp and smashed on the floor and darkness poured into the room like oil' (p. 59). Agnes grieves for Natan: 'I wake every morning with a blow of grief to my heart' (p. 59). She tries to push her mind to memories of her mother and brother, Joás, but only finds more grief. Agnes, realising Margrét is awake, watches her closely, noticing her hair and her disapproval of the officer's snoring. Agnes thinks of Margrét as an 'old woman', scolding herself when she catches Margrét's eye: 'I should have been more careful. Never be caught staring at someone. They'll think you want something from them' (p. 59). Agnes has learned lessons in the past, lessons the reader is yet to understand. She obeys Margrét's instructions to get up and dons the blue wool servant's garb. Agnes notices little details about Kornsó, revealing that she has been there before: '...but I remember from my first time here a storeroom for barrels...' (p. 60). Through Agnes's close observations, other small details are fed to the reader such as Margrét's dirt-stained skirt hem and her nails that are bitten to the quick. Life has not been easy for Margrét who proceeds to address Agnes in mistress-like tones: 'I shall make no secret of my displeasure to you. I don't want you in my home. I don't want you near my children. I have been forced to keep you here, and you...You are forced to be kept' (p. 61).

While outdoors working with Margrét, Agnes remembers an event from her childhood—her foster-mother, Inga, showing her how to spread her skirt out against a gale and pretend she had wings. She learns that Jón is at Hvammur and the farmhands are due to return for hay-making. Margrét warns Agnes that there will be no chance to take advantage of the family, mentioning the incident at Stóra-Borg that has supposedly led to Agnes's residency at Kornsó. 'She knows nothing' thinks Agnes, her ironic tone leaving the reader wondering just what happened at Stóra-Borg (p. 61). Margrét wants to know Agnes's servant skills. She can spin, knit, cook and tend animals but Agnes's stomach drops when asked, 'Can you wield a knife?' (p. 62). Margrét is short of servants who can cut hay. 'Well, as far as I'm concerned, you shall work for your keep. Yes, you shall pay for my inconvenience. I have no use for a criminal, only a servant' (p. 62). Agnes wants to say the word 'criminal' doesn't belong to her. 'It doesn't fit me or who I am. It's another word, and it belongs to another person...But what is the use of protesting against language?' (p. 62). Agnes's sense of disempowerment continues as Margrét sets out her rules against violence, lazing, cheek, thieving and conniving.

A neighbouring farmer from Gilsstadir, his wife, Róslín, and several of their children are seen in the distance. Margrét sends Agnes inside, correctly surmising that they have come to see the prisoner for themselves. The smell of the rye bread brought by Róslín makes Margrét feel ill and her subsequent coughing fit provides her visitor with an excuse for checking up on her health. Róslín asks about the woman she saw with Margrét, although Margrét's sarcasm indicates she knows Róslín is perfectly aware of the answer. She defiantly names Agnes; that horrifies Róslín who claims to have heard rumours Agnes was removed from Stóra-Borg as they couldn't risk the Blöndal family being slaughtered. 'I am so sorry for you, Margrét...Why for having to keep a murderess under your family's roof. For being forced to look at her hideous face every day! For the fear it must inspire in you, for your own good self and your husband and poor daughters!' (p. 65). Margrét rejects this false sympathy, responding that Agnes's face is not so hideous. Róslín is full of gossip about the case but sensing Margrét's annoyance, she focuses on Agnes's guilt. The relationship between these two neighbouring women is a strained one; however, Róslín perseveres with her concern, gossip and offers to help protect Margrét until Margrét, her patience now run out, turns Róslín in the direction of her home. As Róslín finally leaves, Margrét is wracked by another coughing fit. **These two women are very different characters; it is interesting to note how the author positions the reader more kindly towards Margrét in this scene.**

Agnes, who has been sent back inside, realises no one is watching her. '*I am alone*' (p. 69). 'There is no watchful eye, no guard at the door, no rope, no fetters, no locks, and I am all by myself, unbound'. She trembles with exhilaration thinking of all the things she could do without anyone knowing; sing, dance, swear, laugh—or escape. But escaping would be swapping one death sentence for another. Agnes knows that winter 'comes like a punch in the dark' and can be 'as cruel as any executioner' (p. 69). She closely observes the badstofa, noticing its state of disrepair and how cold it will be in winter. She also notices the cross above the lintel, wondering whether the family sing hymns or tell stories from the sagas. Agnes has a flashback to when she previously lived at Kornsó. '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 Bjorn did not like that I knew the sagas better than him' (p. 70). He tells her: 'Books written by man, not God, are faithless friends and not for your kind'. Her foster-mother, Inga,

whispered the sagas to Agnes when her husband was asleep. Agnes's memories are further triggered as she notices some of the changes to Kornsó. She remembers her white sack and the stone her mother gave her. 'It will bring you good luck, Agnes. It is a magic stone. Put it under your tongue and you will be able to talk to the birds' (p. 71). More of the past is revealed. Her mother left Agnes at Kornsó when she was six. She is now thirty-three, has worked at more northern farms than should have been her share, and is worn down by poverty. The irony is that she is back at Kornsó: 'This is it, then. Kornsó, my last grim corner. The last bed, the last roof, the last floor' (p. 71). Agnes lists all the places where she has worked, including the last one, Illugastadir, where everything went wrong. She recalls the image of fire again: '...always Illugastadir, cradling dead bodies in its cage of burnt beams' (p. 71). The laughter of officers outside brings Agnes back to the present. She spots a silver brooch hidden under a bed, a strange thing in a room without luxuries and instinctively picks it up right at the moment Lauga and Steina enter. Margrét slaps Agnes who denies she is a thief. 'No, you're a murderess' spits out the blue-eyed Lauga (p. 74).

Tóti is completing farm and church chores before heading to Kornsó. He doesn't know what to say to Agnes, asking his father for advice: 'Who says you'll need to say anything? Go.' (p. 75).

Agnes assists with the milking before she and Margrét burn the clothes in which she arrived. She recalls how she and Sigga each made a working dress, blue and simple from cloth Natan had given them. If only she had known then some of the events when she was wearing it; shut in the storeroom at Stóra-Borg, running through the 'witching hours to Stapar, screaming fit to raise the dead' (p. 75). Agnes also reflects that the dress was her last possession: 'There is nothing in the world I now own; even the heat my body gives out is taken away by the summer breeze' (p. 76). As the filthy clothes burn, and the two daughters keep their distance, Margrét gives Agnes some warm milk before they head outside to weed the overgrown herb plot. The use of Agnes's first person perspective gives the reader an intimate description of Margrét, Lauga and Steina. She hears the rattle of phlegm in Margrét's chest and sees how the daughters each react to her presence on what is her first day at Kornsó. Steina tells Agnes: 'I think I know you... You were a servant here in this valley before, weren't you? ... We met on the road' (p. 77). In May 1819 Agnes passed the family on the road after she left Gudrúnarstadir. Steina, then about ten, remembers Agnes plaiting their hair and giving an egg to each of the sisters. This memory triggers others for Agnes: she saw three ravens flying in a line that day—a good omen. Not like later in the walk as she headed to Gilsstadir in freezing weather as one hundred whales beached near Thingeyrar—a bad omen. As Agnes watches the ashes of her dress flutter in the wind against a blue sky, she almost feels happiness. 'I may be able to pretend I am my old self here' (p. 78).

Tóti sits with Agnes, his New Testament in one hand and a limp slice of buttered rye bread in the other. He notices ashes in Agnes's hair, the officers departing and the Kornsó women weeding. 'Shall we begin with a prayer?' (p. 78). Agnes wonders what they are beginning; Tóti says her absolution. She tells him to call her by her name. He asks to be called 'Tóti' although blushes as he regrets his familiarity. Agnes notices that she has to complete sentences for the nervous reverend, asking him why she needs to spend time with a churchman. 'Well... I suppose... We want to return you to God'. Her reply is ironic: 'I think I'll be returning to Him soon enough. By

way of an axe-swing' (p. 80). Agnes realises Tóti doesn't remember how they met six or seven years previously as she was walking between jobs and he assisted her over a flooded river pass on his horse. 'Was it because of that kindness that you ask for me now?' (p. 81). Noticing Agnes looks less like a criminal now she has bathed, Tóti explains to her that he isn't yet fully trained and he will understand if she prefers someone else; however, he is willing to take on the responsibility of providing Agnes with spiritual comfort and hope. Agnes has noticed Margrét chasing off ravens by throwing clods of dirt at them. 'They won't like that' she murmurs to herself (p. 81). Tóti is not used to talking so formally and craves his snuff horn to calm his nervousness. Observing his hesitations and clumsiness, Agnes wonders if she has made a mistake asking for the reverend who is little more than a child himself: 'I'd forgotten how young you were' (p. 82). Tóti departs, chatting with Margrét on his way. Agnes hears her tell Tóti: 'Easier to squeeze blood from a stone, I should think!' (p. 82).

As she spends her day weeding and mending a rock wall, Agnes recalls how she first learnt to grieve at Kornsó although doesn't elaborate. She thinks Tóti too callow and soft, noticing his thin, clean hands not stained or roughened through physical labour. Her relationship with Natan raises further questions for the reader as Agnes thinks he would be the only person to understand how she is feeling at the present time: 'He knew me as one knows the seasons, knows the tide. Knew me like the smell of smoke, knew what I was, and what I wanted. And now he is dead' (p. 83). She feels utterly trapped and that God can do nothing for her: 'God has had his chance to free me, and for reasons known to Him alone, He has pinned me to ill fortune, and although I have struggled, I am run through and through with disaster; I am knifed to the hilt with fate' (p. 84).

CHAPTER FOUR

The chapter starts with a letter from Húnavatn District Commissioner Blöndal to the Deputy Governor of North-East Iceland. The letter is a matter of fact but chilling account of Blöndal's efforts to obtain the axe that will be used for the execution. He is concerned about the unexpected high cost of the axe and wants to compensate by drawing money from the fund that pays for prisoner custody. There is also the question of what to do with the axe afterwards.

Tóti decides to write to Blöndal to renege on his agreement to be Agnes's spiritual mentor. He feels embarrassed that their meeting was a failure, he not even being able to lead her in a simple prayer. His father says, 'You're a servant of the Lord. Don't disgrace yourself, boy' (p. 87), further enhancing Tóti's fear of shame. He puzzles about how best to approach a woman who isn't willing to atone for her crimes, coming to the conclusion that maybe Agnes just wants to talk of other things. Compassion is also shown as Tóti reflects: 'Perhaps she didn't have a friend left in the world' (p. 88). Deciding to make things right with Agnes, Tóti heads towards Kornsó; however, on the way deviates to Undirfell to visit the local reverend. While he waits for the reverend, Tóti meets two women, Dagga and Gudrún, an old blind lady. Dagga thinks Natan's death a pity as he cured her child of gripe and another of whooping cough but Gudrún labels Natan a sorcerer: 'Natan Satan, that was his name. Nothing he ever did came from God' (p. 91). Both women relate local legends about Natan; that he was born with foresight, as was his mother, and also his love of money. Dagga claims Agnes only ever cared about herself: 'She was always fixed on bettering herself. Wanted to get on above her station' (p. 92). She also labels

Agnes ‘a bastard pauper with a conniving spirit like you’d never see in a proper maid’ and different from other people. **The reader notes Dagga’s admission that she has never met Agnes.** Her views have been shaped by rumour and an old poem, ‘Búrfell-Agnes’, recited in the valley when Agnes was younger and more popular. Rumour has it Agnes bittered as she grew older and couldn’t keep a man, developing a reputation for her ‘sharp tongue’ and ‘loose skirts’. The Reverend Pétur Bjarnason asks how the Kornsó family are coping with the ‘murderess’ and tells Tóti that Lauga, the younger daughter, is a smart beauty who ‘runs circles around her sister’ (p. 93). The Reverend is sceptical about young Tóti and his quest to find out more about Agnes’s past life. **He provides the same details to Tóti already given to the reader at the start of Chapter Two. The author depicts Reverend Bjarnason as showing no compassion whatsoever towards Agnes, acting condescendingly towards his young visitor, and in commenting on his friend’s ‘pretty little wife’, seeming to us to be inappropriate as a reverend.**

Upon arrival at Kornsó, Tóti is greeted by Margrét and surprisingly is offered coffee, a luxury bought in exchange for woollen stuffs and cured meat. The Kornsó servants have arrived back from Reykjavík with new supplies for the household. Margrét is miffed when Tóti invites Agnes into the curtained-off parlour: ‘Do as you like with her, Reverend Tóti. Take her off my hands’ (p. 97). He offers Agnes coffee and bread, noticing her bruise has almost faded and her face is slightly more filled out from the better food she now receives. He also observes the ‘greasy pink of her lips’ (p. 98). Agnes says she is just tolerated by the family although Jón refuses to speak to her. Tóti lies to Agnes that he wasn’t offended by her calling him ‘a child’. He reveals he spent three years at school in the south, learning to speak Latin, Greek and Danish and that God has chosen him to shepherd Agnes to her ‘redemption’. She reminds him: ‘No / chose you, Reverend’ (p. 98). He wants to help her but needs to know how. Agnes simply wants to be talked to in ‘a common way’, not have her words changed or rejected as happened when she saw the Reverend at Stóra-Borg. ‘He wouldn’t listen’ (p. 98). Tóti notices the curious colour of Agnes’s eyes. **Tóti’s physical observations of Agnes become information that shapes the reader’s final interpretation of Tóti’s relationship with Agnes.**

Agnes asks the Reverend what he wants to hear but when Tóti wants to hear more of her history, revealing his reading of the Undirfell records, Agnes tells him: ‘I have no family... You might have seen their names in that book of yours, Reverend, but I may as well have been listed as an orphan’ (p. 99). Her bitter reflection is interrupted by Steina’s summons to haymaking. Tóti complains he’s ridden a long way to talk but Agnes knows she’s expected to work; she suggests he return the next day and they can talk ‘as the dew dries from the hay’ (p. 100). **Tóti has made a breakthrough, with Agnes now willing to speak to him.**

We shift back to Agnes’s perspective as she reflects on the trial and how she wasn’t allowed by the men in charge to say what happened in her own way. ‘Perhaps it is a shame that I have vowed to keep my past locked up within me. At Hvammur, during the trial, they plucked at my words like birds’ (p. 100). The metaphor is continued as Agnes compares the men to ‘dreadful birds’ who were ‘looking for guilt like berries on a bush’. Her memories were turned into something sinister: ‘Everything I said was taken from me and altered until the story wasn’t my own’ (p. 100). Her hopes of being believed are dissolved by the guilty verdict. Agnes’s life has unravelled: ‘But any woman knows that a thread, once woven, is fixed in place; the only way to

smooth a mistake is to let it all unravel' (p. 100). She remembers how Natan didn't believe in sin; he felt flaws of character made a person. Agnes recalls a curious Natan taking the body of a two-headed lamb, killed by a farmer as a cursed creature, for dissection. Agnes wonders if men see her like this lamb; a curiosity that is cursed. Her mind returns to Tóti who she thinks of as 'hardly like a man at all. He is as fragile as a child without bluster and idiocy of youth' (p. 101). She is uncertain of trusting Tóti and will have to think upon what to say to him.

Jón says a prayer before the cutting of the hay commences. Two of the servants, Gudmundur and Bjarni are nervous seeing Agnes with a scythe. Gudmundur deliberately causes Agnes to stumble and graze her ankle. Lauga laughs with the servants, but Steina asks Agnes if she is hurt.

Agnes lets her body fall into the rhythm of the harvest. The feeling of swinging back and forth relaxes her and she remembers her physical reactions when with Natan: '...when my heartbeat shuddered through me and I could have died. I was so happy to be desired' (p. 103). Agnes recalls the intense pleasure and possibilities of life, but is brought out of her reverie when she realises Gudmundur is leering at her. She recalls how men started looking at her in that way when, as a fourteen-year-old, she worked at Gudrúnarstadir. The servant girls avoided one of the men they used to hear touching himself at night. The imagery of the scythe is emphasised as Agnes works: 'I watch you, the scythe says' (p. 104).

Tóti's body is aching from his own harvesting at Breidabolstadir as he rides to Kornsó the next day. He sees Blöndal's house with its glass windows across the river remembering he'd heard much of the Illugastadir trial held in Blöndal's guest room. Tóti wonders what went through Agnes's mind during the trial, particularly when they told her she had to die. On arrival at Kornsó, he speaks with Jón who, although saying Agnes is a good worker, is clearly unhappy about her presence. Jón tells Tóti of a local man who has offered to carry out the executions for a pound of tobacco; however, one of the farmhands has heard that Blöndal wants Natan's brother, Gudmundur Ketilsson, to be the executioner. Jón appears unhappy with this news.

As Tóti and Agnes sit near the stream, he steals a glance at Agnes's pale neck, imagining it slit, Jón's earlier words about the executioner still dominate his thoughts. Agnes pulls out her knitting and addresses Tóti: 'You wanted to ask me about my family?' (p. 105). Her parents weren't married and as a child, Agnes lived at most of the farms in the valley. Her mother left her at six, this fact making the naive Tóti assume the mother had died. Agnes laughs, saying she only knows what others have told her about her mother: 'Mainly what she did, which, you'll understand, they didn't approve of' (p. 107). Agnes won't tell Tóti what she'd been told: 'To know what a person has done, and to know who a person is, are very different things' (p. 107). Tóti disagrees. He argues that actions speak louder than words. 'Actions lie' responds Agnes, arguing that some people make mistakes or didn't stand a chance from the start. She presents her case to Tóti, the rising volume of her voice indicating her feelings. '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. Not matter how much you try to live a godly life, if you make a mistake in this valley, it's never forgotten. No matter if you tried to do what was best. No matter if your innermost self whispers, "I am not as you say!"—how other people think of you determines who you are (p. 108)'.

Tóti blushes when Agnes tells him she was one of her mother's mistakes, a pregnancy visible to all. She believes her father may not be the man recorded in the Undirfell book, but a farmer at Brekkukot, Jón Bjarnason. When Tóti asks if she's ever asked Bjarnason if he is her father, she responds: 'No such thing as the truth' (p. 110). Tóti disagrees: 'There is truth in God'; Agnes finishes for him the Bible quote, adding: 'I've told the truth and you can see for yourself how it has served me' (p. 110).

We return to Agnes's introspective thoughts. She knows it is no use the Reverend looking in ministerial books to learn more of her. Documents only record what other men thought of her. Agnes imagines ravens cawing on the day of her birth, her mother knowing she would have to leave to find work elsewhere when no farmer would want a servant with a newborn. Agnes possesses only one clear memory of her mother from the day she left, even though she doesn't quite trust the memory: 'Memories shift like loose snow in a wind, or are a chorale of ghosts all talking over one another' (p. 111). She remembers her mother giving her a stone, so that she might learn to understand the birds and never be lonely, but in fact she's alone, and even with Tóti she '...may as well be talking to him with a stone in my mouth'. 'I thought he could help me as he helped me over the river. But talking to him only reminds me of how everything in my life has worked against me, and how unloved I have been' (p. 120).

CHAPTER FIVE

Poet-Rósa's poem to Agnes Magnúsdóttir, written in June 1828, opens the chapter. This poem of bitterness, grief and love is written directly to Agnes. Agnes Magnúsdóttir's poem of reply to Rósa, written in the same month, expresses her own sorrow and disbelief. The second stanza interestingly uses religious allusions: 'I seek grace from the Lord' (p. 114).

Margrét's friend, Ingibjörg Pétursdóttir, is visiting and curious to know how Margrét is coping with Agnes sleeping in the same room. 'Oh, I don't think she'd dare set a foot wrong' responds Margrét (p. 115). Ingibjörg is concerned about her friend's health, having heard Margrét's cough is bad. They are close friends, unlike their relationship with Róslín about whom they both joke. Ingibjörg is portrayed as more circumspect than Margrét, not as willing to be critical of Róslín. She has a bad feeling about Róslín's impending childbirth and when Margrét asks if she's had a dream, the reader is reminded about the superstitious lives many in the valley lead. Their conversation returns to Agnes. 'She's nothing like how I imagined a murderess' (p. 116). Margrét says she works, sleeps, eats but all in silence. 'Her lips might as well be sewn over for all she says to me' (p. 116). She has no idea what Agnes has talked about with the Reverend but is curious about Agnes's thoughts. Agnes's earlier words to Tóti about truth and rumour ring true when Ingibjörg, upon hearing the name of Agnes's mother, says 'I knew an Ingveldur once. A loose woman' (p. 116). The bird imagery of the novel continues: 'No doves come from ravens' eggs,' (p. 117). Margrét can't imagine her own daughters thinking about something as sinful and wretched as murder. She tells Ingibjörg of Steina's claims of having met Agnes before. Margrét thinks her daughter fanciful and is worried because Steina smiles at Agnes. Her fear is that Agnes might have the same effect on Steina as she had on Sigga. We learn that Lauga still hates Agnes being there, watching her like a hawk. Jon refers to his duty to Blöndal but prefers the girls not be near Agnes. The exchange between the two friends ends in a companionable silence after Ingibjörg

tells her she's lucky to have an extra pair of women's hands. **This encounter is important to the structure of the novel as it allows us to hear Margrét expressing her thoughts openly to a trusted friend.**

'I dreamt of the execution block last night. I dreamt I was alone and crawling through the snow towards the dark stump. My hands and knees were numb from the ice, but I had no choice' (p. 118). Agnes is frightened by her dream, not just the actual execution, but also the silence and stones. (She does not yet know where and when her execution will take place.) Agnes is also disturbed as she realises she's slipped in something of her old life during her month at Kornská and has 'forgotten to be angry' (p. 119). Words and phrases such as 'trembling', 'My knees are as weak as a marrow jelly' and 'My heart gibbers', emphasise Agnes's physical reaction to her dream as well her renewed realisation of what awaits her. Natan believed dreams meant something, something of a contradiction as he laughed at the word of God but trusted in dreams. Agnes thinks Natan built his own church 'from wives' tales and the secret language of the weather' (p. 119). He believed nature was watchful of people: 'She is as awake as you and I...and as secretive' (p. 119). The work at Kornská has soothed Agnes even though she isn't one of them. Only Tóti and Steina speak to her, the rest only briefly to give orders, but Agnes notes: 'Compared to Stóra-Borg this family has been kind' (p. 120). Although she's not sure what to say to the young reverend, Agnes admits talking to him has reminded her how difficult her life has been: '...how everything in my life has worked against me, and how unloved I have been' (p. 120). She hasn't yet been able to tell Tóti about her siblings Jóas and Helga. We learn Jóas turned from a 'sweet blur of a boy' into a 'dull-eyed man' while Helga is dead and buried. Agnes remembers back to her young girlhood, living with an uncle, Illuga the Black. Her mother was pregnant and Illuga suffered a 'shaking sickness' and seizures that ultimately would cause him to drown while fishing. Jóas Illugson, Agnes's half-brother was born at Brekkukot but the family who were going to foster the two children changed their minds. Her mother was forced to leave. Agnes recalls their mother's swollen eyes, sleeping against the warmth of her mother's back and waking to the caw of ravens and her belongings bundled in a sack on the floor. This was when she was left at Kornská: 'Mother whispered in my ear, pressed a stone into my mitten and left with Jóas on her back'. As Agnes screamed and tried to follow her mother, she fell: '...all I could see were two ravens, their black feathers poisonous against the snow' (p. 122). For a long time, Agnes thought the two ravens were her mother and Jóas but they never answered her questions, even when she put the stone under her tongue. She learnt years later of a half-sister, Helga and that Jóas had become a child of the parish, but by then Agnes had found herself a better family: her foster-family at Kornská, Inga and Björn.

In the morning, Steina finds Agnes outside emptying the chamber pot and asks her how she slept. Agnes is worried about Steina being seen by her parents but Steina wants to keep her company, claiming she's happier outside in the rain than being blamed by her sister indoors. She claims not to be worried by her parents' reactions and wants to know what Agnes has talked about with the Reverend. Steina reveals her father wants Agnes left to her chores and not spoken to by his daughters. 'He's right', Agnes tells her. Steina says she doesn't believe Agnes killed the men and suggests a petition or appeal: 'You know, like the one they've got up for Sigga' (p. 125). Agnes reels with shock at this news: 'Blöndal has made an appeal for Sigrídur Gudmundsdóttir?' (p. 125). **Kent uses words such as 'swayed on her feet', 'staggered backwards' and 'walking unsteadily' to convey her reaction.** Agnes

drops to the ground by the riverbank, shivering. As the rain pours down, Steina cries out: 'I'm sorry! I thought you knew!' (p. 126). She rushes to the croft seeking assistance. Margrét's first reaction is that Agnes has hurt her daughter but Steina yells that it is Agnes who needs help. Jón is angry that his instructions to stay away from Agnes haven't been obeyed but calls for Gudmundur to come with him to fetch Agnes. Steina and Lauga fight bitterly. When Lauga suggests that Steina was making friends with Agnes, her sister tells her: 'Go to hell, Lauga!' (p. 127). This language prompts Lauga to say: 'If you continue this way you'll be as wicked as her...I'll pray for you' (p. 127).

Agnes hears the family talking about her behind the curtain, after Jón and Gudmundur carried her in. The news of Sigga's appeal has shattered her: 'I could have been a pauper; I could have been their servant, until those words! Sigga! Illugastadir! They anchor me to a memory that snatches the breath out of me' (p. 128). Her name is forever linked to the murders. She will be 'Agnes of Illugastadir', 'Agnes of the fire', 'Agnes of the dead bodies with the blood...', '...I am Agnes—bloody knowing Agnes'. **Her despair and feelings of complete disempowerment are overwhelming at this point in the novel: 'I will never, I cannot escape this, I cannot escape' (p. 128). Any hope has now gone.**

Tóti receives a letter from Kornsa: '*Come quickly, it is Agnes Magnúsdóttir. I do not like to tell Blöndal. Your brother in Christ, Jón Jónsson*' (p. 128). Tóti's father isn't pleased to see him rush off to Kornsa again, complaining that his son is a slave to Blöndal's will. 'The Lord's will,' replies Tóti (p. 129). He rides to Kornsa with Gudmundur, the servant messenger, who tells Tóti that Agnes is wild. He describes Agnes's 'fit'; the scratching, screaming, clawing and howling about Blöndal, adding that she's 'not bad looking' with a glint in his eye. Tóti is shocked to see Agnes handcuffed and still, her lip split and bloody. Agnes tells him of Sigga's appeal but Tóti, confessing he already knew, desperately tries to console her. Agnes rejects his claim that she is pitied too. 'They don't *pity* me; they hate me. All of them. Blöndal especially' (p. 131). **This exchange raises questions for the reader: What exactly has happened between Sigga and Blöndal? Why is Blöndal so determined to execute Agnes? Why are the two women judged so differently?**

Agnes realises she is seen as too clever: 'Too clever by half, they'd say. And you know what, Reverend? That's *exactly* why they don't pity me. Because they think I'm too smart, too knowing to get caught up in this by accident. But Sigga is dumb and pretty and young...' (p. 131). Agnes is indeed clever enough to understand that the Bible says "Thou shalt not kill". She says of Blöndal and the rest: 'They're hypocrites. They say they're carrying out God's law, but they're only doing the will of men!' (p. 132). She tells Tóti she tries to love God but can't love the men who have tried and convicted her: 'I...I hate them' (p. 132). As Agnes calms down, Tóti asks for the irons to be removed. She is glad Tóti has come; she tells him of her dream of dying. They pray together. 'Do you think it's my *fate* to be here?', Agnes asks Tóti. He believes 'We author our own fates' (p. 134). Tóti has been holding Agnes's hand, the feel of her cold skin unsettling him. When Agnes claims she is quite alone, his suggestion that he and God are with her, and that her parents are alive, brings no joy to Agnes: 'They may as well be dead' (p. 134). She has no friends, telling Tóti for the first time about her half-brother and half-sister. We learn her only visitor at Stóra-Borg was Poet-Rósa, who brought her a poem as an accusation. Rósa, who loved Natan, blamed Agnes for his death. 'She was a married woman...He wasn't hers to love!'

exclaims Agnes, a tremor of anger in her voice (p. 135). Margrét and her daughters, who have been knitting in the background, stop to listen as they hear Agnes raise her voice. Lauga would prefer Agnes in irons but Tóti disagrees, thinking it better to change the topic so Agnes remains calm in front of the Kornsó family. She tells Tóti about Jóas and Helga and about the stone given to her by her mother. She explains to Tóti that the stone was a superstition but it's now gone, taken by Blöndal's clerks. Agnes wants to knit, and as her hands work rapidly picking up the dropped stitches of Steina's knitting, she relaxes. She talks of living in various valley farms and of being fostered to a family who lived where they now sit. Her story turns to her foster-mother, Inga, and her death when Agnes was eight. 'In here, I can turn to that day as though it were a page in a book. It's written so deeply on my mind I can almost taste the ink' (p. 138). Tóti who has been watching Agnes's hands, fighting off an 'irrational desire' to touch them, wonders if the news of the appeal has made her 'a little mad'. He is unnerved by 'the glitter in her eyes' (p. 138). 'What happened?' asks Tóti as the intrigued Kornsó family fall silent, wanting to hear Agnes's story as well. **An important theme is outlined in this chapter—even if Agnes was involved in killing Natan (and we still have some doubt about her actual involvement), nevertheless she is a human being, not a monster. As she opens up to Tóti, we see how her fractured upbringing might have made her more vulnerable to a man like Natan, a man who uses women carelessly, who toys with people for his own amusement. Tóti seems to be the only person who treats Agnes as a human person rather than a 'murderess'.... Does Margrét?**

CHAPTER SIX

The historical document opening this chapter is the inventory of the possessions of Agnes Magnúsdóttir and Sigrídur Gudmundsdóttir, both work-maids at Illugastadir. The list also includes the value of each item. **Note item 15 for Agnes: A white sack with useless odds and ends in it.**

'This is what I tell the Reverend' (p. 142). Agnes's story of her first residency at Kornsó, the reader already knowing her foster-mother will die, is a story of death: 'Death happened, and in the usual way that it happens, and yet, not like anything else at all' (p. 142). It is a cold winter and the time of the northern lights. Agnes is eight and her foster-brother, Kjartan, is three. She calls Inga 'Mamma' but Björn doesn't like Agnes's attempts to call him 'Pabbi'. Björn is a conservative man who doesn't like Agnes's aptitude for learning. He thinks it vulgar for a girl and whips Agnes if he catches her reading or writing. His wife Inga, however, takes a different stance. She teaches Agnes the sagas and reads her psalms when Björn is asleep. Agnes implies that the sagas were Inga's escape from her harsh daily life into the imaginative realm. Inga is clearly a good woman, caring for Agnes and even making a coverlet for her bed, sadly never to be finished. Agnes recounts how the day after the dazzling northern lights, a storm started. The pregnant Inga is very unwell and as her condition worsens, so does the storm. Agnes describes how she tried to open the door out of curiosity to peek out at the weather: 'It was an evil sight...It was as though the wind was some form of ghoulish demanding to enter' (p. 144). Inga's baby is arriving prematurely but there is no way of getting help from relatives, as the storm is too great. Björn carries Inga to the loft, ignoring Agnes who begs him not to shift her. Agnes, left to comfort Kjartan, is given the tiny baby girl to hold. She instinctively tries to keep the baby warm while hearing Inga's moans. Björn offers no comfort when he tells Agnes that his wife and the baby are dead. Agnes wants to die too. 'Maybe you

will die', Björn tells her. 'I howled like the blizzard outside...' (p. 148), recalls Agnes, continuing to describe how she ran upstairs to the sight and smell of blood everywhere and Inga's cold, stiff body. Agnes lies besides Inga's body until Jón, the workman, carries her downstairs to bed.

Agnes has tried to tell the Reverend the story in the best way she knows. 'I let the words come as I knit, and I snatch little looks at the Reverend's face, to see if he is moved' (p. 149). She senses the rest of the household listening intently which stops her from asking the Reverend an important question: 'I can't say, Reverend, do you think that I'm here because when I was a child I said I wanted to die? Because when I said it, I meant it. I pronounced it like a prayer. *I hope I die*. Did I author my own fate, then?' (p. 150). Agnes still feels guilt about the death of the baby and great pain at losing Inga whom she loved very much. She thinks to herself: 'It seems everyone I love is taken from me and buried in the ground, while I remain alone. Good thing, then, that there is no one left to love. No one left to bury' (p. 150). **Agnes is wrestling with the question of whether we author our own fate.**

'What happened then?' asks Tóti who has hardly breathed during Agnes's story. Agnes says she finds it strange she remembers Inga's death with such clarity, almost as if it had happened yesterday. The dead baby is put in the storeroom while an aunt, who won't let Agnes watch, washes Inga's body. A servant, Gudbjörg, now dead, consoles her but no sympathy is shown to her and Kjartan by Björn or Uncle Ragnar who seems to have taken over the organisation of the shocked household. The priest tells them there's no chance of burial until the spring as the churchyard is frozen, so Inga's body is kept in the storehouse. Young Agnes tries to dig a grave in the snow herself, telling Uncle Ragnar: 'The storeroom is as cold as a witch's tit' (p. 155). She is reprimanded for using ugly words and soon after is thrown on the mercy of the parish as Björn can't afford to keep her. 'That is how I came to be a pauper. Left to the mercy of others, whether they had any or no' (p. 155).

Agnes awakes early and suddenly, thinking someone has been whispering her name. It felt as if the whispering in her ear was like that from a lover. She sees dreadful images of a burning, bloody Natan, smells of whale fat and sees Fridrik's knife deep in Natan's belly. **Agnes's dream brings the reader, still trying to piece together exactly what happened, closer to the events of the fateful night of the murders.** She wakes Tóti to ask if she can light a lamp but all he can do in his state of half-sleep is mutter words about the light of Jesus. Agnes smells smoke as her mind returns to her devastated state after Inga's death. The body kept in the storehouse terrifies Agnes as she imagines Inga calling her by name to come and let her out. The young Agnes enters the storehouse, seeing the lump of Inga's body on the floor, weeping as the reality of her loss sinks in: 'And I sit on the floor, my legs buckled with the pure, ripe grief of an orphan, and the wind cries for me because my tongue cannot. It screams and screams ...' (p. 157).

CHAPTER SEVEN

The chapter opens with Reverend Jóhann Tómasson's testimony to the court about Fridrik Sigurdsson, who possesses 'a good intellect' but whose bad behaviour and disobedience is highlighted. The Reverend blames this on his parents: 'However, such is my opinion that he has been raised with too much freedom' (p. 159).

The second historical document is a letter to the Assistant Reverend Thorvardur Jónsson, written by Blöndal in September 1829, enquiring about his progress with

the spiritual advancement of Agnes Magnúsdóttir. Blöndal summons the Reverend to Hvammur to present an account of his ‘transactions’.

Tóti is overawed upon his arrival at Hvammur. Blöndal is dressed in official regalia and his residence is impressive. There are many servants, glass windows and fine etchings. Blöndal is pleased to enjoy luxuries usually only available on the mainland and tells Tóti he hopes more Icelanders will benefit from glass windows, wooden panelling and iron stoves before the end of the century: ‘I am of the opinion that a drier home allows better circulation of air, and is therefore better for the health’ (p. 162). **The reader remembers Blöndal’s discomfort in the ill-built croft at Kornsó, as well as Margrét’s frequently mentioned hacking cough.** Tóti’s innocence and ignorance is highlighted as he gasps at the beauty of Blöndal’s study. He hadn’t known there were people in the north who lived like this. Tóti’s use of Agnes’s Christian name and the fact she isn’t kept in irons draws Blöndal’s disapproval but Tóti perseveres, explaining that Agnes has helped with the haymaking, contributed to domestic duties and also knits. Her access to tools concerns Blöndal who is selecting a swan feather quill as Tóti talks. He gives one to Tóti asking him to write a summation of his religious administrations to the criminal. Blöndal is displeased when he hears of Tóti’s unorthodox approach to Agnes’s instruction and particularly taken aback to hear that Tóti thinks it will be ‘the gentle and enquiring tones of a friend that will best draw the curtain to her soul’ (p. 166). Blöndal’s response is terse: ‘The gentle tones of a *friend*. I hope I am not mistaken in thinking you are serious’ (p. 166). ‘I provide her with a final audience to her life’s lonely narrative’ (p. 166). He prays for Agnes rather than with her, telling Blöndal he thinks she prays in private. **It becomes clear that Blöndal has no compassion for Agnes whatsoever.** To him, she is a criminal who is to die for good reason. A plate of good food is brought in but Tóti is reluctant to eat, feeling highly discomforted by Blöndal’s formal, patronising language and tone. As Blöndal enjoys his meal, he expresses concern about Tóti’s youth and inexperience then starts recounting the detailed story of the murders to Tóti; that is, Blöndal’s version of the story.

We have already learnt through Agnes how words and stories can be altered so, as readers, we have been positioned to be sceptical about the account Blöndal now delivers to Tóti, especially about the way he constructs Agnes as a murderer, without proper evidence.

Fridrik confessed to killing both men, therefore, observes Tóti, Agnes wasn’t a murderer. But Blöndal is of the opinion that Agnes killed Natan and Fridrik killed Pétur. Blöndal believes Sigga was too young and simple-minded to know how to murder, telling Tóti that Sigga burst into tears, and told him everything that happened: ‘How Agnes hated Natan, how Agnes was jealous of his attentions to her’ (p. 169). Blöndal is convinced Agnes travelled to Illugastadir with the intention of marrying Natan to further herself, even though Natan was known for his indiscretions and his ‘bastards’ littered the valley. Agnes is described by Blöndal as a ‘...spinster woman whose unrequited affections erupted into bitter hatred’, warning Tóti he won’t find proof of Agnes’s innocence in stories of her life (p. 170). ‘She is a woman loose with her emotions and looser with her morals’ (p. 170) continues Blöndal as he warns Tóti to beware older women practised in deception. Tóti thinks back to Kornsó and the thin, pale Agnes describing the death of her foster-mother. The only solution, according to Blöndal, is to ‘apply the Lord’s word to her as a whip to a hard-mouthed horse. You will not get anywhere otherwise’ (p. 170). Blöndal redirects Tóti by telling him of the other reverend’s excellent work with Fridrik who has come to repent of his

crime and see the error of his ways. The only explanation he can see for Agnes's failure to repent is that she is reticent, secretive and guilty. Tóti, suppressing his desire to flee from the room, realises Blöndal wants to make an example of Agnes. Blöndal instructs Tóti that he must return to God's word: 'Forget Agnes's. She has nothing that you need to hear, unless it is a confession' (p. 173).

Tóti leaves the study thinking of Agnes's pale face, her voice, and an image of red-headed Fridrik raising a hammer above a sleeping man. 'Had she been lying to him?' (p. 173). He is stopped by Karitas, the servant, who urgently wants to speak with him. Karitas worked at Illugastadir, leaving in 1827, just before Agnes arrived. Natan had told her Agnes would be housekeeper but he broke his word and gave the position to Sigga instead. Karitas quotes from Gisli Sursson's Saga: 'The treachery of a friend is worse than that of a foe'. 'Natan knew it would embarrass Agnes to be under her authority' (p. 175). Karitas tells Tóti of her concern Agnes's name has been blackened. She left Illugastadir herself as she couldn't stand Natan and the way he 'toyed' with people to amuse himself. She expresses shock that Agnes has said nothing of Natan, also revealing that Blöndal paid Natan plenty to heal his wife. **We can guess why this news angers Tóti.** Karitas isn't prepared to visit Agnes in person as Blöndal wouldn't allow it, but she leaves Tóti with some advice: 'Reverend, you must ask Agnes about Natan. I think they knew each other better than they knew themselves' (p. 176).

Karitas is the first person who presents Agnes in a different light. The reader by now can infer the author's 'more ambiguous portrayal' of this story. Agnes, despite the handicaps of her dislocated early life, has become a steady, hard-working, self-educated woman—but she is misunderstood and persecuted by everyone except Tóti.

Her judge and executioner (Blöndal) was friendly with the deceased (Natan), so his persecution of Agnes is utterly compromised, and being wealthy, he does not understand the humanity of the working poor. Blöndal is too easily swayed by protestations of a pretty young girl (Sigga), and too readily embraces 'confessions' made only out of self-interest (Fridrik). The deceased (Natan) was a person who toyed with people for his own amusement, so the court should have more carefully tested the relationships of the women around him.

We return to Agnes at Kornsó where the harvest is finished and all are ready to relax with food, drink and talk after weeks of hard work. Margrét keeps Agnes busy in the kitchen and there is little time for private thoughts. The daughters are away collecting berries and moss in the hills, Agnes almost missing Lauga's eye-rolling and Steina's shadowing of her. Steina, before she left, told Agnes: 'I know you... We are alike' (p. 177). Agnes knows this isn't right as they have led completely different lives but recognises Steina is sad. Steina hasn't had to live with her wits about her in the same way as Agnes: 'Has Steina ever had to decide whether to let a farmer under her skirts... or to deny him and find herself homeless in the snow and fog...' (p. 178). **The reader can link this quote to remarks about Agnes being 'a loose woman'. We are shown the difficult moral decisions she, and other work-maids of the time, needed to make.** Steina hasn't delivered babies who will die. 'She is not like me. She knows only the tree of life. She has not seen its twisted roots pawing stones and coffins' (p. 178). Agnes tells how she left Guðrúnarstadir after Indridi died. The family are 'splintered by starvation' but they give Agnes kisses, a letter of recommendation and two eggs for her journey to Gilsstadir. 'I gave the eggs to a pair

of fair-headed girls I met on my way.’ The irony that those girls are now her custodians almost makes Agnes laugh. She overheard Jón the previous night talking to the girls about her: ‘She must meet her God, and in an ugly way... Our family way of life must continue. We keep you safe from her’. He doesn’t want the girls to pity Agnes so he has sent them away for a while from her presence. It is now September and Margrét wants the guests to eat outside enjoying the last of the sunshine before the onset of winter. Róslín is mortified on arrival to see Agnes: ‘You invite us all with her here!’ (p. 179). She thinks Agnes should be locked in the storeroom but Margrét formally introduces Agnes ignoring Róslín who seems to be enjoying her tantrum. Agnes without thinking tells Róslín her baby will be a girl because of the way her belly protrudes. Róslín labels Agnes ‘a witch’ and storms out. Ingibjörg is fascinated, particularly when she learns that Agnes learnt from Poet-Rósa. She kindly tells Agnes she should be outside to feel the sun on her face. ‘Before you die’, adds Agnes after Margrét and Ingibjörg leave the room (p. 180). She dreads being outside where there will be people she knows from around the valley, but experiences a sudden urge to free her hair from its tight plaits and lie on her back in the sun.

Tóti finds Agnes churning butter in the dairy, the closeness of her fast and hard breath making him blush. Blöndal’s words, ‘*Someone plunged the knife into Natan Ketilsson’s belly*’ resonate in his mind (p. 181). She gets her knitting and they sit outside, away from the party. Tóti is truthful about his visit to Blöndal, telling Agnes that Blöndal wants her engaged in prayer and speaking less. Upon hearing of Fridrik’s so-called ‘spiritual progress’, Agnes wonders if they’ll get up an appeal for him as well. She says nothing when Tóti tells her of Karitas’s view that Natan toyed with people. However, Agnes does reveal that Natan believed in dreams, his mother possessing ‘foresight’ and having dreams that often came true. He made Agnes tell of her dreams, placing great weight on them. Agnes tells Tóti, after insisting he believe her, of a dream in which she met him. She is walking on a lava field, full of cracks and chasms, dying of fear when a young man in a priest’s collar appears and takes her hand: ‘...I had his hand in mine, and it was a comfort’ (p. 184). Suddenly, the ground opens up, her hand is wrenched from the young man and she falls into a chasm. Tóti asks: ‘Was I that man?’ (p. 184). Agnes confirms that he was, and reveals that when she recognised him during their encounter on the road at Gonguskord, she ‘knew then that you were bound to my life in some way, and it worried me’ (p. 184). Agnes found out Tóti’s name, knowing they would meet for a third time. ‘Even Natan believed that everything comes in threes’ (p. 184). Tóti tries to appease her fear by reminding her of God’s love. He takes her hand: ‘Trust me, Agnes. I’m here, as I was in your dream. You can feel my hand in yours’ (p. 185). Tóti is very aware of Agnes’s physicality at this point; her smell, the touch of her skin evokes a sudden urge to put her fingers in his mouth. ‘I am sure that you will make a fine priest after all’, Agnes tells him, unaware of how Tóti is feeling. He reveals he was worried Blöndal would forbid him from seeing her again, adding that he has been instructed to preach to Agnes. Agnes removes her hand from his and resumes knitting. ‘Why don’t you tell me about Natan?’ (p. 185).

Agnes tells Tóti the first part of her story, describing how she met Natan at Geitaskard when she was working as a maid for Worm Beck. She had also met the man she believed to be her true father but, not wanting anything to do with her, he gave her the first money she’d ever held in her life and sent her on her way. Agnes also meets up with her brother, Jóas, on the way to Worm’s farm, noticing his slovenly dress and smell of liquor. Whereas Agnes has been educated, Jóas is

unable to read or write, rejecting his sister's offers to teach him as showing off. Worm Beck agrees to take on Jóas at Geitaskard and Agnes finds conditions there much better than her previous workplaces. There's plenty of food and they are treated well. She and Jóas argue about their mother one night, Agnes waking to discover her brother has left—and taken her money with him.

Agnes is friendly with a servant named Daniel Gudmundsson who is keen to marry her, but she doesn't reciprocate his affection. Agnes tells Tóti, 'I let him think what he fancied, so long as it meant that he was kind to me' (p. 188). Daniel later worked at Illugastadir as well as being a witness at the murder trials where he was jailed by Blöndal who believed Daniel must have known what was going to happen. Tóti asks whether Daniel did know. Agnes replies: 'If anyone knew what was going to happen do you think I'd be sitting here, talking to you?' (p. 189). She reveals that Daniel and Fridrik's family were whipped due to Blöndal's suspicion that they knew more. Agnes befriends a fellow work-maid, Maria, her first real friend. At previous farms she'd mainly kept to herself, preferring to read rather than talk. Agnes smiles when she hears that Tóti enjoys reading too. Her smile makes Tóti think how beautiful she is, this emotional response suddenly triggering his memory of the servant girl he helped across the river.

Agnes reminisces about her love of the sagas and the punishments meted out when her employers found her reading rather than completing chores. We learn that she wrote poetry but not like Rósa, whose poems were known by all. Agnes reveals that Natan loved the way Rósa could build things with words: 'She invented her own language to what everyone else could only feel' (p. 190). Rósa and Natan spoke to each other in poetry, although Agnes feels she and Natan also communicated in a kind of poetry. She elaborates on the story of meeting Natan, already knowing of him and his affair and subsequent children with Rósa. Natan had become friends with Blöndal in Copenhagen. Everyone thought Natan was a sorcerer and a thief—he had been whipped for thievery when younger—and that it was because of his friendship with Blöndal that he never got caught for what he did. Agnes's friend, Maria, told her of Natan leaving Rósa, Worm's assisting him by buying the Illugastadir farm, and Natan reshaping his identity by calling himself 'Lyngdal, not Ketilsson'. Maria tells Agnes: '...that men might do as they please, and that they are all Adams, naming everything under the sun' (p. 191). Agnes recalls her first meeting with Natan, noticing he wasn't handsome: 'I thought he looked like a fox with his chestnut hair and beady little eyes...' (p. 192). When Natan wants to know the work-maids' names, Agnes notices his hands: '...like a woman's hands...' and is reminded of his nick-name, 'long-fingers' (p. 192). Natan tells them he has many names, Agnes recalling for Tóti, Natan's 'easy' way of speaking: 'He always knew what to say to people; what would make them feel good. And what would cut the deepest'. Tóti feels a little envious as Agnes speaks, aware of his own small, unremarkable hands. That first evening, Natan singles out Agnes and sits next to her as the servants share stories. She has heard the jokes about Natan's reputation with the women, observing some of the work-maids looking away from him. Tóti is curious about why Natan chooses Agnes, a work-maid who isn't particularly popular with other servants 'on account of my having a certain way of talking to people...' (p. 193). Perhaps he was curious, and interested in her, as he 'could not read' her as he claimed to read most people. 'Make what you will of that, Reverend. But that is what he said' (p. 194).

The author returns us to Agnes's first person perspective as she wonders if the Reverend is wondering what she and Natan were to each other. 'He might as well be sucking a stone' (p. 194). She recalls the immense emotional response she experiences with Natan, describing a 'hunger so deep, so capable of driving me into the night, that it terrifies me' (p. 194). Agnes assures the reader she hasn't lied to Tóti; she just hasn't told him the full story of what happened that first night after the other servants had gone to bed. Natan takes Agnes's hand, perusing it closely to learn a little of her. The callouses tell him she's a hard worker but her 'hollow palm', according to Natan, means '...there is something secretive about us' (p. 195). He also draws on superstition, warning Agnes: 'This empty space can be filled with bad luck if we're not careful. If we expose the hollow to the world and all its darkness, all its misfortune' (p. 195). 'The weight of his fingers on mine, like a bird landing on a branch. It was the drop of the match. I did not see that we were surrounded by tinder until I felt it burst into flames' (p. 195).

The imagery of the final sentences of this chapter needs careful reading. The reader can see that the young Agnes had been so hungry for love that she failed to assess Natan's character accurately; he was a man who 'toyed' with women. Perhaps he mesmerised her or perhaps it was just that he paid her the sort of loving attention that she had not previously experienced.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Poet-Rósa's poem to Natan Ketilsson (c 1827) opens the chapter, written first in Icelandic, then translated into English. She refers to Agnes: '*Oh, how this rose of Kidjaskard/Has gone and poisoned you!*' (p. 197).

The author once again personifies the season: 'Autumn fell upon the valley like a gasp' (p. 198). It is October and Margrét's lungs are 'mossy with mucus' (p. 198). **The reader will have noted how Margrét's illness has become part of the story;** now we return to seeing events through her narrative perspective. Unable to trust her lungs for the long walk, she has sent her daughters berry picking. Margrét has found the 'round-up' disquieting and the sky grey and foreboding: '...and she had known something would happen. It was the way the clouds had crouched too close to the ground' (p. 199). She and Agnes ironically find comfort talking together about death, listing those they have known to die on the mountains.

Ingibjörg announcing the onset of Róslín's labour interrupts them. Róslín is horrified to see Agnes, screaming when she lays hands on her belly; however, Agnes recognises that the baby is in breech position. Margrét recalls how Agnes never took her hands off the woman, stroking and soothing Róslín and making a wild angelica tea, which Róslín at first refuses to drink. In the moment the baby is born, Agnes and Margrét share a moment: 'A shared look with Agnes. A quick, taut smile' (p. 200). Agnes refuses to deliver or touch the baby, leaving that to Ingibjörg. Margrét observes Agnes's concern that if she cradled the child it may not live. After Steina and Lauga return, the story is retold, Margrét wondering how, even for an hour, Agnes had seemed part of the family. The next day she converses with Agnes about dyes, just like mistress and servant, triggering complaints from Lauga. Her mother dismisses the possibility of Lauga being jealous: 'Why on earth would Lauga be envious of a woman who would be dead before the weather turned again? Yet, there was an intensity to her revulsion fired by something more than resentment' (p. 201). Margrét feels Agnes has unified the family, making her feel closer to her daughters

and husband but worries about how used to Agnes's presence she is becoming. Another pair of hands has been useful in lessening Margrét's workload, easing her back pain and cough. 'She avoided thinking about what would happen when the day of execution was announced' (p. 202).

The reader is returned to Agnes's voice. It is slaughter time on the farm causing her to wonder if she has been factored into the number of mouths to feed in the months ahead. Agnes has the impulsive thought of offering herself up to Jón and his knife: 'Why not kill me here, now, on an unremarkable day? It is the waiting that cripples' (p. 203). She is waiting in the killing pen just like the sheep. Agnes observes the slaughtering process closely, noting how Gudmundur is nimble with the knife, unlike Bjarni. She knows how to skin sheep but wryly thinks of the reaction if she requested a knife. Later during the sausage-making, a memory is triggered of Natan nicking the gall bladder of a sheep, spilling its bile. Agnes immerses herself in the work, feeling a 'swell of happiness' when Margrét agrees to her suggestion to add some lichen: 'This is my life as it used to be: up to my elbows in the guts of things, working towards a kind of survival. The girls chatter and laugh as they stuff the bags with the bloody mix. I can forget who I am' (p. 204). When Agnes serves Jón his meal, he looks her in the eyes for the first time: ' "Thank you, Agnes," he says quietly. It is because of Róslín's baby—I am sure of it. He sees me differently now' (p. 205). Agnes finds herself frequently thinking of Natan and Illugastadir as she works, remembering her enjoyment of putting provisions aside for the winter as Natan read to her from the sagas. However, her mood changes when the smell of a singed sheep head triggers memories of the burning badstofa in Illugastadir. Key information is revealed to the reader: 'The whale fat smeared on the wood and the beds... Burning hair' (p. 206). Desperate not to let the family see how upset she is, Agnes runs outside for fresh air. Instead of telling Agnes off, Margrét sits beside Agnes until the snow falls. ' "Come Agnes. You'll catch your death." Looking down, I see that Margrét has extended her hand. I take it, and the feel of her skin is like paper. We go inside' (p. 207).

This section alerts the reader to the fact that Agnes is to be slaughtered like an animal, even though she is a hard-working and skilled human being.

The story shifts to the perspective of Lauga and Steina, allowing the author to reveal their reactions to Agnes. Whereas Steina compliments the speed of Agnes's work, Lauga says she's probably poisoned the whole barrel. Steina wonders what gave Agnes 'the funny turn' adding: 'For all she says, I think Mamma holds a fondness for her now' (p. 208). This observation provokes Lauga to claim: 'Am I the only person who sees her for who she is?' (p. 208). The girls react differently to Agnes's confinement in their house. Lauga worries about how everyone in the valley gives them strange looks. She thinks the family is 'marked' now and their prospects gone: 'We'll never be married' (p. 209). Lauga's angry remark—'I can't wait till she's gone'—and her accusations that the Reverend is 'gadding' about with Agnes 'like some besotted boy', that Agnes 'witched' Róslín's baby from her as well as her anger at her father's recent turnaround, shocks her sister. Lauga accuses Steina of wanting Agnes to like her: 'You treat her like a sister more than you do me' (p. 210). Steina attempts to defend her sympathy for Agnes—'And I can't stop thinking that she wasn't always like this. She was our age once...'—but she is shut down by Lauga who believes that Agnes's presence has damaged the family's reputation.

Tóti wants to ride to see Agnes but it is snowing. He is drawn towards her, even his father observing how much time his son is spending at Kornsó, although mistakenly thinking the attraction may be the daughters. Tóti feels he has now made a connection with Agnes: ‘He felt that some invisible membrane between Agnes and him had been broken. She has begun, finally, to speak of Natan...’ (p. 210). He now recalls his first meeting with Agnes by the river, her white sack and the warmth of her body against his chest as they forded the river at Gönguskörd. ‘The thought of it ran through him like a fever’ (p. 211). Agnes talks to Tóti about Natan and even though he suspects the family are listening, ‘It was as though she could not stop talking, even if she wanted to’ (p. 212). She tells of meeting Natan for the first time as he stopped at Worm’s farm on his way back from treating Blöndal’s wife. Natan wants more servants as his housekeeper, Karitas, is leaving on Flitting Day and the work-
maid is ‘soft in the head’. The reader learns it is also the day Natan first meets Sheepkiller-Pétur or Pétur Jónsson who will later be killed with him. It is suggested that Pétur possesses foresight too, Agnes recalling Pétur recounting a dream he’d had about the sheep he’d killed. Lauga breaks into the conversation to say Róslín had told her about Natan’s dreams. She wants to tell of them but her father insists the Reverend speak to Agnes without her interference. This triggers an angry reaction from Lauga: ‘My interference!...How about *her* interference! She’s in *our* home! Always breathing over my shoulder in the kitchen! Speaking lies in our badstofa!’ (p. 214). Margrét tries to ease the tension but Agnes wants to know Róslín’s account of Natan’s dreams. Lauga tells of Natan dreaming of an evil spirit stabbing him in the belly. He sees a corpse in an open grave and upon questioning a man, is told the body is his own. Agnes says Natan’s version as told to her was that he saw his soul standing at the other end of the grave and that his body sang a psalm from Bishop Stein to his soul. The family are all entranced by the conversation now and Jón refuses Agnes’s request to move closer to the light. **(Note how Margrét defers in decision making to her husband.)** Agnes continues to tell of Pétur and the warnings given to her by Maria about Natan. Jón, at this point, wants his daughters to go to bed but Tóti stands up to him, insisting Agnes tell him whatever she finds in her heart, despite the family’s close proximity.

Agnes wants the job as housekeeper at Illugastadir: ‘I wanted Karitas’s position more than anything. I didn’t do myself any dishonour’ (p. 217). She claims Maria was jealous and all the girls knew Natan was an unmarried man with money. Natan also offers Agnes friendship and his visits give her an opportunity for good conversation. Maria and the other servants withdraw from her, and when Agnes is offered the job, they accuse her of bragging and ‘...thinking myself better than the pauper I really was’ (p. 216). Agnes describes her life at Geitaskard as lonely. Her brother had gone, Maria now ignored her, so there was no incentive to remain. Tóti, his throat feeling tight and painful, stays overnight at Kornsó but wonders if he had been right in letting Agnes speak.

We return to Agnes’s perspective. She feels tired after talking to the Reverend: ‘My tongue feels so tired; it slumps in my mouth like a dead bird, all damp feathers, in between the stones of my teeth’ (p. 218). Agnes wonders what the others made of her story but believes it impossible for anyone to understand what it was like to know Natan. She recalls how they would ‘place words carefully together, piling them upon one another, leaving no spaces’ (p. 218). They discuss the stars, God and philosophical questions. Natan shocks Agnes with his atheism, arguing that Man only created God out of fear of dying, therefore he can’t believe in heaven. ‘Agnes.

You pretend you don't understand me, but you do. We're the same kind' (p. 219). He continues: 'You don't belong in this valley, Agnes. You're different. You're not scared of everything'. However, Agnes now recalls how she later suffocated under the weight of his arguments and darker thoughts. These later problems are foreshadowed as they make love for the first time in the cowshed: 'I wanted to weep afterwards. It was too real. I felt too much to see it for what it was' (p. 220). Natan returns regularly during the winter, Agnes feeling for the first time in her life that someone sees her for who she is: 'For the first time in my life, someone saw me, and I loved him because he made me feel I was enough' (p. 221). She can't believe that the renowned Natan, who had been with the famous Poet-Rósa and knew Latin, had chosen her. They agree that Agnes will go and live with him. 'He would haul me out of the valley, out of the husk of my miserable, loveless life, and everything would be new. He would give me springtime. And all that while, there was Sigga' (p. 222). The chapter ends sombrely as we are reminded that Agnes's story of the past is still unfinished; Sigga must play a key role in the circumstances that have brought Agnes to await her execution at Kornsa.

CHAPTER NINE

An anonymous poem from about 1825 starts this chapter. It suggests that 'the good Búrfell-Agnes' has the blood of a poet, Magnússon, flowing in her veins. Note the use of 'good' (p. 223).

Hannah Kent returns to the third person perspective giving us an omnipresent view of the continuing conversation between Tóti and Agnes, still in the hearing of the Kornsa household as the snowy weather dictates indoor tasks. Agnes tells of her journey to Illugastadir, a place she describes as 'almost on the edge of the world' (p. 224). She departs Geitaskard during The Flitting Days at the end of May 1827, unsure of the route. Many servants are on the move in the valley but none are headed to Vatnsnes or Illugastadir, forcing Agnes to ask for directions along the way. She sees the sea for the first time and hears seabirds screaming in circles. A little boat and madly waving bedclothes in the wind are her initial sighting of the farm. 'At the time I took it as a good sign; I thought it seemed that they were waving to me in welcome' (p. 225). A young, well-dressed and pretty girl who seems no more than fifteen greets Agnes. Agnes wonders if this girl, who greets her with a welcome kiss, is the daughter of Natan. Sigga, short for Sigrídur, shows Agnes around the small badstofa. The cramped and dirty interior disappoints Agnes but she is glad to be offered coffee, an expensive luxury. Natan's absence also disappoints her. She had hoped he would be there to greet her but Sigga says he is fox hunting on the mountain. Agnes elaborates on the physical surrounds of Illugastadir for Tóti: the wild grass, pebbles, and huge tangles of seaweed, driftwood, eider ducks and seal colonies. 'On a clear day it's beautiful, and others it's as miserable as grave-digging in the rain' (p. 227). Natan's workshop, where he made his medicines, sat on a little stony skerry of land with the window positioned inland so he could see who might be travelling on the road. 'He had some enemies', Agnes tells Tóti (p. 227). Sigga tells Agnes that Natan probably keeps a lot of money in his workshop and that he provided seal leather shoes and eiderdown mattresses just like the District Commissioners. She had grown up at Stóra-Borg, was new to service and having not been a housekeeper before, is hoping Agnes will teach her. This revelation shocks Agnes: 'She *thanked* me then for coming to be *her* servant, and she took me

by the arm and said that we must get along well, for Natan was often away, and she grew lonely' (p. 228).

The author creates a brief section break at this point. We are still reading the narrative from Agnes's point of view but the authorial device of swinging Agnes's audience briefly from Tóti and the Kornsó household to the reader allows the revelation of thoughts Agnes does not want to say aloud. 'Perhaps it was that first morning at Illugastadir when I understood the nature of things. Perhaps not' (p. 228). In hindsight, Agnes is unsure whether she appreciated the nature of the relationship between herself and Natan—and now Sigga. It doesn't occur to her to ask what bed Natan had slept in after his late return.

We return to the story as told to Tóti. Later that first day, Agnes questions Natan about Sigga. He says Sigga is not his housekeeper, dismissing her as young and simple. Natan's workshop is a fascinating place. Agnes describes its contents to Tóti, so involved in her story she seems to have forgotten the family are listening as well. At this point, the Reverend Pétur Bjarnason from Undirfell arrives to enter them all in the soul register of the parish. When he comments on Tóti's task on behalf of Blöndal, Tóti hastily introduces Agnes. 'I am Agnes Jónsdóttir...And I am a prisoner' (p. 230). Her words stun the family. Margrét stands in surprise. Jón's mouth opens in horror. 'What? She isn't our...' Lauga tries to say. Tóti says 'Agnes Jónsdóttir is my spiritual charge. As I told you before'. The family are stunned but the Reverend Bjarnason says: 'Duly noted' (p. 230). **Why has Agnes named herself thus? And why does Tóti support her?** The Reverend speaks to each member of the family, including Agnes, examining their reading skills and ability to recite catechisms. He tells Tóti what he has recorded about Agnes: 'Agnes Jónsdóttir. A condemned person. *Sakapersona*. 34 years old...She reads very well...' (p. 231). He has written '*blendin*', meaning 'mixed' to describe her character based on the opinion of the District Officer and his wife. Tóti questions the Reverend as to his own opinion of Agnes: 'Very well-spoken. Educated. Surprising considering her illegitimacy. Well brought up' (p. 232). However, Jón has described Agnes's behaviour as 'unpredictable' and mentioned 'hysterics'. Tóti reminds him that Agnes is facing a death sentence. **The final image in this section, of the door slamming in Tóti's face, is a stark reminder of the end that awaits Agnes. The Reverend's conclusions also confirm Agnes's view that society judges people like her on events beyond their control. Illegitimacy is hardly Agnes's fault but she is forever defined by her birth.**

Agnes returns to her private thoughts. 'Agnes Jónsdóttir. I never thought it would be that easy to name yourself. The daughter of Jón Bjarnasson of Brekkukot, not the servant Magnús Magnússon. Let everyone know whose bastard I truly am' (p. 232). Agnes thinks of her new identity as the woman she should have been. A housekeeper with a husband and children to love and teach and tell stories—perhaps even sisters such as Lauga and Steina. 'Born into a family that would not be ripped apart by poverty' (p. 232). This could have been her life rather than foolishly loving Natan. She could even have believed in heaven and had a host of familiar faces gather around her deathbed. Agnes only recalls happiness on her first day at Illugastadir as Natan told her about his fox hunting exploits before they make love on the table in his workshop, Natan softly saying her name. She is fascinated by his books but notes uneasily that they are about disease and horror. We learn that

Natan would come to Agnes's bed after Sigga was asleep and return to his own before she awoke. But Agnes believes Sigga must have known about them.

Tóti gently puts a hand on Agnes's shoulder to signal her to continue her story of the first day at Illugastadir. The few months are relatively happy and unusually, according to Sigga, Natan has been at home more. Agnes enjoys his stories about the area and thinks Natan glad to have someone interested in his work. He encourages her reading and shows her how to make simple remedies. Agnes is given new sealskin shoes, a shawl, duck eggs to eat and gifts of lace, silk or French handkerchief are given to her and Sigga after Natan's trips away. There are rarely visitors other than some men hired to work the farm. Agnes breaks her story to ask Tóti if he has any news of Sigga and her appeal. She thinks Sigga, once possessing 'a saucy little manner' will have probably become pious, telling Tóti that Natan was right describing her as '...only a child, with a child's way of thinking' (p. 236).

Fridrik Sigurdsson is returned to the narrative as Agnes recalls his first visit. Whereas Sigga turns 'pink' when Fridrik visits, he unsettles Agnes: 'There was something off-balance in Fridrik' (p. 236). She also finds Natan moody, describing how 'the feel of a room would fall from high spirits to a glowering in an instant' (p. 236). Both Natan and Fridrik make her feel every small injustice 'like a thorn'. Fridrik is quick to anger and always wanting to prove himself. Natan doesn't have to prove himself to anyone although Agnes observes: 'But superstitious signs troubled him. And what I admired in him, his way of seeing the world, and yearning for knowledge...had a darker underbelly. It was a matter of enjoying the bright skies all the more, so as to endure the sloughs when they came' (p. 237). At this point, Tóti needs some water, Agnes noting his paleness and wondering if he has caught a chill.

Agnes continues her story about the conniving Fridrik and immature Sigga. Natan doesn't trust Fridrik's 'long fingers'; he thinks Fridrik has come to steal money. Agnes explains that he was helpful in the lambing season, but Natan has a frighteningly angry change of mood as they argue: 'I learnt later that he was as changeable as the ocean, and god help you if you saw his expression shift and darken' (p. 239). One day he was friendly, the next threatening to throw her into the ocean. Tóti wants to know about Sigga. Agnes says Sigga's desire was to marry Fridrik but permission wouldn't be forthcoming as Natan won't have Fridrik on the farm. Agnes notes Fridrik's obsession with money as well as the holes he digs near the croft, and also Sigga's departure to the cowshed each evening. Natan rides to Geitaskard to hire Daníel Gudmundsson for the harvest.

CHAPTER TEN

A deposition to the court in 1828 from an anonymous clerk opens the chapter. It records the story told to the clerk by Rósa Gudmundsdóttir. Rósa's story about keeping money for Natan seeks to malign Fridrik while being positive about Natan, but it avoids the fact that Natan fathered 'the baby'. She says Fridrik hated Natan because he couldn't find the money, thus suggesting Fridrik's motive for murder.

Tóti wakes burning with fever and struggling to breathe. He collapses in the pantry, waking to what he believes are his mother's hands lifting him. At first his father thinks Tóti has been sleepwalking but then blames the exhaustion of travelling to Kornsa in bad weather. 'It's addled you' (p. 246). His father catches him as he falls; Tóti is now not able to visit Agnes.

Agnes knows the days are dwindling, both for the sun and for her. The snows have come and the water in the cowshed has iced over. Agnes hasn't seen the Reverend for many days. It's November and she craves a letter or message to sustain her. She puzzles over various reasons that may be preventing Tóti from visiting, thinking it 'cruel to leave me without warning...' (p. 247). Her low spirits make Agnes wish her execution could happen here and now; Blöndal is deliberately crippling her with waiting. Against a background of Margrét's bad coughing and spitting, Agnes describes herself as 'sick with finality'. 'Why won't they tell me when I have to die?' (p. 247). Even Stóra-Borg might have been a better option. There her body might have lost the will to live and given up on its own. She thinks of asking Margrét if she could attend church, a place Natan wouldn't allow her to go. Agnes's present despair reminds her of the loneliness at Illugastadir and the lack of anywhere for her to go 'when it all became twisted'. She imagines Rósa could have been a friend in another time and place: 'Natan always said we were as alike as a swan to a raven, but he was wrong. We both loved him, for one' (p. 248). She says of Rósa's poetry: 'Natan never stopped loving her. How could he? Her poetry made lamps out of people' (p. 248). However, Rósa made it a battleground from the start, arriving one summer night with her little girl, Natan's child. Natan claims that he felt suffocated by Rósa, preferring to create a life of his own on his farm. He plays the two women against each other, saying to Agnes: 'You take life by the teeth, Agnes. You are not like Rósa' (p. 249). We learn that Rósa called Agnes 'The Rose of Kidjaskard. The Rose of the valley lands' (p. 249). Natan senses the antagonism and jealousy between Agnes and Rósa, amusedly announcing they all must be friendly. Natan's agreement to have Thóranna live with them for part of the year is a surprise to Agnes. Rósa sharply accuses Natan of being under Agnes's thumb but he laughingly responds that Agnes is only his servant. Rósa angrily refuses an offer of coffee, shrilly laughing: 'Oh yes, you'd like that! All your whores supping together under your roof? No, thank you' (p. 250). Agnes recalls Rósa's plea that she be good to Thóranna and her parting words: 'The burnt child fears the fire' (p. 251). Agnes asks Natan why Rósa called her the Rose of Kidjaskard. 'Rósa has a way of naming people. I expect she thinks you're beautiful' (p. 251). The friction between the two is evident at the close of this section.

Tóti is struggling with fever. In his state of delirium he imagines Agnes has appeared. 'Come here. See how our lives are entwined? God has willed it so' (p. 251). He imagines Agnes kissing the sweat off his skin and then her fingers around his throat. As he fights her off, flames lick at his skin, smoke pours in his mouth and Agnes climbs atop him, lifting her knife.

Lauga and Steina are fighting. Lauga has heard a story about Agnes that has upset her sister. Folk remember when Agnes was little; a travelling man prophesied an axe would fall on her head after she had told him to stop camping on grass feed. Margrét coughs up a bright clot of blood and Agnes suggests 'a jelly of lichen' to ease her lungs. Although Lauga doesn't see a need for Agnes's 'potions', Margrét agrees and the sisters follow instructions, Steina curious as to whether it's one of Natan's potions.

We are returned to Agnes's first person perspective. The Reverend still has not come but winter has: 'Autumn has been pushed aside by a wind driving flurries of snow up against the croft, and the air is thin as paper' (p. 254). **Note the use of personification and similes in the opening paragraph. Does this help you**

better visualise the penetrating cold of the winter? Agnes determines that if Tóti arrives this night, she will tell him that she and Natan were as husband and wife. 'Then I could tell him about what began to change between us. Perhaps he guesses at it anyway' (p. 254). Agnes creates a metaphor of salt, wind, cold and water to foreshadow the painful darkening of the relationship. She imagines what she would tell Tóti, the reader sensing Agnes is now desperate to tell the rest of her story. Each time Natan leaves he returns more of a stranger. She is accused of sleeping with Daniel, of loving Fridrik, accusations that now seem comical. She tells Natan she'll be his wife if he wishes but is unable to connect with him anymore: 'It was those moods of his that took him away' (p. 255). Natan doesn't want her help, wonders if he was ever in love with her and keeps her out of the workshop. However, there are still times when Natan would seek sex: 'He would take me beside the birds' nests, his hands in my hair, his look as desperate as a drowning man's. He needed me like he needed air' (p. 255). The author weaves in a form of 'asides' to highlight Agnes's imaginings that Tóti is sitting beside her: 'Reverend Tóti, draw your stool nearer. I'll tell you what it was really like' (p. 256). She hates feeling like a servant one night, a lover the next, feeling his cool commands as reprimands. Agnes wonders if Tóti has ever loved a woman, the answer of course known to the reader who has been privy to his inner thoughts. 'Do you understand what I am saying, Reverend? Or is love constant for you? Have you ever loved a woman? A person you love as much as you hate the hold they have on you?' (p. 256). Agnes recalls how she was sick with the pattern of her thoughts and continually took things to Natan's workshop that he no longer required. As he sees Agnes stepping out of the workshop one day, Daniel finally tells her how it really was. He is peeved that Agnes has a key: 'I forgot you maids get special treatment' (p. 256). He hasn't received gifts of clothes or shoes. Daniel tells Agnes he's fond of her and had told people at Geitaskard they were engaged, despite them all knowing that she and Natan were sneaking off to the storeroom at night. He accuses Agnes of thinking she's better than others as she shares a bed with a farmer but reminds her: 'Just because you play at being a wife, does not make you a married woman, Agnes' (p. 257). She is Natan's mistress not housemistress. His words anger Agnes who lashes out at his insults. Again, would she tell Tóti? Perhaps he hasn't come because he has drawn his own conclusions. Another story is told; the day of the death wave. Daniel is out fishing with Natan when the boat is hit by three large waves. The superstitious Natan believes they are death waves and insists they return to shore. He becomes angry at Daniel's comment that he didn't think a learned man like Natan would be fooled by such a thing. Upon return, Natan is furious, and more so when he discovers Agnes has left the workshop door unlocked. She's accused of meddling, looking for money, taking advantage of him. Unable to bite her tongue, Agnes says she was lured to the lonely farm with the lie that she'd be housekeeper. Later she tries to make up with Natan but he rejects her touch. 'He said he saw signs of death all about him' (p. 261). He has been dreaming of death, seeing blood everywhere and waking with the taste of blood in his mouth. As Natan harshly grips her, he tells Agnes he has been dreaming about her: 'I dream that I'm in bed and I can see blood running down the walls. It drips on my head and the drops burn my skin' (p. 262). He has dreamt of Agnes nailed to the wall by her hair. Natan pulls Agnes by the hair and strikes her full on the face. After a fiery verbal exchange, she stumbles away crying, hearing Natan's words: 'Remember your place, Agnes!' (p. 263). When Natan finally returns to the croft that night, he chooses Sigga's bed. Agnes recalls Rósa's words about 'his whores' and knows then what she meant. She fights to control her emotions as the

noise of Natan and Sigga's lovemaking reaches her ears. After everyone is asleep, Agnes thinks of leaving but knows there is nowhere for her to go: 'My throat closed up with pain, and something else, something hard and inciting and as black as tar. I did not let myself cry. Rage flooded through me until my hands and back grew stiff with it' (p. 264). Agnes thinks of the valley of Vatnsdalur, the only place she really knows, with its white-headed mountains, a lake and grass. 'And the ravens, the constant, circling ravens' (p. 265). She has no one and nowhere to go in Illugastadir, a landscape she doesn't understand.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The chapter starts with an anonymous clerk again, reporting events from the courtroom on April 19, 1828. It is the testimony of ten-year-old Bjarni Sigurdsson, Fridrik's brother. He says Fridrik had slit the throats of two milk-giving sheep and one lamb belonging to Natan. His mother had warned him not to say anything about this at the trial, the clerk recording that even with 'toughness and gentleness' no more information could be gained from him.

The story returns to Margrét's perspective; she has been woken by the sound of whimpering. The 'criminal' was crying like a child and the scared Margrét wonders whether she should go to her. After lighting a candle, she goes to Agnes's bed to find her shivering and obviously having a nightmare. Agnes wakes in fright, instinctively grabbing Margrét's wrist and accusing her of watching. 'I wasn't watching you. You woke me. You were crying' (p. 269). Margrét sits on the edge of the bed coughing blood: 'Two dying women' murmurs Agnes, a truth understood by Margrét. She says Jón worries for her but says nothing, asking Agnes not to think of him as a bad man. 'He wouldn't wish harm to any soul, only with you here...' (p. 270)—she stops. **How would she have completed the sentence? Has Agnes's presence changed Jón?** She asks Agnes what she was dreaming about. The answer is Katadalur, Fridrik's farm, where we learn Agnes was staying in the days before Natan died. Natan has thrown her out. Margrét expresses surprise that she went to Fridrik's as she remembers Agnes saying they weren't friends. 'We weren't'. The reader; however, understands from the previous section why Agnes has sought refuge at Katadalur. 'Why haven't you asked me about the murders?' (p. 270). Margrét believes that is between the Reverend and Agnes, suggesting they go to the kitchen for some warm milk. Margrét holds to her own superstitions, one acquired from her mother; she never lets the hearth die out, believing that as long as a light burned, the Devil couldn't get in. She is also practical, believing a fire keeps a body warm. Agnes recalls the fire going out at Gafl, her own fault, resulting in three days without light or fire. **Conversation about fire and dying is ironic at this point in the novel but also important is the way Margrét now becomes a substitute confidante for Agnes in Tóti's absence.** Agnes comments that the family are lucky to have enough supplies. Margrét tells her there's a little extra money as compensation from Blöndal; 'Not much' to which Agnes responds 'No, I'm not worth much' (p. 271). Changing the subject, Margrét observes the Reverend hasn't visited lately. She also feels an impulse to put an arm around Agnes who looks so childlike. Agnes apologises for waking her and also for the fear her presence has created for Margrét. 'A mother is always afraid for her children' says Margrét (p. 272). Agnes refuses to believe that her mother ever thinks of her. 'A mother always thinks of her children...Your mother, Fridrik's mother, Sigga's mother. All mothers' (p. 273). Agnes reveals that Sigga's mother is dead and Fridrik's mother is to be sent to prison in

Copenhagen as she lied in the courtroom about knowing Fridrik had stolen some sheep. **(Link to the clerk’s report at the start of the chapter.)**

Agnes reveals Thórbjörg saved her life after finding the destitute Agnes on her doorstep. She brought Agnes inside and allowed her to stay there. The bringing up of Thórbjörg’s past crimes in the courtroom did not help Agnes’s case. She told the court she was friendly with Agnes and that Agnes had sought her advice after the fight with Natan. Margrét assumes this wasn’t true. ‘She never told me to burn down Illugastadir, as they claimed...They made it seem that I had gone to Katadalur on purpose. To plan murder’ (p. 273). Margrét asks if it was Fridrik who burned Illugastadir down. Agnes told the trial the fire spread from a pot of herbs boiling in the kitchen but Margrét heard it was Fridrik. She wonders if Agnes is protecting him. Agnes assures her it was not Fridrik and he was not her friend. ‘Loneliness threatened to bite you at every turn. I took what company presented itself’ (p. 274). She explains Fridrik visited Illugastadir for a little romance with Sigga, making up excuses to come to the farm. Margrét observes how hard it is to be alone in winter as Agnes tells her there were no friends or neighbours, only ‘weary days’. ‘“The dark can make a body lonely,” Margrét said thoughtfully’ (p. 275). This suggests Margrét empathises with Agnes; perhaps she has experienced the same feelings. Agnes reveals that Natan never liked winter: ‘He went his whole life without getting used to the darkness’ (p. 275). Margrét wonders why he bought Illugastadir if this was the case. Natan went away a lot, saying it was for work, but Agnes wonders if it was to be with friends or to avoid her. He stayed away longer each time, his daughter left in the care of Sigga and Agnes. She tells of Natan’s dislike of Fridrik, their suspicion of each other and a fight that ensued when a whale beached at Hindisvík. ‘I remember. We bought some whale oil from folk up north of the valley. They went to get what they could’ (p. 275). Agnes describes the whale as a stroke of luck as they were worried about a lack of food in winter. Natan comes home a mess after going to buy some whale meat. His story is that Fridrik tried to take meat Natan had already sliced and paid for, shoved Natan resulting in a fight. However, Agnes later learns from the family at the neighbouring farm that Natan had started the fight. Margrét wants to keep Agnes talking so chooses her next words carefully: ‘It must have been hard for you at Illugastadir’ (p. 276). Natan grew worse after the whale, spending less and less time at home. When he did return, he found constant fault with Agnes and Sigga, even accusing them of trying to find his money. He bans Fridrik from Illugastadir after meeting him on the road. Sigga is dragged outside into the snow and subjected to a tirade of abuse and accused of betrayal. After a red-eyed Sigga returns to bed, Natan orders Agnes to follow him to the sea’s edge, telling her that Fridrik asked for permission to marry Sigga. Natan knew they were carrying on but believed it an idle flirtation. He shows Agnes three silver coins Fridrik had offered him for Sigga and tells Agnes off for allowing them to carry on when she knew Natan didn’t want the boy on the property. Margrét says she didn’t know Sigga and Fridrik were wedded. ‘They never married’ Agnes tells her (p. 278). Sigga was in tears the next day upon hearing of Fridrik’s payment to Natan for her hand in marriage. She is told she is Natan’s servant and would remain so until he saw fit to let her go.

Fridrik arrives, despite Daniel’s warning, and announces he and Sigga are to wed. After a capful of brandy to celebrate, Agnes walks to the shore, watching flames burning out to sea. Margrét says she’s only visited the sea once when younger. Agnes tells her of seeing two icebergs grinding together, causing the driftwood on them to erupt into flame. This story reminds Margrét of the sagas. The eeriness of

the driftwood flames attracts Agnes; the author neatly juxtaposes this with an image of Margrét and Agnes watching the flames dying in the red glow of the kitchen fire. The winter winds pick up force outside. Fridrik surprises Agnes by telling her that Natan has been taking advantage of Sigga: 'He's been raping her!...I'm going to kill him' (p. 282). Sigga isn't sure if Natan forced her but Agnes knows there hadn't been a struggle. Fridrik's anger intensifies and he refuses to listen to Agnes: 'I wouldn't expect a woman like you to understand' (p. 283). He knows Natan has been having his way with Agnes as well. Daniel arrives, telling Fridrik to go home, as there's a snowstorm coming. He believes it 'unholy' that both Agnes and Sigga have shared a bed with Natan, also revealing that Fridrik has killed some sheep. Natan returns three days later, and unhappy with the news of Sigga's engagement, blames Agnes for playing matchmaker. Agnes argues: 'No. Even Sigga seems confused about what has happened' (p. 284). This calms Natan and he apologises to Agnes for hitting her, claiming he has been distracted and travelling too much in the damp. He's sought advice from Worm about his dreams: 'I have not been myself' (p. 284). That night he and Agnes sleep together, Agnes symbolically stripping his bed of blankets and placing them at the foot of her own: 'Agnes', he said gently. 'I'm glad to see you' (p. 285).

Margrét returns with milk from the dairy, not having heard the last part of Agnes's story—it is privileged information to the reader. Agnes resumes with Fridrik's proposal to Sigga. Natan gives his blessing; she can marry a boy without money or name. He's not going to stop two 'puppies' playing together. Agnes assumes Natan is happy to be rid of Fridrik and worries about his money being stolen. After Yuletide, Daniel is sent back to Geitaskard and Sigga has stopped talking to Agnes, becoming moody, lax, jumpy and gazing out the window: 'I believe she was anxious to keep the two men apart' (p. 286).

One night, Agnes decides to tell Natan she knows he has had Sigga: 'I know, Natan. I forgive you' (p. 286). His reaction isn't what she expects. Natan knows she saw them. Agnes realises '...for the first time I guessed how he saw me' (p. 287). She calls Natan 'cruel': 'You've been playing with me' (p. 287). Her questions aggravate Natan. When she demands to know if he loves her, Natan tells Agnes she's more than a servant but adds: 'You're a nag, Agnes' (p. 287). As she explodes with anger, he teases her more. 'The look on Natan's face was not of derision, but of scornful amusement. An immediate weight of despair and loss pressed on me until I was suddenly, unalterably, concave with grief' (p. 288). The ensuing argument is full of angry, bitter accusations. Natan tells Agnes: 'You're a cheap sort of woman. I was wrong about you' (p. 288). Agnes blames him, provoking Natan's response: 'But you just want what you can't have' (p. 288). He tells her that she can leave if she doesn't like the valley and has been nothing but trouble for him. The argument wakes Sigga and Thóranna starts crying. Natan drags Agnes to the doorstep, sending her sprawling naked into the snow. Torn between killing herself and wanting to get back inside, Agnes goes to the cowshed, warming her body against the cow and pushing her frozen toes into a cowpat. Sigga brings her clothes during the night, warning that Natan won't let Agnes back in. 'Talk some sense into him, Sigga. He's actually gone mad this time' (p. 289). Sigga responds that she is so sick of living at Illugastadir. The next morning, cold and hungry, Agnes decides to leave before Natan comes out to feed the stock.

Tóti awakes to see his father asleep at the end of his bed. He struggles to raise his voice or move his limbs but his father thanks God his son is still alive. Tóti has sweated out the fever while swaddled in blankets. Although he doesn't know the month (December), Tóti desperately wants to go to Kornsó. Angrily, his father tells him: 'You'll pay her no heed until God restores you...She's not worth the time you give her' (p. 290).

Margrét wants to know what happened after Agnes was thrown out in the snow. 'You could have frozen to death' (p. 290). Agnes claims Natan wasn't in his right mind, upset at the realisation that Sigga preferred Fridrik. Margrét's tone suggests she isn't sure this is entirely the truth but tells Agnes to continue her story. Agnes makes her way over the mountain to Katadalur and Fridrik's family, collapsing delirious with fatigue on the doorstep. Fridrik's mother takes her in, Agnes observing the miserable poverty and neglect of the croft. She tells them Natan threw her out because she criticised his treatment of Sigga. This causes the mother to tell Fridrik: ' "He means to deprive you of your wife" ' (p. 291). Agnes thinks she saw Fridrik glance down at the knife he'd just sharpened, making her fearful. He is told by his mother: "You will not have Sigga while Natan is alive" ' (p. 292). Agnes tells Margrét they must have decided to kill him while she was asleep. At this point, Margrét suggests they ought to return to bed. 'Don't you want to hear the rest?' (p. 292).

Why does Agnes want to continue telling her story?

CHAPTER TWELVE

The chapter starts with an excerpt from the *Laxdæla Saga*, a story of revenge. A sister inspires her brother to avenge the disgrace and dishonour caused to him by another man.

Agnes continues her first person interior narrative. She and Fridrik arrive at Illugastadir to find Natan away. Sigga, holding Thóranna, opens the door and lets them in despite Natan's instructions. He has gone to see Worm. Fridrik starts looking around for 'compensation'. Sigga rejects Fridrik's advances claiming Natan has changed his mind about their marriage and won't allow it. 'He says he will be the one to marry me if anyone does' (p. 295). Her tears make Fridrik and Agnes realise that she has said yes to Natan. The three spend several days making plans to leave, Sigga thinking she could go to Stóra-Borg. Fridrik thinks he knows a farmer who doesn't like Natan who might give Agnes work out of sympathy. Amidst all their talking, they don't see travellers on the pass. Natan has returned with Sheepkiller-Pétur. He is angry to see them: 'Three little foxes sneaking about the place' (p. 296). Natan refuses Sigga's pleas to let Agnes stay until after winter. He also laughs at Fridrik's demand that Natan not marry Sigga. He says to Pétur: 'See what happens when you live with children? They draw you into their little games' (p. 296). He relents and lets Agnes sleep in the cowshed but she must not be there when he returns from Geitaskard or he'll have her charged with trespass. Fridrik is told to '...leave before I get Pétur to slit your throat' (p. 296).

Agnes, sleeping in the cowshed that is lice-ridden and stinks of cow shit, wakes during the night, thinking of going to the house and trying to make up with Natan. She hears footsteps. It's Fridrik who has come back. Agnes tells Fridrik he will be killed if seen by Natan; however, Fridrik's tone of voice concerns her. 'I'm going to sort this out once and for all. I've come for what's mine...Admit it. You want this too, Agnes' (p. 298). The moonlight allows her to see the knife in his hand.

Agnes continues but starts this new section with questions. ‘What do I remember? I didn’t believe him. What happened?’ These questions are aimed directly at the reader; Margrét has gone to sleep. Agnes awakens again in the cowshed at Illugastadir and goes to the croft to find the door open and Sigga crouched against the wall with Thóranna. Sigga is whimpering: ‘The badstofa...’ (p. 299). Shaking and fumbling in the dark, Agnes hears panting hard and fast. ‘Agnes. I don’t know if he’s dead’ (p. 299). She can’t believe Fridrik has killed Natan. He’s just a boy. However, after lighting the lamp, she sees Pétur’s head crushed, blood on the wall and Fridrik holding a hammer which has hair stuck to it. Agnes vomits. One side of Natan’s head looks strange and he is bleeding. ‘A scream erupted from my chest and strength left me’ (p. 300). Natan groans, saying ‘Worm’. He opens an eye and says Agnes’s name upon seeing her, then falls out of bed to the floor. He’s repeating over and over: ‘Fridrik, I will pay you, I will pay you’ (p. 301). Natan is choking on blood as Agnes picks up the knife and begs the frightened Fridrik to finish what he began. She doesn’t want Natan to slowly die. Fridrik says he can’t. ‘Natan looked up at me: his teeth were red from blood. His lips moved silently, and I understood what he was trying to say’ (p. 302). Agnes believes Natan is willing her to help him die quickly. ‘The knife went in easily...like an ill-practised kiss—I couldn’t have stopped if I’d wanted to’ (p. 302). As she looks at the knife sticking out of Natan’s belly she says: ‘It felt like forgiveness’ (p. 303). Fridrik who has crumbled sobbing to the floor tells her: ‘Agnes, you’ve killed him’. Her hatred for Fridrik is further heightened as he pulls the knife out of Natan and tells Agnes: ‘You’ll be hanged for this’. Her response: ‘If I’m hanged...You’ll be burnt alive’, comes just as she remembers the whale fat Natan had bought.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

A long historical document opens the chapter. It is a promemoria, a memo, to Blöndal, dated 22 December 1829. It includes four documents:

1. An original copy of the Supreme Court ruling.
2. A confirmed copy of the King’s letter pardoning Sigridur from execution. She will be moved to prison in Copenhagen.
3. Instructions that the execution be close to where the offence occurred.

The executioner will be Gudmundur Ketilsson. Other details about the execution are also outlined including the requirement for local men to attend and how the bodies will be buried.

Blöndal’s actual letter to District Officers states that the execution will be on Tuesday 12 January, specifying a location on a little hill and obliging farmers to attend. The next letter is to Blöndal from the Reverend attending to Sigridur, claiming she is praying to God and thanking the King for his kind treatment. Hannah Kent then includes The Icelandic Burial Hymn on page 312. (The words to this can be found online.) This hymn suggests to the reader that Agnes’s execution is imminent.

We next read that the date is 6 January and a messenger awakens Tóti from Hvammur at the door bearing a letter with Blöndal’s seal ‘looking like a drop of blood against the pale paper’ (p. 313). The snow has prevented the messenger from coming any earlier and Tóti’s panic is exacerbated by dizziness from his illness and uncertainty about his father’s whereabouts. Tóti has to read the letter three times. ‘It could not be happening. Not like this. Not with so much unsaid and undone, and him

not even by her side' (p. 314). His father is furious as Tóti readies himself to ride to Kornsó: 'Do not kill yourself for the sake of this murderess' (p. 314). He tells Tóti going is suicide and against God's will. 'God will forgive me' says the very unsteady Tóti. As he prays in the church, the author's word choices emphasise how ill he still is: 'lurched', 'collapsed', 'hands trembling', 'skin burning', 'ceiling swam above him' (p. 315).

Margrét greets Tóti: 'You look like death. How thin you have become!' (p. 315). Tóti wants to talk to Jón but is taken to the kitchen where he tells Margrét about his illness. Agnes isn't about when he gives Jón the District Commissioner's letter announcing the date of execution. Lauga gasps as Jón reveals it is to be 12 January. Margrét, taking Tóti's hand, says: 'She would want to hear it from you' (p. 316).

We shift to Agnes's first person narration. The Reverend is talking to her but she can't hear what he is saying, feeling as if she is 'underwater'. He looks 'like a drowning man', his 'hands wave' as if he is 'trying to catch hold of something to bring him to the surface' (p. 316). This metaphor is extended as Agnes wonders where all the water has come from. She notices Tóti looks like a skeleton: 'Agnes, he is saying. Agnes, I will be there with you' (p. 317). She recognises Tóti's kindness but rebuffs his attempt to embrace her. He is unable to speak, 'his mouth opening and shutting like a fish...' (p. 317). She is unable to console him in her own angst. 'Those who are not being dragged to their deaths cannot understand how the heart grows hard and sharp, until it is a nest of rocks with only an empty egg in it. I am barren; nothing will grow from me any more' (p. 317). Agnes describes herself as 'the dead bird on the shore', unsure whether there will be any blood left in her to bleed as the axe falls. The bird imagery (so intense in the novel) continues as she wonders where all the birds have gone: 'I am the dead bird on the shore' (p. 317).

Tóti feels the prick of tears at the back of his throat. Jón asks for some brandy for Agnes who manages to croak, 'How many days?' (p. 317). Tóti takes her hands, reassuring Agnes: 'But I'm here. I won't let go' (p. 317). Agnes wants Tóti to talk to Blöndal about an appeal, begging him to get them to listen. Margrét surprises everyone by muttering: 'It's not right...it wasn't her fault' (p. 318). Tóti is astonished that Margrét has talked with Agnes and now wants to help her. Jón and Margrét leave the room. The only thing Tóti is able to say is: 'I am here for you, Agnes' (p. 318).

Agnes tries to concentrate on her breathing: 'I do not crumble. I think of small things' (p. 319). She thinks about the cold, wind, soil, her bones becoming dry and brittle and the dirt, wondering what will eventually happen to her body.

Tóti stays up with Agnes until she sleeps, falling asleep himself against the bedpost. Margrét has been watching him while she knits. She is reminded of Hjördis's death, realising she hasn't thought about her old servant since Agnes's arrival. Margrét is wracked by a coughing fit, falling to knees hacking up a blood clot. She finds Lauga crying in the pantry. 'I only wanted a minute to myself' she tells her mother (p. 320).

Another short section from Agnes's perspective reveals that Fridrik never found the money he wanted. Importantly, she also divulges her act of smearing whale fat around the Illugastadir badstofa—on the wood and the floor. **This is key information as we now know Agnes was the one to stab Natan (even though the implication is that Natan implored her to put him out of his misery after Fridrik's attack) and start the fire.** Agnes is rambling. She is unable to eat,

wondering where her stone is, and also the ravens. She thinks her brother, Joás, has sent them all away. ‘I eat stones, I shatter my teeth, and still they will not speak to me’ (p. 321). The ravens, present so much in her life, are nowhere to be seen. Agnes can only hear the wind speaking and it doesn’t make sense to her. Her isolation and lack of a place to call home is overwhelming as she imagines being sucked up and spread by the wind.

‘The night before the execution, the Kornsó family sat together in the badstofa’ (p. 321). The reader senses that on this night, Agnes is part of the family group. The servants are dumbly watching Agnes and Tóti huddled together, holding hands, on her bed. He whispers quietly to the shivering Agnes. Margrét pulls a fine woollen scarf out of a trunk, wrapping it around Agnes’s shoulders. She also takes out a skirt, white cotton shirt, embroidered bodice and a striped apron. Steina questions her. ‘It’s the least we can do’, replies her mother (p. 323). Margrét also asks Lauga for her brooch. Lauga hands it over, blinking away tears.

The reader is privy to Agnes’s thoughts the next morning: ‘The world has stopped snowing, stopped moving; the clouds hang still in the air like dead bodies. The only things that move are the ravens...’ (p. 323). The black ravens circle around and she notes the Kornsó family dressed in black. Margrét takes her hand and tells her ‘You are not a monster’ (p. 323). Clearly confused by her fear, Agnes isn’t sure if it’s her own voice crying out ‘They’re going to kill me’ (p. 324). Margrét says they will remember her but Agnes doesn’t want to be remembered: ‘I want to be here!’ (p. 324). ‘I am right here, Agnes. You’ll be all right, my girl. My girl’. says Margrét. Crying, Agnes feels something choking her and spits a stone to the ground. **(Read this section again and decide if you read the stone in her mouth as literal or metaphorical.)** She farewells the sobbing Steina next, realising she can’t remember ‘when someone last cared enough to lay their cheek next to mine’ (p. 324). Agnes hears herself saying ‘I’m so sorry’ but she doesn’t know why she is apologising. Lauga says her name and when Agnes replies ‘That is the first time you have called me by my name...’ Lauga collapses as though Agnes has stabbed her in the stomach. As Tóti says it’s time to go, Agnes is struggling, with imagery of being unable to swim, and drowning underwater, filling her thoughts. She feels herself lifted and placed on a horse: ‘...like a corpse they are going to take me to the grave, like a dead woman they will bury me in the earth, pocket me like a stone’ (p. 325). Agnes hears the ravens in the sky, wondering what bird can sing without stones beneath him to listen. ‘Natan would know. I must remember to ask him’ (p. 325).

‘Snow lay over the valley like linen, like a shroud waiting for the dead body of the sky that slumped overhead’ (p. 325). Hannah Kent’s use of metaphor and personification appropriate to Agnes’s day of execution, shifts us to Tóti’s perspective. It is all over. He moves his horse closer to Agnes, taking off his glove and putting his hand on her leg. There is a strong stench of urine and Agnes’s mouth is chattering uncontrollably. She mouths, ‘I’m sorry’. The procession is joined by other men dressed in black. Jón rides alongside Tóti who is given a flask for Agnes to drink by a large man with blond hair. ‘Drink it all, Agnes...I brought it for you’ the man tells her (p. 326). She manages to see the man and thanks him. **(Can you work out who this large blond man might be?)** The procession comes up out of the valley and Tóti notices the strange mounds of the hills where Agnes will be executed. She is unable to stand. Tóti tries to lift her but fails. However, he is determined to carry her despite Jón’s offer of help and the smell of Agnes. ‘Please let me lift her. I need to lift her’ (p. 327).

More than forty men dressed in black stand around the middle hill reminding Tóti of ‘birds of prey surrounding their kill’. He tells Agnes that Fridrik is ‘walking out first’, lowering her to the snowy ground and sitting beside her. Tóti suggests they pray. Agnes can hear singing—it’s the burial hymn, ‘Just like the flower’, being sung for Fridrik. Jón is on his knees muttering the Lord’s Prayer. Agnes panics, telling Tóti she doesn’t think she is ready. He reassures her he won’t let go of her. ‘God is all around us, Agnes’ (p. 328). They both hear the sudden sound of the first axe fall echoing through the valley.

EPILOGUE

A report of the execution is given from the Magistrate’s Book of Hunavatn District, 1830. Fridrik’s priest completed a speech of admonition to him. ‘After the Assistant Reverend Thorvardur Jónsson had appropriately prepared her for death, the same executioner cut off her head, and with the same craftsmanship as before’ (p. 329). The lifeless heads were set upon two stakes and the bodies put in coffins and buried, and a short address given by Reverend Magnús Árnason before the men were dismissed.

AUTHOR’S NOTE

Hannah Kent reminds the reader that while the novel is a work of fiction, it is based on real events. We learn that in 1934, the remains of Agnes and Fridrik were moved to the churchyard at Tjörn, where they share a grave. Natan Ketilsson is buried in an unmarked grave in the same churchyard. It was believed Sigríður died a few years later in prison. At the end of the author’s note, Hannah Kent provides us with an important clue about her interpretation of events. ‘This novel has been written to supply a more ambiguous portrayal of this woman’ (p. 335). **It is worth considering what Kent means by ‘ambiguous portrayal’.**

PERSPECTIVE ON THE TEXT

The release of *Burial Rites* in 2013 generated much publicity but it was not until after watching the ABC TV program, ‘Australian Story’, that I felt an urgent need to read the novel. The glimpses into Hannah Kent’s authorial journey, her fascination with Agnes Magnúsdóttir and footage of the remarkable Icelandic landscape was both evocative and disturbing. Just as Kent was intrigued by the back-story of Agnes when first told about the executions, the author’s own back-story of her school exchange to Iceland, the research undertaken to write the novel and film footage of Kent on other trips to Iceland accompanied by her partner and parents, intrigued me. If you have not yet watched the episode, head to this link right now. <<http://www.abc.net.au/austory/specials/nomorethanaghost/default.htm>>.

Burial Rites, from its opening pages, raises many questions. Why the map of Iceland at the start? Why the information about Icelandic pronunciations? Why the line quoted from the Laxdæla Saga? Why the prologue opening with the brutal words?—“THEY SAID I MUST DIE.”⁴ And why the three historical documents that open Chapter One? The reader is immediately positioned to understand that this novel will be a blend of factual information gleaned from Hannah Kent’s research and a story fleshed out by her imagination. It is not too far into Chapter One that the reader, becoming increasingly immersed in the unfolding of Agnes’s story, starts to forget this authorial re-imagining of events. However, the placement of material from Icelandic historical archives at the start of each chapter provides timely reminders about the official perspective of the events of 1828 and Agnes’s subsequent execution in January 1829. Hannah Kent provides some excellent insights into her blending of fact and fiction in an interview with Ruth Starke, her PhD supervisor at Flinders University. It is fascinating to read about her writing process, learning snippets of information such as Margrét being her third choice of name for the mistress of Kornsó and Kent’s decision to omit the real life son of the Kornsó household as she felt there was not room for another character. Her reasoning for including the brooch Margrét gives to Agnes on the morning of the execution is also explained. Read the interview now. <<http://dSPACE.flinders.edu.au/xmlui/handle/2328/27267>>.

A key concern of *Burial Rites* is the way in which others view individuals like Agnes and Natan, and how those who do not know a person for who they really are, can directly and indirectly shape that person’s life. The official records and other historical documents, printed at the start of each chapter, provide ‘facts’ about the Illugastadir murders, the subsequent trial and executions, but they are perspectives of people who do not really know the accused, or who were not there, or who are unreliable as witnesses. They do not tell the reader what actually happened that fateful night at Natan’s badstofa or the real story of Agnes’s stay at Kornsó.

Hannah Kent becomes our telescopic lens into the minutiae of Agnes’s life, from her birth to her death. We know the outcome from the very beginning so the interest in the novel lies in the exploration and interaction of characters and how the reader engages or reacts as the story evolves to its expected conclusion. *Burial Rites* becomes a little like those movies we watch over and over, knowing there is a sad

4 p. 1 Kent, Hannah *Burial Rites*, Picador, 2013

ending, but each time becoming so engrossed or emotionally invested, we forget the outcome or hope for a miracle. Yes, Agnes is doomed. History has recorded her execution; photos of her grave shared with Fridrik, and the axe used to behead them, are easily located online. No letter of pardon ever arrives for Agnes and the relationship the reader develops with her ends in grief, as do the connections she has formed with Margrét and Tóti.

There are a number of reasons why the reader forms an attachment to Agnes prior to, and despite, her revelation on pages 302 and 303 that she is the one who delivered the final stab wound to Natan and is responsible for burning the badstofa crimes for which she has been found guilty under Icelandic law of the time and is to pay the ultimate penalty. Hannah Kent plays on our sympathies for Agnes from her opening thoughts on page 1. Agnes's first person narration allows us inside the mind of a woman awaiting her death. She is a woman who has been forced to fight hard for survival and self respect in a land where harsh poverty combined with a strictly religious and patriarchal society, does not favour a single woman, particularly one born illegitimately as was Agnes. Now, as the novel opens with Agnes incarcerated in a dark, filthy cell and imagining herself as a flame about to have its life extinguished, we are ready for her story to begin: 'I hear footsteps'.⁵ Agnes essentially tells us two stories; one is set in her present circumstances and the second is about her past. The two stories intersect when she falls in love with Natan and moves to Illugastadir. As you read the novel, reflect on which of Agnes's 'voices' moves you more—her interior storytelling voice or the voice directed towards others?

Burial Rites reminds us of the importance of stories in peoples' lives. The Icelandic Sagas, mentioned many times in the novel, are Iceland's most famous contribution to world literature. The sagas, written somewhere between 1100 and 1320, are intrinsically linked to the identity of Icelanders and part of the country's cultural tradition to which any tourist—or exchange student like Hannah Kent—will be exposed. Long winter nights and a harsh climate make the perfect conditions for storytelling. The sagas, grounded in stories of people from all strata of Icelandic life, tell of the country's history, its explorers, invaders, warriors, kings, farmers and families. Female characters are crucial to many of the stories, an element of the sagas that attracted Agnes. *Burial Rites* highlights Agnes's intelligence through her ability to read and write and also via her knowledge of the sagas and the Bible. The government and church rigorously encouraged the literacy of Iceland's population and in Agnes's times, most people were literate with local priests visiting to test each family member. The meticulous recording of the Illugastadir murder trials, preparation for the executions, church records and other documentation utilised by Hannah Kent in her novel epitomises the national importance of words. (Did you know that Iceland is possibly the best-read country in the world? Apparently, more books are written, published and sold per person than in any other country.⁶)

The personal stories created by the author are as crucial to the novel, or even more so in the eyes of many readers, than the historical story. Imagine being sentenced to death. How would you cope or continue with life while awaiting your death on some yet unknown date? Most of Agnes's story is told after she has been sent to remote Kornsó to stay with a family who have been given no choice in the matter, a move

5 p. 1 *ibid*

6 'The Icelandic Sagas: Europe's most important book?' *The Guardian*, Books Blog, 3 October, 2008

intended to save the government money. The unfolding of the Kornsó story starts with the arrival of Agnes, a wretched, filthy and silent prisoner and ends with a clean, well-dressed Agnes being farewelled to her execution by the weeping women of the household. Much of the story is told from Agnes's point of view; however, Tóti and Margrét allow us another perspective as they gradually get to know the woman who has so unexpectedly become part of their lives. Other stories about Agnes are spread through the valley; some by the unlikeable gossip, Róslín. Her illegitimacy, aloofness and reasons for leaving various employers come under close scrutiny. The people of the valley do not speak of the poignancy of Agnes's search for love and a place in the world. They do not have the benefit of knowing Agnes as we do—her passion for knowledge, the hurt and oppression she has suffered as a woman, her simple desire to be heard and to be loved, the stifling of her words.

The novel is also the story of a landscape; a moody country whose bleakness and beauty is brought to life by Hannah Kent's use of personification. She immerses the reader in harsh snowy winters as well as the sunshine, fertility and beauty of summer and spring, and the ominous unreliability of autumn. The seasonal cycle is a cleverly used metaphor in the novel; the murders at Illugastadir happen in late winter while the executions take place in January of the following winter. In between, Agnes's story of magic stones, ravens, ill fortune and so much more is revealed. The landscape also heightens the feeling of *Burial Rites*' resemblance to a morality play. Blöndal's determination to execute Agnes in a specific geographic location in the midst of winter, surrounded by local men summonsed to witness her death, is a bitter and icy warning to all in the district.

A reading of *Burial Rites* is an education on many levels. Apart from key thematic concerns of justice, love, tradition, morality, religion, oppression, hard work, unfulfilled desires, fear, suspicion, relationships and hardship, the novel teaches us much about Icelandic history. We learn of Iceland's system of government and division into districts, the strict religious, literacy and social control of the population, the importance of tradition and superstition as seen through the sagas, the burial hymn and the yearly rituals adhered to by Icelanders of the time. Hannah Kent has taken a 200-year-old story from one of the remotest countries in the world and brought the name of Agnes Magnúsdóttir to worldwide attention. The novel presents a woman who deserves to have her side of the story heard. She wants someone listening and giving power to her words that otherwise flutter away in the wind: 'They don't know me' (p. 29). Book sales continue to increase, the film rights have been sold: an ironic assurance that many throughout the world will utter Agnes's name and claim to 'know' her.

CHARACTERS

NAME	ROLE	LOCATION
Agnes Magnúsdóttir	Work-maid convicted of murder and sentenced to execution. 33 years old at time of story.	Lives and works at numerous farms: Flaga, Beinakelda, Litla-Giljá, Brekkukot, Kornsa, Guðrúnarstadir, Gilsstadir, Gafi, Fannlaugarstadir, Búrfell, Geitaskard, Illugastadir. Held at Stóra-Borg. Shifted to Kornsa until execution.
Natan Ketilsson	Farmer. Victim of murder. Called himself Natan Lyngdal on 1827.	Illugastadir.
Björn Blöndal	District Commissioner of Húnavatn District.	Hvammur.
Reverend Jóhann Tómasson	Reverend appointed to oversee Fridrik's spiritual guidance.	
Assistant Reverend Thorvardur Jónsson (also known as Tóti)	Young reverend beginning chaplaincy under father's supervision.	Lives next to church at Breidabólstadir, Vesturhóp.
Reverend Jón	Tóti's father.	Breidabólstadir.
Pétur Jónsson	Murdered with Natan. Known as 'Sheep-Killer' Pétur.	
Fridrik Sigurdsson	Son of farmer. 17 years old when charged with Natan's murder. Born May 6, 1810. Confirmed 1823.	Katadalur.
Sigrídur Guðmundsdóttir (Sigga)	Work-maid. Charged with Natan's murder. Sentenced to execution; sentence commuted. Sent to Copenhagen jail.	Illugastadir.
Steinvor (Steina) Jónsdóttir	Daughter of Margrét and Jón, aged 21.	Kornsa.
Sigurlaug (Lauga) Jónsdóttir	Younger daughter of Margrét and Jón, aged 20	Kornsa

Kristin	Family work-maid.	Kornsá.
Jón Jónsson	Farmer, aged 55. District Officer. Pabbi of Steina and Lauga.	Kornsá.
Margrét, his wife	Mistress of Kornsá. Mamma of Steina and Lauga.	Kornsá.
Hjördis	Deceased servant of Margrét's.	Buried at Undirfell.
Joás Illugson	Agnes's half-brother.	Born at Brekkukot.
Snæbjörn	Farmer close to Kornsá.	Gilsstadir.
Róslín, his wife	Wife of Snæbjörn and mother of 11 children.	
Páll, their young son	Shepherd boy.	
Gudmundur	Servant of Kornsá. 28 years old.	
Bjarni	Servant of Kornsá.	
Gudmundur Ketilsson	Natan's brother who is asked to be the executioner.	
Gudrun	Old blind lady.	Undirfell.
Dagga	Her daughter cured of whooping cough by Natan.	Undirfell.
Pétur Bjarnason	Reverend of Undirfell Church.	Undirfell.
Jón Bjarnason	Farmer whom Agnes believes to be her real father.	Brekkukot
Ingibjörg Pétursdóttir	From nearby farm. A friend of Margrét's.	
Poet-Rósa	Rósa Gudmundsdóttir, also known as Poet-Rósa. She is married and has a child with Natan.	Vatnsendi.
Illuga the Black	Agnes's 'uncle'. Drowns after seizure.	Litla-Giljá.
Helga	Agnes's half-sister. Fathered by farmer at Kringla. Died when 13.	
Inga and Björn	Agnes's foster-parents. Tenants of Kornsá.	Kornsá.
Kjartan	Young son of Inga and Björn.	Kornsá
Gudbjörg	Servant of Inga and Björn.	Kornsá.

Uncle Ragnar	Björn's brother. He and his wife adopt Kjartan. Tells Agnes she has to leave.	
Karitas	Servant of Blöndal. Previously servant at Illugastadir.	Hvammur.
Maria Jónsdóttir	Servant at Worm's farm. Friend of Agnes.	
Daniel Guðmundsson	Farmhand at Geitaskard. Also works at Illugastadir. Fond of Agnes.	
Worm Beck	Farmer. Close friend of Natan's.	Geitaskard.
Olaf	Poet-Rósa's husband.	
Thóranna	Daughter of Rósa and Natan.	
Thórunn	Servant woman. Companion of Fridrik.	
Thorbjorg	Fridrik's mother.	Katadalur.

Agnes Magnúsdóttir

Agnes, the central protagonist, is an enigmatic woman whose story drives the novel. It is important to distinguish between the historical Agnes and the fictional Agnes as re-imagined by the author. She is illegitimate, retaining fleeting memories of her mother who abandoned her at six years of age, and certain that the man named on her birth certificate is not her true father. Kornsó, in the Hunavatn District, is twice home to Agnes. It is where her mother leaves her with 'a kiss and a stone' aged six; at thirty-three, Agnes finds herself dragged there again 'because of two dead men and a fire' (p. 71). Her foster mother at Kornsó, Inga, is one of the few people who ever show her kindness. Inga, against her husband's wishes, teaches Agnes to read and write, also gifting her a love of the Icelandic Sagas. After the devastating death of Inga in childbirth, Agnes lives and works as a servant at many other farms in the valley, suffering ill treatment and sexual advances at the hands of some masters. As a single, illegitimate woman, life is extremely hard. Agnes is subject to gossip, her aloof personality and intelligence making her an outsider in the valley. This inability to find security and love gives rise to bitterness. She simply wants to be judged for who she is rather than what has happened in the past: *'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. No matter if you tried to do what was best. No matter if your innermost self whispers, "I am not as you say!"—how other people think of you determines who you are'* (p. 108).

- Which relationships in the valley prove to be the best and worst for Agnes before she shifts to Geitaskard?
- How important is her relationship with Joás, her half-brother?
- What memories or events seem to have most shaped Agnes's character?

- Find examples of superstitions or stories that are important to Agnes.

Meeting Natan while working at Geitaskard alters Agnes's sense of self-worth immeasurably. Although her relationship with Natan is at the expense of Maria's friendship and further isolates her from the other farm workers, Agnes falls in love with this mysterious and renowned womaniser. Natan awakens Agnes emotionally, sexually and intellectually. She experiences intense passion for the first time in her life and Natan's offer of the housekeeping position at Illugastadir is like a dream come true. Agnes envisions love, happiness and responsibility awaiting her as she leaves the valley, a place of loneliness and heartbreak, behind her.

- Use the Running Sheet to make notes about Agnes's hopes and expectations as she heads to Illugastadir.
- Trace the various emotions Agnes experiences at Illugastadir.
- What skills does she acquire through working with Natan in his workshop?
- Consider her relationship with Sigga.
- How do you respond to Agnes during her time at Illugastadir? Do you see her as naïve, abused, deluded?
- How convinced are you by Agnes's account of the murders?

Agnes's incarceration at Stóra-Borg after her trial brings her to the brink of despair. The darkness of her cell focuses all attention on her physical and psychological state, as well as her complete disempowerment—she loses her words, her freedom and soon, her life. The trial epitomised her inability to fight the rigid, patriarchal processes of the justice system. Her words are changed or thrown back at her like insults: 'Everything I said was taken from me and altered until the story wasn't my own' (p. 100). Her transportation from Stóra-Borg to Kornská is a painfully undignified experience and Agnes is astute enough to sense immediately the family's reluctance to have her in their home.

- What significance do you place on Poet-Rósa's presence when Agnes is brought out of the prison at Stóra-Borg?
- What conclusions can you draw about Agnes's physical ill treatment in prison?
- How is Agnes's dislike of Blöndal conveyed to the reader?
- Does Agnes's narrative perspective position you to feel about her in a certain way, prior to her Kornská arrival?

The months spent at Kornská see a physical transformation of Agnes as well as great variations in her psychological state. Her impending execution is ever present; however, there are moments when she briefly experiences satisfaction and even happiness. While her relationship with Jón and Lauga is tense, Steina provides some company. Agnes gradually warms to Margrét and it is the farewelling of Margrét that in the end proves most difficult for her. At first dubious about her choice of Tóti as her religious guide, Agnes gradually views him as more than a 'child' and it is his presence that assists her in her final hours.

- Which moments at Kornsó are the best and the worst for Agnes?
- Why is Kornsó so symbolic to Agnes?
- Trace her relationship with Tóti. Has Agnes actually gained any spiritual guidance from him?
- What effect do Agnes's stories have on the Kornsó family?
- Is there a turning point in her relationship with Margrét?
- What aspects of Agnes's time at Kornsó does the reader admire?
- What effect has the witnessing of so many deaths in her life had on Agnes?
- What private aspects of her life does Agnes omit to tell Tóti or Margrét? Why?
- Agnes is a highly observant woman. Find some examples to support this.
- Use the Running Sheet to collect some of Agnes's thoughts about her impending death.

Björn Blöndal

Blöndal, the District Commissioner, is first introduced through the historical documents of Chapter One. His letters to two members of the clergy are published, including that to Assistant Reverend Thorvardur Jónsson explaining the role required of him as the spiritual advisor of the accused before her execution. The detail of his letter to Tóti establishes that Blöndal is the controlling force in arrangements for Agnes. His is the formal voice of administration and his tone towards Tóti is patronising: *'In all things, Reverend, if you cannot construct your own counsel, seek mine'* (p. 7). Blöndal is first met in person when he dismounts from his horse at Kornsó and asks Steina: *'Do you know who I am?'* (p. 10). Blöndal's disdain for the crumbling croft is evident as the narrative perspective is constructed through his eyes. *'The hovels of the peasants and farmers had begun to repel him, with their cramped rooms of turf that issued clouds of dust in the summer, irritating his lungs'* (p. 11). As we learn later, his own house is a luxurious one for the region, with glass windows and proper tiled floors. Blöndal's arrogance towards Lauga and Steina and his refusal to eat the hard-earned food they serve him, make him an unlikeable character, as does his lack of sympathy towards the girls' fears about having Agnes in the house.

Blöndal is also portrayed as favouring pretty, young Sigga while making an example of Agnes. He is concerned about the financial costs of the trial, imprisonment and executions of the three accused and determined that an example be made of Agnes and Fridrik through their execution. Blöndal monitors Tóti's progress as Agnes's spiritual advisor. Tóti's summons to Hvammur allows the reader to view the District Commissioner's home and gain further insights into his character traits as he questions and lectures Tóti. Blöndal's judgement of Fridrik, based on his red hair and his view that Agnes's reticence and secretiveness is a sign of her guilt, further alienates us from him. Blöndal's servant also reveals that Natan healed the District Commissioner's wife. The documents at the start of Chapter Thirteen highlight Blöndal's painstaking organisation of the executions, as does the Epilogue; his descriptions of the executions match the man's detachment, officiousness and formality.

- Use the Running Sheet to find quotes that support an interpretation of Blöndal as arrogant, unsympathetic and self-absorbed.
- What specific examples can be found of Blöndal's efforts to carefully manage the fund allotted for the Illugastadir case?
- Why does Blöndal want Natan's brother to be the executioner?
- Is there any evidence of how Jón and Margrét feel towards Blöndal and the situation in which he has placed their family?
- Reread the section where Tóti visits Blöndal's house. What does Blöndal's house suggest about him?
- How does Blöndal treat and advise Tóti? Also, how does Hannah Kent further develop the reader's response to Blöndal during the Hvammur visit?
- In the end, what do you believe Blöndal has gained from the execution of Agnes Magnúsdóttir?

Assistant Reverend Thorvardur Jónsson (Tóti)

Tóti, the son and assistant of the Reverend Jónsson of Breidabólstaður, is a young, unworldly man. His only exposure to life outside the valley has been university study in Copenhagen. The appointment as Agnes's spiritual advisor rattles Tóti: a month after Blöndal's visit, his stomach is 'crowded with nerves' and he ironically wishes he were too ill to travel to Kornsó to meet Agnes for the first time. Tóti's father disapproves of his son's acceptance of the task, refusing to offer any advice. The first meeting between Tóti and Agnes is viewed from her perspective; Agnes observes his red hair, physical awkwardness and youth. He has no recollection at this stage of any previous meeting with Agnes, arriving home from this first encounter feeling 'like a wet rag wrung dry and left distorted upon the ground' (p. 48). Interestingly, Tóti recalls her smells and the colour of the vivid bruise on her chin; this sensory relationship with Agnes continues throughout the novel. He is constantly questioning his faith and ability to provide spiritual guidance, frequently turning to prayer to help resolve his fears: 'Please guard my heart against...the *horror* this woman inspires in me' (p. 50). The first real meeting with Agnes is a test of courage for Tóti. Uncertain of how to approach his task of bringing her to absolution, Tóti's awkwardness continues, with Agnes having to complete sentences for him. He still has no memory of helping her over a flooded river and yearns for his snuff horn. His attempts to sound paternalistic and self-assured do not fool Agnes as she tells him: 'Perhaps I have made a mistake, Reverend' (p. 82).

After the failure of the first meeting, Tóti intends to write to Blöndal reneging on the agreement. Surprisingly, it is his father who suggests that as a servant of God he would be disgracing himself. Tóti decides to change tack with Agnes; unsure of her religiousness, perhaps she would prefer to talk of other things. He heads to Undirfell in search of more information, hearing gossip from a local woman, Dagga, who claims Agnes was always fixed on bettering herself and wanted to get 'above her station' (p. 92). The local Reverend Pétur Bjarnason shows Tóti the Ministerial Book that reveals Agnes's confirmation date and records her excellent intellect and her strong knowledge and understanding of Christianity. He tells Agnes of this discovery when they next meet but is unable to persuade her to speak of her past; however, as he goes to leave, Agnes suggests Tóti return the next day and they can talk as she

works. Hannah Kent also reinforces for the reader that Tóti has other commitments besides his religious duties. He must work alongside his father harvesting the crop at Breidabólstaður. Each time he rides to Agnes, he is taken away from other duties at home. The conversation Tóti has with Agnes beside the stream (pp. 106-110) is their first of length. She speaks of her parents, Tóti's innocence of the world apparent as he blushes when Agnes talks of pregnancy and her mother's relationship with a married farmer. He next sees Agnes, summoned by Jón, after her hysterical reaction to the news of Sigga's pardon. This encounter allows Tóti to become closer to Agnes, as he listens to her express her bitterness and belief that Blöndal and the court are hypocrites who follow the will of men, not God's law. Tóti asks for the irons binding Agnes to be removed and prays with her. When Agnes reveals she is glad of his presence, Tóti squeezes her hand, their first physical contact. We sense his pride as Agnes reveals more of her background but are curious at the revelation of some of Tóti's thoughts as he watches Agnes's hands knitting: 'He fought off an irrational desire to touch them' (p. 137). This night, spent listening to Agnes's stories, is a turning point in their relationship.

The visit to Blöndal's home at Hvammur is a revelation for Tóti. He gasps at the beauty of Blöndal's study, is fascinated by the etchings, furniture and other decorations, and so taken aback at the abundance of food brought to Blöndal's desk, he is reluctant to eat. Blöndal's patronising and detached tone unnerves Tóti, who has revealed he provides Agnes with 'a final audience to her life's lonely narrative' and chosen to pray 'for her' rather than with her (p. 166). Tóti is forced to sit and listen to Blöndal's diatribe about the murders and his declaration that Agnes killed Natan because she was spurned. Blöndal is trying to re-position Tóti to see Agnes as 'a woman loose with her emotions and looser with her morals'—a woman who as a practised liar is trying to 'prick your sympathy' (p. 170). Seeing Blöndal through Tóti's eyes is a clever strategy on the author's part. Whereas Agnes is the condemned criminal, Tóti is a young, inexperienced assistant reverend. Tóti's desire to escape from Blöndal's critical assessment of his performance is palpable and his subsequent encounter with Karitas, who shows sympathy for Agnes, help firm his resolve to guide her to execution on his terms, not Blöndal's. He chooses to tell Agnes of his meeting with Blöndal and the direction that he engage her in regular prayer.

As their conversations continue, although it is mainly Agnes speaking, Tóti's character is the means by which elements of her story are unveiled. We know because of the changing narrative perspective that Tóti is not privy to all of Agnes's past, but Hannah Kent deliberately draws these two characters closer together. Tóti increasingly notices Agnes's eyes, hands and body, and when Agnes finally starts to talk of Natan, 'He felt that some invisible membrane between Agnes and him had been broken' (p. 210). He increasingly wants to spend time at Kornská, riding there even when the weather conditions are harsh, and against his father's wishes. Agnes craves his presence when unbeknownst to her, Tóti falls seriously ill. His illness, first hinted at on pages 217, 224 and 236, is never named but keeps Tóti away from Kornská for much of November and all of December. In moments of delirium he imagines Agnes has come: 'Come here. See how our lives are entwined? God willed it so' (p. 251). Tóti imagines Agnes kissing sweat off his skin and then, as flames lick and smoke pours, climbing on top of him, lifting her knife. It is not until January 6 when Blöndal's messenger brings a sealed letter to the door that Tóti is able to struggle out of bed. He is deeply distressed upon reading the letter: 'It could not be

happening. Not like this. Not with so much unsaid and undone, and him not even by her side' (p. 314). The language chosen by the author as Tóti makes his way to the cold church to pray focuses on his terrible physical condition, as well as acting as a reminder of the Tóti's physical awkwardness when we first met him: 'unsteady', 'lurched', 'collapsed', hands trembling', 'skin burning', 'ceiling swam above him' (p. 315). He is determined to carry out his duty of delivering the letter of execution to Kornsó and being the one to tell Agnes she is to die in six days time. 'Agnes, I will be there with you' (p. 317), Tóti says as he feels tears at the back of his throat. All he can do is take her hand and reassure: 'I am here for you, Agnes' (p. 318). Tóti's tenderness and humanity towards Agnes as she nears the end allows us to see how seriously he takes his role, a role that was thrust unwanted upon him. It is Tóti's perspective through which we view 12 January, 1830.

- Much emphasis is placed on Tóti's physical mannerisms, particularly his hands. After finding some examples, consider why Hannah Kent so closely describes Tóti's gestures.
- 'They pick a mouse to tame a cat' (p. 10). Reread the first meeting between Tóti and Agnes on pages 42–43 and their last on page 328. How has Tóti changed, both as a man and a reverend?
- Tóti is very aware of Agnes's physicality—for example, her smells, colours, skin and eyes. Choose your first example of this sensory awareness from page 48 and then collect other examples as their relationship develops.
- At what point in the novel do you feel Tóti decides to commit himself to helping Agnes? Is there an incident or something said that changes his mindset?
- Reread the description of Agnes's dream about Tóti on pages 183–186. How does Tóti react to the story?
- Why does Hannah Kent make Tóti fall ill for such a length of time? Does his illness serve as a plot device or is it more than this?
- How do you imagine Tóti would look back on his appointment as Agnes's spiritual advisor? Has he changed? What influence has Agnes had on the way he views the world?

Jón

Jón Jónsson, master of Kornsó, holds the position of District Officer, therefore placing him under the control of District Commissioner Blöndal. He has no choice but to accept the condemned Agnes into his home. We first meet the 55-year-old, blond haired Jón on page 19 as he and wife, Margrét, travel home about to learn of Blöndal's visit. He is clearly shocked at his daughters' news, trying to placate the household by immediately travelling to Hvammur to see Blöndal, but returning to say it is decided and there will be remuneration for Agnes's custody. Jón is a farmer who ekes out a meagre existence. It is just enough to feed his household and little more. He has even had to sell the wood panelling that once covered the crumbling turf walls of the croft to pay a debt.

At first, Jón refuses to speak to Agnes. He expects her to earn her keep through farm labour but is able soon to acknowledge to others that she is good worker. There

are subtle signs that Jón is not entirely comfortable with the impending execution. This is revealed in a conversation with Tóti on page 105. Margrét notices that Jón has become more watchful over his daughters since Agnes's arrival but still feels he is more concerned about his duty to Blöndal than to his family. Steina reveals to Agnes her father's dictum that the family not speak to her: 'He thinks we're better off leaving you to your chores' (p. 124). When Agnes breaks down after hearing of Sigga's pardon, Jón sends for Tóti, not wanting to inform Blöndal. Jón is overheard telling his daughters on page 178 that Agnes 'must meet her God, and in an ugly way'. He says, 'We must keep you safe from her', also making it clear that Steina and Lauga must not pity Agnes. However, after Agnes assists with Róslín's delivery, he starts to see her differently. When Agnes serves his meal, he looks her in the eyes for the first time quietly thanking her. Jón is not quite sure how to deal with his family's interest in listening to Agnes's conversations with Tóti. When he suggests the Reverend speak with Agnes away from his family, Tóti and Margrét do not agree, saying he has nothing to fear. 'I hope that is the case' replies Jón who then pinches his lips together and keeps quiet (p. 217).

Jón's mouth opens in horror when Agnes tells Reverend Bjarnason her surname is Jónsdóttir. We hear from Tóti that Jón has told the Reverend Agnes's behaviour was 'unpredictable' and also 'mentioned hysterics' (p. 232). Through Margrét's conversation with Agnes, Jón is revealed as a man who does not speak much. She knows he worries about her health and does his best to live a quiet Christian life, asking Agnes not to think him a 'bad man'. 'He wouldn't wish harm to any soul, only with you here...' (p. 270); Margrét's words suggest Agnes's presence has affected Jón, giving him more to worry about on top of the struggling farm and her illness. He reacts quietly when Tóti arrives with the news of the execution date but recognises Agnes's shock, offering her brandy. Interestingly, as the convoy of horses makes its way to the execution site, Hannah Kent uses the title 'District Officer Jón' rather than simply 'Jón' as he rides alongside Tóti 'with his mouth in a determined line' (p. 325). When Tóti struggles to carry Agnes, Jón offers assistance and the final description of him in the novel is of a man 'bent on his knees, his hands clasped before him, his lips muttering the Lord's Prayer'.

- As the reader does not see events from Jón's perspective and must rely on Agnes, Tóti and Margrét, he is a somewhat enigmatic character. What conclusions do you reach about Jón?

Margrét

We are first introduced to Margrét as she and husband, Jón, head home to Kornsa through the Vatnsdalur valley. Margrét is wracked by fits of coughing and spitting that make her breathless. She is obviously unwell, but noticing the new cow of a local family tells Jón they could do with one as well. He says they can't afford one, a response that allows the author to convey Margrét's bitterness and frustration: 'In good time I'll be dead' (p. 20). She too is a woman who has craved more from life. The news of Agnes's impending arrival in her home is horrifying and Margrét struggles to understand the family's obligation to Blöndal: 'Are we just going to yield to this? Like a dog rolling over?' (p. 27). Her anger increases when she learns that Jón will be at Hvammur when Agnes arrives. Margrét's maternal instinct is to send her daughters away to safety, fearful that the family will be murdered in their beds. We view Margrét through Tóti's eyes on the evening of Agnes's arrival. He notes her 'hard face' and her comment, 'I do not like to share my home with the Devil's

children' (p. 39). Her words to one of the guards are also harsh: 'Just make sure the bitch stays away from the knives in my kitchen' (p. 41).

More is revealed of Margrét's hard existence through the third person narrative just before she first meets Agnes. Her despair at their unhealthy living conditions is shown as she thinks about the dust, the collapsing turf walls, the dankness in winter, mould dripping on blankets and the pervading illness: 'The home had begun to disintegrate, a hovel that had spread its own state of collapse to its inhabitants. Last year two servants had died from diseases wrought by the damp' (p. 43). Margrét's own lungs are issuing 'rot' with increased regularity, Hannah Kent regularly drawing attention to her coughing fits to make the reader aware that Margrét, in her own way, is also facing an early death. Margrét's reaction upon meeting Agnes is one of shock, particularly at the prisoner's filth and wretchedness. She sees the physical signs of abuse including the large facial bruise that also shook Tóti. Margrét, 'invigorated by [a] sudden curl of anger', asks the guard 'Is it necessary to keep her bound like a lamb ripe for slaughter?' (p. 46). Forgetting her earlier fears, Margrét dismisses the guard and orders Agnes to follow her, aware of the crusted blood and stale urine. Her intention is to clean Agnes although her heart lurches when Agnes, desperate for water, falls to the ground and drinks from the kettle. She awakes early the next morning, watching the sleeping Agnes with fascination after a month's wait of fear and anticipation. The only knowledge Margrét has about murderesses is from the sagas, reminding herself that Agnes is not a saga woman but a 'landless workmaid raised on a porridge of moss and poverty' (p. 52). She reflects on the washing of Agnes the previous night; a woman too weak to undress herself, flea-ridden, bony from starvation and a body that is 'a terrain of abuse' (p. 54). Aware of the strangeness that Agnes will soon be underground, Margrét provides clean clothes, food and an ointment to dress wounds made, ironically, by Natan. Although she speaks only briefly and harshly to Agnes, we are positioned to see that Margrét is capable of compassion and indignation at injustice. She may be appalled at Agnes's crimes but cannot condone the ill treatment dealt to the prisoner at Stóra-Borg.

The practical Margrét quickly sets Agnes to work, wanting to know her servant skills and whether she can wield a knife to help cut hay: 'Well, as far as I'm concerned, you shall work for your keep. Yes, you shall pay for my inconvenience. I have no use for a criminal, only a servant' (p. 61). She lays out a strict set of rules by which Agnes must abide. Margrét's strength of character is also observed through her interactions with Róslín, a neighbour whose tendency to stickybeak and gossip she finds annoying. The sarcastic side of her personality is revealed as she defiantly tells Róslín the prisoner's name and comments on the good eyesight Róslín must possess to draw her to Kornsó. The ensuing conversation with Róslín coupled with Margrét's strength of character further position the reader in favour of the mistress of Kornsó. However, soon afterwards she slaps Agnes after Lauga's accusation about the silver brooch, telling her, 'You can prove your penitence by working like a dog' (p. 74).

Many observations about Margrét come from Agnes's perspective: her worn clothing, the 'rattle of phlegm' when she coughs, chasing the ravens away, an action that worries Agnes. Tóti also provides insights into Margrét's personality, sensing she doesn't like Agnes in the parlour and prefers Agnes to be working rather than talking with him. Hannah Kent also sets up a conversation between Margrét and her best

friend, Ingibjörg, as a means for the reader to hear how she actually feels about having Agnes at Kornsó. ‘She’s nothing like how I imagined a murderess’ reveals Margrét, describing how Agnes sleeps, works and eats, all in silence. ‘I often wonder what she’s thinking’ (p. 116). She tells Ingibjörg how Steina follows Agnes around, worrying that her daughter’s head might be filled with wickedness, and also complains that Jón only seems concerned about his duty to Blöndal. There is an implicit recognition at the end of the conversation that Margrét is finding the extra pair of hands rather useful. Margrét benefits from Agnes’s assistance in the kitchen and gradually relaxes as she becomes used to her presence. Guests come to eat one September morning and Róslín is appalled to see Agnes: ‘You invite us all with *her* here!’ Margrét appears to secretly enjoy Róslín’s discomfort and keeps Agnes mostly, but not entirely, out of sight.

Chapter Eight, sees Margrét and Agnes talking more openly together; they both feel a sense of foreboding in the grey sky as the coldness of autumn arrives. They both list people they know who have died on the mountains. Margrét finds some comfort in talking about death aloud ‘as though in naming things, you could prevent them from happening’ (p. 199). She wonders if that is the reason why Agnes speaks more to the Reverend than to her. Agnes’s role in the birth of Róslín’s baby provides a shared moment with Margrét. She admires the way Agnes stays calm, taking control of the breech birth, stroking Róslín ‘with those slender palms of hers, soothing her...’ (p. 200). This event marks a turning point in their relationship. Margrét starts to ask Agnes about herbal medicine and dyes. She recalls Agnes’s arrival, now feeling that it had unified the family and brought them closer together. But Margrét also worries that she is getting too used to Agnes’s presence and her usefulness. Her back pain has eased and cough is less troublesome. ‘She avoided thinking about what would happen when the day of execution was announced’ (p. 202). When Agnes suffers a panic attack on the meat-salting day, Margrét finds her outside and sits by her side. Her gesture of taking Agnes’s hand is touching: ‘Come Agnes. You’ll catch your death’ (p. 207). Steina has noticed the changing nature of the relationship between her mother and Agnes, telling Lauga; ‘For all she says, I think Mamma holds a fondness for her now’ (p. 208).

Margrét, increasingly troubled by her hacking cough that brings up clots of blood, agrees to try Agnes’s lichen jelly despite Lauga’s protestations. One night she awakens to hear Agnes crying in her sleep and goes to soothe her. She sits on the edge of Agnes’s bed coughing blood, seeing the truth of Agnes’s murmured words, ‘Two dying women’ (p. 269). Margrét suggests they go to the kitchen where she builds up the fire and makes them warm milk. This is a pivotal conversation between the two women as they progress from discussing day-to-day practicalities to Agnes recalling more stories from her past. Tóti’s absence, the reason as yet unknown to both women, has brought Agnes’s tale to a halt but now the reader can appreciate why Hannah Kent makes this authorial decision. Margrét, who feels an impulse to put her arm around Agnes, can now become the audience as Agnes tells of her life at Illugastadir and the events leading up to the murders. Margrét’s shock is palpable when Tóti arrives with the execution letter; however, she instinctively knows Agnes will want to hear the news from Tóti. ‘It’s not right...It wasn’t her fault’ mutters Margrét who is desperate to help Agnes.

Margrét’s gesture of providing Agnes with respectable clothing and the silver brooch is poignant. ‘It’s the least we can do’, she tells her daughters. The reader’s final

image of Margrét is of her entwining her fingers in Agnes's and telling her, 'You are not a monster' (p. 323). Agnes also hears Margrét's other words: 'We'll remember you, Agnes...I am right here, Agnes. You'll be all right, my girl. My girl' (p. 324).

- Reread pages 44–47 and 51–55. Discuss how Margrét reacts to her first contact with the prisoner.
- How does Agnes view Margrét?
- Read pages 66–68 again. How does Margrét react to Róslín's overtures of 'sympathy'?
- Why has Margrét's attitude to Agnes changed so significantly by the novel's end?

Steina

'Steina Jónsdóttir was piling dried dung in the yard...' (p. 10). Life is not easy for Steina, the elder daughter of Jón and Margrét. Her life extends little further than the family's turf croft at Kornsó where she is expected to work hard. Blöndal observes her ungainliness and dirty fingernails when he first arrives to inform the family about Agnes's placement with them. Even though her sister, Lauga, is younger, Steina appears to defer to her—a tense sisterly relationship is depicted in the novel. Her reaction to Blöndal's news is one of shock, 'one hand over her mouth and the other clutching the letter' (p. 17). However, she astutely sees through his scheme: 'You're putting them *here*? With us? Because the court in Reykjavik wants to avoid the cost of sending them abroad?' (p. 17). Steina recoils with anger as Blöndal patronisingly places his hand on her shoulder. We learn when her parents arrive home that Steina has thrown Blöndal's letter into the fire after arguing with Lauga and is further upset when Lauga is the one to break the news of Agnes.

She is sickened by the thought of the murders but when Agnes arrives, Steina's character allows the reader a contrasting view of the prisoner from the rest of the Kornsó family. She recognises Agnes: 'I think I know you...You were a servant here in this valley before, weren't you?' (p. 77). Steina remembers, as a young girl, meeting Agnes on the road as the family moved to Kornsó in May 1819. She recollects how Agnes plaited Lauga's hair and gave them an egg each. Although the rest of the family seem concerned about Steina's efforts to be friendly towards Agnes, her curiosity, intuitive humanity and memory of the small kindness shown ten years earlier, draw Steina to this condemned woman living amidst them. She asks Agnes if she is hurt when Gudmundur's deliberately clumsy handling of the scythe makes her stumble, is inquisitive about Agnes's medicinal and cooking skills, and apart from Tóti, is the only person to openly communicate with Agnes. Margrét believes Steina makes up stories, the smiles she witnesses her daughter direct at Agnes worrying her that Steina will be influenced like Sigga: 'What if Agnes has the same effect on Steina? Makes her go to the bad. Fills her head with wickedness' (p. 118). Lauga complains that Steina talks about Agnes all the time: 'You treat her like a sister more than you do me' (p. 210). Steina's response shows her capacity for compassion and empathy: 'And I can't stop thinking that she wasn't always like this. She was our age once...' (p. 210).

It is Steina who inadvertently triggers Agnes's emotional collapse when suggesting she help mount a petition or appeal: 'You know, like the one they've got up for Sigga'. Steina sees Agnes's grief and begs her parents for help. She is curious about

the conversations between Agnes and the Reverend, listening with fascination to Agnes's unfolding tale being told to Tóti at night. Unlike Lauga, Steina is not interested in Róslín's gossipy stories of Agnes, suggesting an independence of thought and a desire to reach her own conclusions about Agnes. This is another reason Steina's character is so important to the novel; she listens to Agnes, appreciating answers to her questions. Steina values Agnes's words and can (ironically) also see how skilled Agnes is at housekeeping. She is full of admiration for the way Agnes salts the meat and makes the lichen jelly that eases Margrét's cough. Steina is depicted at times as clumsy, careless with her clothes, a poor cook and an unskilled knitter but she is an intelligent girl who feels frustration at her family's lack of power. As observed by Agnes, Steina is not a happy girl but is unlikely to escape her destiny of living a hard life like her mother. She is 'tear streaked' the night before the execution and wraps her arms around Agnes's neck upon their parting, loudly sobbing, 'I'm so sorry' (p. 324). Perhaps Steina could have been the friend Agnes never had.

- Reread the conversation between Steina and Agnes on pages 123–125. What is revealed about Steina and how she perceives Agnes at this stage of the novel?
- On page 177, Agnes notes Steina 'following me like a shadow'. What observations does she make about Steina's life?

Lauga

Many readers will not warm to Lauga. She is a contrast to her sister's more reasoned and compassionate approach to Agnes. Lauga, although younger than Steina, is portrayed as possessing greater confidence and skill at household chores. She is more interested than Steina in making a good impression on Blöndal, providing him with food, speaking politely and seemingly aware of his position of power. After Blöndal's departure, an angry, anxious Lauga tells her sister off for putting their social standing at risk by challenging him and furthers the sisterly tensions by ensuring she is the one to tell her parents. She has heard about the trial and is fearful of Agnes's presence at Kornská from the very start, viewing it as a punishment for the family: 'But why, Pabbi?...What did we do wrong?' (p. 26). Lauga is influenced by superstition, asking her mother if Agnes will show some outward hint of evil or evidence of the Devil; 'a harelip, a snaggle tooth, a birthmark; some small outer defect' (p. 52). She listens to the gossip of Róslín and is quick to jump to conclusions; for example, when she accuses Agnes of trying to steal her brooch. Lauga refuses to sleep in the bed next to Agnes, watches her like a hawk all the time and does not work co-operatively with her on the chores. She is angry at her sister's familiarity with Agnes, jealously complaining that Steina has more time for the prisoner than for her own sister. Agnes notes Lauga as a 'tremendous sulker' who reminds her a little 'of Sigga, only smarter' (p. 178).

As her mother starts communicating more openly with Agnes, Lauga's anger and jealousy build further. She complains to Margrét that she's sick of Agnes staring at her clothes and belongings. Margrét wonders how Lauga could be jealous 'of a woman who would be dead before the weather turned again' but does notice a change in her daughter: 'Yet, there was an intensity to her revulsion that seemed fired by something more than resentment' (p. 201). Even the day spent preparing the meat brings out the worst in Lauga, who claims Agnes has probably poisoned the

whole barrel. She angrily tells Steina: ‘Am I the only person who sees her for who she is?’ Lauga had expected Agnes to be locked up, not to live freely in their home. She claims ‘everyone in the valley gives us strange looks now’ and worries that because they are ‘all marked now’, she and Steina will ‘never be married’ (p. 209). Perhaps it is Lauga’s concerns about the repercussions for the family’s social status in the valley that drive her behaviour, whereas Steina is more focused on the present rather than the future. Ironically, the reader also remembers Agnes’s concerns about how she was perceived by the people of the valley. As Agnes tells her story to Tóti, Lauga interrupts to say she knows about Natan’s dreams from Róslín. When her father reprimands her, Lauga reacts angrily: ‘My interference! How about *her* interference! She’s in *our* home!’ (p. 214). She also responds when Agnes declares herself to be ‘Agnes Jónsdóttir’ to Reverend Bjarnason: ‘What? She isn’t our—’ before being cut off by Tóti (p. 230). The suggestion of a jelly to ease Margrét’s cough is also treated with loud derision but her mother silences her daughter: ‘Enough, Lauga...Enough’ (p. 254). Surprisingly, Lauga gasps with shock when the letter of execution arrives and that night is found by Margrét crying in the pantry ‘I only wanted a minute to myself’ (p. 320). The next morning, blinking away tears, she hands over her brooch for Margrét to pin to Agnes’s bodice, and when bidding farewell, Lauga collapses in tears when Agnes says to her: ‘That is the first time you have called me by my name’ (p. 324).

- Reread the conversation between Lauga and Steina on pages 208–210. Why does Lauga view Agnes so differently to her sister?
- Reverend Bjarnason describes Lauga as ‘smart as a whip’ and ‘a beauty’ who ‘runs circles around her sister’ (p. 93). Do you agree with this assessment?
- Consider Lauga’s tears on Agnes’s departure. Do you think she is crying for herself or for Agnes? Does your understanding of Lauga change at this point?

Natan Ketilsson

Natan’s name is known throughout the valley and beyond, almost like a celebrity of the times, those not having met him personally hearing of him through gossip, rumour and stories. Some choose to greatly admire his skills at healing while others view him as a womaniser, sorcerer or dangerous atheist who got his name from Satan. Natan is clearly a cruel, complicated and manipulative man who may be interpreted by some readers as amoral. The manner in which he manoeuvres Agnes and Sigga, and his antagonism towards Fridrik, helps drive the plot to its ultimate conclusion. Yet, he is also a charismatic and intelligent man with a great penchant for the natural world. Natan tells Agnes: ‘Do not think nature is not watchful of us...She is as awake as you and I...And as secretive’ (p. 119). He is described as ‘not handsome’: ‘I thought he looked like a fox with his chestnut hair and beady little eyes...’ (p. 192) says Agnes, also noticing that Natan’s hands are like those of a woman.

So just who is Natan Ketilsson, who introduces himself to Agnes on their first meeting as Natan Lyngdal? This man with a ‘knack for discovering beauty’ (p. 52), who has ‘spent more time in beds of married women than in his Illugastadir workshop’ (p. 66), who has been whipped for stealing when younger, who is ‘never without money’ (p. 90), who ‘laughed at the word of God but trusted in dreams’ (p. 119), didn’t believe in sin but believed everything came in threes, had a lot of enemies, ‘liked to keep people guessing’ (p. 191) and whose ‘bastards litter this

valley' (p. 170). Natan makes Agnes the happiest she has ever been in her life but also treats her appallingly. He makes love to Agnes in a way she has never before experienced, teaches her much about science, healing and nature, trusts her in his workshop, reads to her from the sagas and provides good food, clothing, shoes and other gifts. But Natan also misrepresented Agnes's role at Illugastadir, provokes arguments, leaves bruises on her body (p. 221) and slaps her hard after the 'death waves' incident. He tells of breaking the front legs of a fox kit in order to make it cry so he can kill its mother, is frequently away for long periods of time, reprimands Agnes and treats her with scornful amusement when she speaks of his relationship with Sigga. The throwing of Agnes out into the winter snow can be seen as the action of a man who is 'off-balance'. She talks of his moods and dark thoughts, recognising his contradictory nature: 'He always knew what to say to people; what would make them feel good. And what would cut the deepest' (p. 193).

When we reflect upon Natan, there is not a great deal to admire, a reaction that perhaps positions us to feel somewhat unsympathetic when he is murdered. Agnes's narrative, or dual narrative if you wish (the one she tells to Tóti and Margrét and the additional parts she provides only to the reader), spends more time describing Natan's darker character traits than his positive ones. The official narrative provided by the historical documents placed at the start of each chapter naturally portrays Natan Ketilsson as a victim of a brutal and unwarranted murder for which justice must be meted out to the perpetrators.

- Examine how Natan is viewed by other characters in the novel through what they reveal to Tóti, Margrét or the court.
 - Dagga—pages 90–91.
 - Margrét—pages 52 and 66.
 - Blöndal—page 170.
 - Karitas—pages 175–6.
 - Róslín—pages 66-67, pages 214–215.
 - Rósa—pages 243–244.
- Make a list of adjectives and nouns that are associated with Natan. For example, 'sorcerer' and 'superstitious'.
- Discuss why Natan 'chooses' Agnes in the first place.
- Reread the incident where Natan and Daniel are hit by three large waves while out in the boat. Can you explain his behaviour during and after the incident?
- What do you believe Natan wanted out of his relationships with Agnes and Sigga? Rósa?
- Why does he dislike Fridrik with such intensity?

Sigga

The character of Sigga can only be constructed from court records and the views of others including Blöndal and Agnes. Sigga is first mentioned on page 37. Agnes

refers to her as ‘unschooled in nightmares and ghosts’ remembering how she warned Sigga about ravens. We learn she was imprisoned with Agnes but taken elsewhere, ‘away from you’ (p. 38). Before Agnes fully reveals her story of Sigga, rumours about her are heard at Kornsó. One of the guards tells Tóti on his first visit ‘A lot of people Vatnsnes way hope Sigga will receive a pardon from the King. Too young and sweet to die’ (p. 41). This man also claims that Blöndal is behind Sigga, as she reminds him of his wife. Agnes, as she tries to understand why she herself is unable to appeal her sentence, tells Tóti that Sigga is ‘dumb and pretty and young...’. Tóti’s meeting with Blöndal reveals more information about sixteen-year-old Sigga. She burst into tears when summoned and according to Blöndal, did not even attempt to lie: ‘She is too simple-minded, too young to know how. She told me everything’ (p. 169). Sigga told him how Agnes hated Natan and was jealous of the attention he paid Sigga. She also testified in court that Natan preferred her attentions.

These observations about Sigga do not appear to match Agnes’s recollections of her in the first half of the novel. Agnes remembers the dresses they make together, food they liked to eat and Sigga’s propensity to giggle. There is an implication at times that she misses Sigga. However, our view of Sigga is shifted when Agnes starts to tell her story of Natan: ‘And all that while, there was Sigga’ (p. 222). Sigga believes she is the housekeeper at Illugastadir, enthusiastically welcoming Agnes as an experienced servant who can help her. She had grown up at Stóra-Borg and hoped Agnes could both teach her and provide companionship at the isolated farm. Sigga’s infatuation with Fridrik and hopes of marrying him create tensions at Illugastadir. Again, Hannah Kent’s use of Agnes’s narrative perspective intertwined with the information about Sigga presented from Tóti arouses the reader’s curiosity. **Is Sigga really as naïve as she is portrayed? Why does she sleep with both Fridrik and Natan? Has she been honest with Blöndal and her court testimony? Sigga’s character is also used to make the reader ask questions about Agnes’s version of events. Does it really take Agnes until page 264, when she hears Natan and Sigga making love, to understand how Natan is toying with them both?** After Yuletide, Sigga talks less to Agnes, becoming moody and constantly watching out the window, an action Agnes interprets as desperation to keep Natan and Fridrik apart. Sigga shows kindness when she brings Agnes her clothing to the cowshed but is later depicted as seeming resistant towards Fridrik when he and Agnes return to Illugastadir. She claims Natan has changed his mind and won’t allow the marriage: ‘He says he will be the one to marry me if anyone does’ (p. 295). The last image of Sigga in the novel is of her crouched whimpering against a wall holding Rósa’s little girl.

- Sigga is described as tearful a number of times. Do you believe her tears are genuine? Do you ever feel sorry for Sigga?
- How does Sigga’s character enhance your understanding of how women are treated in the novel?
- Why does Blöndal see Sigga so differently to Agnes?

Fridrik

Fridrik is only seventeen when he is charged with Natan’s murder. This seems very young to the contemporary reader but needs to be seen in context of 1820s Icelandic society. He has been brought up in a poverty stricken household and is

represented as being extremely focused on money, particularly through gaining access to Natan's hidden savings. The first mention of Fridrik is in the account from the Supreme Court Trials of 1829 that starts Chapter Three. One sentence in the report says 'Fridrik came to commit this evil through hatred of Natan, and a desire to steal' (p. 57). The testimony of Reverend Tómasson at the start of Chapter Seven focuses on Fridrik. He describes Fridrik as having a good intellect but reports a history of bad behaviour and disobedience such that his parents complained about Fridrik to the Reverend in autumn 1825 (Fridrik would have been fourteen). Blöndal reveals his view of Fridrik to Tóti during their meeting at Hvammur. Apart from the fact Blöndal doesn't trust anyone with red hair (Fridrik is red-haired), he believes Fridrik 'was a boy raised in a household careless with morality and Christian teaching... Slothfulness, greed, and rude, callow inclinations bred in him a weak spirit, and a longing for worldly gain (p. 171). Fridrik confessed to murdering the two men with the aid of Agnes and Sigga and showed no remorse or repentance at the time of his arrest. However, several mentions are made later in the novel of Reverend Tómasson's success in encouraging Fridrik to repent and in 'bringing him to God' as his execution approaches. 'Fridrik has come to repent of his crime and see the error of his ways... acknowledges that his impending execution is right... He recognises it as "God's justice" ' (p. 172). Fridrik's family also suffer because of the Illugastadir murders. Agnes mentions that they were whipped and the younger brother tells the court of Fridrik's stealing of Natan's sheep even though his mother has told him not to mention the theft. His mother, Thórbjörg, who already has a criminal record, is sent to prison in Copenhagen.

Apart from Blöndal and the court documents, our interpretation of Fridrik is shaped by Agnes's perspective. Fridrik unsettles her as soon as she meets him: 'There was something off-balance in Fridrik' (p. 235). Agnes believes he is desperate to prove himself a man, is easily offended and sees the world as against him. 'I did not like that in him, the way he looked for a reason to anger. He liked to fight' (p. 236). Fridrik talks constantly of fighting and money, Natan believing he only visited with the goal of stealing. Agnes portrays Fridrik's relationship with Natan as fraught with tension, particularly over Fridrik's hopes to marry Sigga. He is banned from visiting Illugastadir although does come when Natan is absent, on one occasion helping with the birthing of lambs, a task Agnes and Sigga are unable to manage alone. The symbolism of money is again associated with Fridrik when he offers Natan three silver coins in return for permission to marry Sigga. Tensions rise again at this time as Fridrik claims Natan has been taking advantage of Sigga: 'He's been raping her! I'm going to kill him' (p. 282). This, plus Fridrik's killing of Natan's sheep, is part of the precipitous events leading to the murders. Agnes provides further insights into Fridrik's family when she seeks refuge at Katadalur after Natan throws her out into the snow. She tells Margrét that Fridrik's mother told him ' "You will not have Sigga while Natan is alive." ' Agnes's account of the actual murders paints a picture of a cowardly Fridrik crumbled sobbing on the floor, unable to finish what he had begun. However, he has wit enough to implicate Agnes, telling her, 'You'll be hanged for this' (p. 303).

- Reread Blöndal's account of Fridrik on pages 170–172. Do his views match those of Agnes?
- How many references can you find about Fridrik's obsession with Natan's money?

- Do you believe his desire to marry Sigga is genuine?
- It is interesting that Hannah Kent develops Fridrik's character as one who brings much tension to Illugastadir. What interpretation have you developed of Fridrik?

Rósa Gudmundsdóttir

Rósa, although classifiable in literary terms as a minor character, has a presence that permeates Agnes's story. She is another historical character who has been re-imagined by the author for the purposes of the novel. The real life Rósa Gudmundsdóttir, also known as Vatnsenda-Rósa, was a writer of well-known poems and songs in Iceland, and she did appear as a witness at the trial of Agnes Magnúsdóttir.

By the end of the novel, we are well aware that Rósa is Natan's ex-lover, mother of his child and jealous of Agnes. She is also Poet-Rósa, known throughout Iceland for her poetry. Even Agnes loves Rósa's poems; they 'kindled' her soul. 'Her poetry makes lamps out of people' (p. 248). However, we may have forgotten that Rósa is first mentioned by Agnes on page 35 as she is taken outside from her Stóra-Borg cell to be transported to Kornsó: 'Then I saw Rósa, watching from a distance, clutching the hand of her little daughter. It was a comfort to see someone I recognised...'. Agnes's quick smile at Rósa unlocks the crowd's fury. The next mention of Rósa comes from Margrét's perspective; she has heard from Ingibjörg that it was Agnes who had caused Natan to break off his affair with Poet-Rósa. Poet-Rósa's poem to Agnes Magnúsdóttir, written in June 1828, is quoted at the start of Chapter Five. Agnes interprets the poem's words as words of pain, grief, bitterness and love, writing her own poem in response. We later learn Rósa was Agnes's only visitor at Stóra-Borg when she brought the poem of accusation, blaming Agnes for Natan's death and making her life meaningless. Rósa fell in love with Natan during a two-year period when he resided with her and her husband at Vatnsendi. A reasonable assumption is that Thóranna was conceived in 1825, the year in which Natan leaves to set up home at Illugastadir. He tells Agnes that Rósa suffocated him, taking away his independence and he had told her by letter that his love for Agnes eclipsed that which he'd had for her. Thóranna is three years old when Rósa deposits her at Illugastadir in 1828. Rósa's visit is quite possibly a deliberate ploy to upset the delicate situation there and to see Agnes and Sigga for herself. She refuses hospitality, telling Natan, 'All your whores supping together under your roof? No, thank you' (p. 250).

We need to remember that our view of Rósa is shaped mainly through the eyes of Agnes. Agnes knows Rósa loved Natan but angrily claims, 'She was a married woman...He wasn't hers to love!' (p. 135). She also accuses Rósa of bragging about her poems but acknowledges that Natan loved how Rósa knew how to build things with words: 'She invented her own language to say what everyone else could only feel'. Rósa also teaches Agnes, for example, telling whether a baby is a boy or girl by the way the belly protrudes, so we can assume conversations took place between them to which the reader is not privy.

Rósa is summonsed to give evidence at Agnes's trial. The official record of her testimony starts Chapter Ten. She declines to give any information about the case, telling the court there is nothing unusual she can say about Agnes or Sigga, as she doesn't know them well. It is revealed that Fridrik visited her in the spring of 1826,

propositioning her and seeking to find money she had made Natan hide with her for safekeeping. Rósa says nothing that might incriminate Agnes.

- Reread the poems written by Poet-Rósa and Agnes at the start of Chapter Five. Can you make any interpretations about their feelings towards each other as expressed through poetry?
- Agnes tells Tóti, 'I don't think she'd describe herself as my friend' (p. 134); later she says to Margrét and Ingibjörg, in response to a query whether she and Rósa are friends, 'We aren't' (p. 180). She also wonders if she and Rósa might have been friends 'if we'd met in another way' (p. 248). Now reread pages 249–251. Why are Agnes and Rósa unable to be friends? What evidence can you find of their jealousy towards one another?
- Why might Rósa call Agnes 'The Rose of Kidjaskard'?

ISSUES AND THEMES

There are many issues and themes explored in *Burial Rites*. Assessment task and examination questions may well require an exploration of one or more of these. Ensure that useful notes are made on each. Examples are provided for some of the headings below but you will need to return to the novel to find others.

Landscape and weather

- Bleakness.
- Metaphor for unforgiving harshness of life.
- Rhythms of the seasons.
- Snow, ice, winds.
- Mountains, valleys, sea.
- Effects on people: Margrét dying from the damp, Tóti riding through storms, Agnes seeking refuge in the cowshed and using cow dung to keep her feet warm.

Justice

- The death sentence imposed on the three accused.
- Sigga's pardon.
- Blöndal's insistence on the men of the valley attending the executions.
- Capital punishment as deterrent, as revenge, as state sanctioned murder.

Truth

- The truth as presented in the trial.
- The giving of testimony or evidence.
- Agnes's inability to make her words heard in court.
- The truth of what is recorded in the official documents.
- Natan's idea of truth.
- The distortion of truth through rumours and stories.
- Agnes telling Tóti and Margrét the truth, but not the whole truth.

Death

- Death sentence
- Agnes's experiences of death: her half-sister, Inga's death in childbirth and her guilt about hugging the baby too tightly.
- Agnes awaiting her own death.
- *'Good thing, then, that there is no one left to love. No one left to bury' (p. 150).*

- Margrét's knowledge that her illness will claim her life.
- Natan's 'death waves'.
- The murder of Natan and Pétur.

Brutality

- The act of murder.
- The physical and sexual abuse of Agnes at Stóra-Borg.

Goodness and kindness

- Tóti's treatment of Agnes.
- Margrét's act of providing the clothing for Agnes to wear to her execution.
- Agnes giving the eggs to the young girls she meets on the road.
- Inga reading the sagas to Agnes.

Fight for survival

- Agnes supporting herself from an early age.
- Risks of childbirth.
- Fighting the natural elements.
- Tóti's near fatal illness.

Hardships of rural life

- Worry about running out of food.
- Croft at Kornská in a state of disrepair.
- The dampness of the badstofa causing Margrét's illness and the death of two servants.
- Dried dung used in fires.

Social structure/class

- Pauper and illegitimate children treated badly.
- Agnes's abuse in prison and lack of care for her physical needs.
- Iceland has a reliance on the Danish king and the Supreme Court in Copenhagen.
- Kornská family have no choice in accepting Agnes.
- Lauga's fear that she and Steina unmarried after Agnes is confined with the family.
- Blöndal's glass windows compared to the pig skin windows at Kornská.
- Dispossession of women, children and the poor.

Fear

- Agnes's fear of her execution.
- Margrét's fear of dying from her illness.
- The fear at having Agnes present at Kornsó.
- Fear of Blöndal.
- Tóti's fear of his own inadequacies.

Gender roles

- The patriarchal society where males control bureaucracy and government.
- Male control of economy, religion and politics.
- Blöndal's complete power over constituents.
- Women carrying out domestic work.
- Difficulties for single women like Agnes.
- Farmers expecting sexual favours in return for employment.
- Men making the decisions.

Relationships and love

- The need to be loved: Agnes's yearning for love is a central theme.
- Romantic love—Agnes falling in love with Natan: *'For the first time in my life, someone saw me, and I loved him because he made me feel I was enough'* (p. 221).
- Marriage—Jón and Margrét, Björn and Inga, Lauga's expectation, her mission to marry (Sigga).
- Friendship—Agnes's desire for a friend.
- Siblings—Steina and Lauga, Agnes's siblings.
- God—All characters are Christian, but their relationships with God differ.
- Community—Relationships and gossip in a small community.
- Maternal—Agnes has not experienced the love of her birth mother. Her foster mother dies in childbirth. Margrét's worry for her daughters if she dies. Margrét starting to think of Agnes as a daughter.

Manipulation

- Natan's manipulation of Agnes and Sigga.
- The manipulation of words.
- Employers manipulating Agnes.
- Blöndal's manipulation of the execution process.

Superstitions, dreams and omens

- Agnes suspected of being a witch by Róslín.
- Old wives' tales.
- Natan's potions and healing powers.
- Agnes's dreams—she dreams of Natan the first night at Kornsa (p. 58), dreams of execution block and Natan (p. 118–120), tells Tóti her dream of dying (p. 133), recalls the dreams of her foster-mother clawing at the storehouse door (p. 157), tells Tóti of having met him before in a dream (pp. 183–85 and her nightmare that precipitates her conversation with Margrét (p. 269).
- Natan's dreams—he believes dreams mean something. He trusts in dreams but not God.
- Róslín's version of Natan's dream as told to Lauga.
- Natan's dreams of seeing death and blood everywhere.
- Tóti's dreams.
- Pétur's dream.
- Fridrik tells Rósa his mother had a dream about where Natan's money was hidden.

Rites and traditions

- The title of the novel—*Burial Rites*.
- Death rites such as the Icelandic Burial Hymn.
- Flitting Days.
- Harvest celebrations.

Spirituality and religion

- Appointments of spiritual advisors for the condemned.
- Christianity—on the surface but underneath a belief in the workings of fate.
- Rites of Christianity still take place even though death by beheading.
- Tóti's conversations with his father.

Education

- The importance placed on literacy and testing by local officials.
- Agnes manages self-education and her love of learning.
- Björn doesn't want Inga to teach the sagas to Agnes.
- Natan's learning of science and Latin.

Possessions

- Agnes's white sack and her stone.
- List of prisoners' possessions.
- Lauga's silver brooch.
- Natan's sheep and money.
- Blöndal's well furnished home.

Repentance

- Fridrik's repentance.
- Blöndal's expectation of repentance.

Personal growth

- Tóti.
- Steina and Lauga.
- Margrét.

Stories and preservation of memories

- The need to be remembered.
- Icelandic Sagas.
- Stories about Natan.
- Agnes's story.
- The documented story.
- Stories that are twisted by others or taken out of context.
- Those who don't want to listen or disbelieve the stories of others.
- Poet-Rósa and Agnes both write poetry.
- Inga reading sagas to young Agnes against her husband's will.

Names

- Icelandic names.
- Agnes is not referred to by her name in court or at Stóra-Borg.
- Agnes Magnúsdóttir/Agnes Jónsdóttir.
- Remembering names—Agnes remembered Tóti's name from her first encounter with him.
- '...If no one will say your name, you are forgotten. I am forgotten' (p. 320).
- Hannah Kent ensuring the name, Agnes Magnúsdóttir, will be remembered outside Iceland.

Ravens

- ‘Their dark shapes look like omens...cruel birds but wise...The raven had known’ (p. 37).
- The first mention of Sigga is when Agnes recalls telling her ‘*never to call out to or feed a raven*’ (p. 38).
- Margrét sees ravens flying silently across the mountain range. She thinks of them as ‘a conspiracy’ of ravens. Tóti thinks they were called ‘*an unkindness*’ (p. 40)
- ‘*Now I am alone. I watch the ravens...*’. Agnes’s arrival at Kornsó (p. 43).
- ‘*Three ravens flying in a line.*’ Agnes meeting Steina and Lauga on the road sees this as a good omen (p. 77).
- As Margrét chases off the ravens, Agnes tells her: ‘*They won’t like that*’ (p. 81).
- Agnes imagines ravens cawing on day of her birth (p. 110).
- ‘*No doves come from ravens’ eggs.*’ Margrét speaking about Agnes to Ingibjörg (p. 117).
- ‘*So lonely I make friends with the ravens that prey on lambs*’ (p. 157).
- ‘*Natan always said we were as alike as a swan to a raven, but he was wrong*’ (p. 248).
- ‘*And the ravens, the constant, circling ravens*’ (p. 266).
- ‘*Where are the ravens? Joás has sent them all away*’ (p. 321).
- ‘*...the clouds hang still in the air like dead bodies. The only things that move are the ravens*’ (p. 323).
- ‘There are ravens in the sky, but what bird flies underwater?’ (p. 325).

Fate, misfortune and destiny

- Agnes feels she is tied to the wheel of fate.
- The ravens as a symbol of fate.

Betrayal and loyalty

- Natan’s betrayal of Agnes.
- Tóti’s loyalty to Agnes.

Speaking and silencing

- Agnes is able to tell her story to Tóti.
- She feels silenced by the court.

Loneliness

- Agnes’s loneliness at Illugastadir.

- Her lack of friends and family.

Waiting

- Agnes awaits her death throughout the novel.
- Agnes waits for Tóti to visit Kornsó.
- The wait for the execution date to be announced.

LANGUAGE AND STYLE

Use this list of writing techniques to create individual and class notes about the style of Hannah Kent's writing and the language devices she employs to craft *Burial Rites*. Some examples have been provided. The rest can be uncovered while the novel is being reread and closely studied.

1. Combination of first and third person narrative
 - The first person voice of Agnes creates empathy and allows the reader to more closely understand her actions and decisions. She addresses the reader directly.
 - The reader hears indirectly as she relates her story to Tóti.
 - An omniscient narrator takes the reader to Tóti's home and describes his interactions with his father. Interactions in the Kornsó farmhouse are similarly conveyed.
 - This also helps us realise that Agnes isn't always completely honest with others, making us wonder why she manipulates her words.
 - The reader zooms in close to Agnes's private reflections but then also zooms out to hear the conversations she has with others.
 - The combination of narrative perspective means the reader can hear all parts of her story. However, they still need to make judgements about the truth of Agnes's words.
2. Unreliable narrator
 - Is Agnes an unreliable narrator?
3. *Burial Rites* as a deliberately disjointed novel.
 - Readers are switched between fiction and historic archival materials.
 - Agnes's fate is known from the beginning.
 - Does this technique heighten the novel's tension or detract from it?
4. The use of archival material
 - Letters, official communications and documentation, poems, auction lists.
5. Setting
 - The valley of Vatnsdalur.
 - Kornsó.
 - Stóra-Borg.
 - Illugastadir.
 - Hvammur.
 - How does the author create each of these settings?

6. Language of the landscape

- How the landscape is brought alive?
- Personification.
- Similes and metaphors.
- The use of sensory description.
- The weather ever-present, whether it is the midnight sun or the intense darkness and cold of mid-winter.
- Highlighting unpredictability of the landscape and climate.

7. Role of Time

- Provision of dates and months.
- The creation of a sense of waiting. When will the executions happen?
- Rhythms of farm work as seasons pass.
- References to celebratory days.
- References to the length of the day as we progress towards Agnes's execution.
- The story moving between past and present.

8. Flashbacks

- How are these utilised?

9. Listeners to Agnes's story

- Tóti.
- Margrét.
- The reader.
- Kornsó family and servants—although not privy to all.
- Blöndal and the court—a different type of listening?

10. Start of chapters

11. Chapter lengths

12. Style of prose

- Very precise language. Every word seems to suggest something.

13. Structural role of the Prologue

14. Use of italics

15. Colours

- Much use of black and grey.
- Whiteness of ice and snow.

16. Sounds

- Margrét's coughing, sheep bleating, waves crashing, ravens cawing, Agnes sobbing.
- Voices telling stories.
- Natan's voice.

17. Smells

18. Religious imagery

19. Bird imagery

- The ravens.
- Find examples of references to other birds.

20. Fire imagery

21. Tone

- Different characters speak in different tones of voice.
- The tone of Blöndal's writing. Has the author captured the same tone in his spoken voice?

22. Motifs

- Ravens.
- The stone Agnes is given by her mother.
- The execution axe.

23. Clothes

- Blöndal's red coat trimmed with silver buttons.
- Agnes's blue dress.
- The dirty skirts of Margrét, Steina and Lauga.
- Tóti's snuff horn.

24. Use of eyes to communicate

- Jón and Margrét often look at each other.
- Tóti notices the colour of Agnes's eyes.

25. Illness

- Detail of Margrét's and Tóti's illnesses.

26. Dreams

- Consider the language used to describe Natan's dream.

CLOSE STUDY

Conversation between Róslín and Margrét on pages 64–68

This conversation takes place the day after Agnes has arrived at Kornsó. Róslín, a heavily pregnant neighbour who is a great gossip and ‘know it all’ has visited under the pretext of concern for Margrét’s bad chest. It is quickly established that Róslín has heard rumours of a woman visitor and is determined to discover as much information as possible. The interaction between Margrét and Róslín is important to the author’s early establishment of these two characters, particularly Margrét who has been placed, through no fault of her own, in a very challenging situation.

- How does each of the women view the murders at Illugastadir?
- Do they differ in their views of Natan?
- What evidence is there that Margrét does not think very highly of Róslín?
- How does this conversation highlight some of the views and values of the valley?
- Find three examples of how tone is utilised in the conversation.
- Choose three quotes for each woman and explain your choice.
- How does Róslín challenge the reader to view Margrét in a different way from her earlier interactions with Agnes?
- Now that you know how the novel concludes, do any of Margrét’s words in this conversation foreshadow the possibility of her and Agnes becoming closer?

Agnes’s first person narrative (pages 100–101)

The placement of this passage is an excellent example of way the author constructs her scenes or sections. Tóti and Agnes have been conversing in the previous scene (although reported from Agnes’s perspective); we then shift to her first person interior voice, and after this to a third person narrative describing multiple characters the following day. Here, Agnes remembers her feelings of utter disempowerment at her trial as her story was manipulated into unrecognisable words. She has gauged Tóti’s inexperience and wonders what she can think of to say to him.

- How is simile and metaphor used in the passage?
- What do we learn about Agnes’s experience of the trial?
- Other references are made to religion in the passage. Why are they memorable for Agnes?
- What does Agnes suggest about a woman’s place in the world?
- How do she and Natan respond differently to the two-headed lamb?
- Choose three quotes of significance and explain your choice.

Agnes recalling her first meeting with Natan (pages 194–95)

This is the final section of Chapter Seven so as to be expected, delivers important information that will be followed through in the next chapter. Agnes has previously told Tóti about her first meeting with Natan but now reveals she hasn't told him everything; however, emphasises she has not lied to the Reverend.

- Why is it important to the reader to know Agnes has not lied to Tóti?
- What hasn't she revealed and why?
- How is the symbolism of hands used in the passage?
- Comment on the final sentences of Chapter Seven.

Make up your own questions for each of these passages

- The argument where Natan throws Agnes out (pages 288–89).
- Tóti delivering the news of her execution date to Agnes (pages 317–18).
- The Kornsó family farewelling Agnes (pages 323–24).

FURTHER ACTIVITIES

- Conduct hot seat interviews of various characters. Set them at different stages of the novel. The Character Table can be used to assist in the activity.
- Set up role-playing discussions between Agnes/Tóti, Agnes/Margrét, Tóti/Blöndal, Agnes/Steina, Agnes/Natan or other combinations. Key conversations could also be re-enacted in class.
- Class groups could investigate the roles of servants, both male and female, in *Burial Rites* and consider how they are portrayed.
- Investigate the depiction of women in the novel. How do men treat them? What power do women hold in their households and community?
- Create a map of the places where Agnes has worked. The map can also highlight the walks she undertook between places of employment.
- Blöndal becomes a villain in the novel. Set up an interrogation of Blöndal where each member of the class must ask him about specific events in the novel.
- Recreate the events of the night Natan and Pétur are murdered. This could be done through a flowchart or poster. Include key quotes as well.
- Imagine the aftermath of Agnes's execution and its effect on the Kornsó family. Has Agnes's time at Kornsó changed Margrét, Jón, Lauga and Steina in any way? How would each of them describe the influence Agnes has had upon their lives?
- Consider Tóti's growth. Is he the same person at the end of the novel? This could be completed as a group task, creating a visual continuum to show to the class.
- *'You must apply the Lord's word to her as a whip to a hard-mouthed horse. You will not get anywhere otherwise'* (p. 170). Why does Tóti choose not to follow Blöndal's instructions?
- Debate whether Natan or Blöndal is the real villain of the story.
- Group task: collect references to birds, Agnes's stone, red hair or other motifs/symbols.
- Make some class 'metalanguage' posters to help understand the author's writing style. Use some of the heading in Section 7 to assist you. For example, similes, metaphors or personification.
- Collect examples of recurring images of illness and death, disintegration and poverty, dreams and nightmares, beauty and horror.
- In groups, collect examples of 'judgements' made in the novel. These could be moral judgements, character judgements, legal judgements or simply judgements of the heart.
- Discuss how Margrét's illness provides a parallel to Agnes's story. Do you imagine Margrét will live much longer after Agnes's execution?

- Tracing the changing seasons in the novel. How do they parallel Agnes's story?
- What role has the croft at Kornská played in Agnes's life?
- Consider the importance of meetings or encounters in the novel—Agnes/Tóti, Agnes/Steina and her family, Natan/Agnes first meeting, Tóti/Blöndal, Tóti/Karitas.
- Collect examples showing how difficult life was for the people of the valley.
- 'To know what a person has done, and to know who a person is, are very different things' (p. 107). Debate the topic: 'Actions speak louder than words'.
- How is the role of mothers, fathers and siblings explored in the novel?
- What moral questions are raised in *Burial Rites*?
- Find examples of kindness in the novel.
- We do not hear Fridrik's story. Discuss what his period of imprisonment and spiritual preparation for his execution may have been like.
- Discuss who the blond-haired man who gives Agnes the brandy to drink on page 326 could be.
- Choose the section of the novel that made the strongest impression on you and discuss the reasons behind your choice.
- What effect does the use of specific dates; places and the actual historical documentation have on your reading of the novel?
- In small groups, discuss the positive and negative aspects of Agnes's relationship with Natan. Also, consider whether Agnes herself, can be interpreted as a difficult character.
- Can you find any contrasting views of religion in *Burial Rites*? Collect references to God, making a note of who is speaking or reflecting.
- How would you describe the prevailing social values in Iceland at the time of the story?
- Why does the author portray Agnes as going to her death holding Tóti's hand?
- Can you really believe that Agnes did not know earlier about Natan's sexual relationship with Rósa? Explain your reasons.
- Does the character of Joás add to the plot?

KEY QUOTES

Look up the context of the quote and discuss why it is important.

- *‘Blöndal slowly rose to his full height. ‘I have no choice,’ he said, his voice suddenly low and dangerous.’ ‘Your father’s title comes with responsibility. I’m sure he would not question me.’ (p. 17)*
- *‘I remain quiet. I am determined to close myself to the world, to tighten my heart and hold on to what has not yet been stolen from me. I cannot let myself slip away. I will hold what I am inside, and keep my hands tight around all the things I have seen and heard, and felt.’ (p. 29)*
- *‘He had wanted to turn away, flee at the sight of her. Like a coward.’ (p. 49)*
- *‘I shall make no secret of my displeasure to you. I don’t want you in my home. I don’t want you near my children...I have been forced to keep you here, and you...You are forced to be kept.’ (p. 61)*
- *‘It will bring you good luck, Agnes. It is a magic stone. Put it under your tongue and you will be able to talk to the birds.’ (p. 71)*
- *‘God has had His chance to free me, and for reasons known to Him alone, He has pinned me to misfortune, and although I have struggled, I am run through and through with disaster; I am knifed to the hilt with fate.’ (p. 84)*
- *‘Perhaps it is a shame that I have vowed to keep my past locked up within me. At Hvammur, during the trial, they plucked at my words like birds.’ (p. 100)*
- *‘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. No matter if you tried to do what was best. No matter if your innermost self whispers, “I am not as you say!”—how other people think of you determines who you are.’ (p. 108)*
- *‘Memories shift like loose snow in a wind, or are a chorale of ghosts all talking over one another.’ (p. 111)*
- *‘All my life people have thought I was too clever. Too clever by half, they’d say. And you know what, Reverend? That’s exactly why they don’t pity me. Because they think I’m too smart, too knowing to get caught up in this by accident. But Sigga is dumb and pretty and young...’ (p. 131)*
- *‘You must apply the Lord’s word to her as a whip to a hard-mouthed horse. You will not get anywhere otherwise.’ (p. 170)*
- *‘Has Steina ever had to decide whether to let a farmer under her skirts...or to deny him and find herself homeless in the snow and fog...’. (p. 178)*

- *'Agnes killed Natan because she was spurned. He saw the sentence written in his mind.'* (p. 189)
- *'The weight of his fingers on mine, like a bird landing on a branch. It was the drop of the match. I did not see that we were surrounded by tinder until I felt it burst into flames.'* (p. 195)
- *'Why not kill me here, now, on an unremarkable day? It is the waiting that cripples.'* (p. 203)
- *'Come Agnes. You'll catch your death.'* Margrét extends her hand. *'I take it, and the feel of her skin is like paper. We go inside.'* (p. 207)
- *'He would haul me out of the valley, out of the husk of my miserable, loveless life, and everything would be new. He would give me springtime.'* (p. 222)
- *'I learnt later that he was as changeable as the ocean, and god help you if you saw his expression shift and darken.'* (p. 239)
- *'The knife went in easily...like an ill-practised kiss—I couldn't have stopped if I'd wanted to.'* (p. 302)
- *'I won't let go of you. God is all around us, Agnes. I won't ever let go.'* (p. 328)

TEXT RESPONSE TOPICS

- “He has pinned me to ill fortune, and although I have struggled, I am run through and through with disaster; I am knifed to the hilt with fate.”
‘It is Agnes’s struggle against fate and ill fortune that wins the reader’s sympathy.’
Do you agree?
- ‘Hannah Kent’s integration of historical facts with her re-imagining of Agnes Magnúsdóttir’s story makes the novel even more powerful.’
What makes *Burial Rites* a powerful novel?
- To what extent does Tóti fulfil his task of bringing Agnes to God?
- ‘Margrét ends up being the most admirable character in *Burial Rites*.’
Do you agree?
- How does Hannah Kent make the landscape and weather an integral part of her novel?
- ‘Tóti’s father tells him: “You’re a servant of the Lord. Don’t disgrace yourself, boy”.’
Does Tóti succeed in his role as Agnes’s spiritual advisor?
- ‘*Burial Rites* shows how important story telling is for both individuals and communities.’
Discuss.
- ‘The use of motifs in *Burial Rites* assists the reader’s understanding of important themes in the novel.’
Do you agree?
- ‘Hannah Kent’s choices of narrative perspective allow the reader to better understand the main characters of *Burial Rites*.’
Discuss.
- ‘The traditions and rituals of Icelandic culture are imperative to the reader’s understanding of the events in the novel.’
To what extent do you agree?
- ‘The setting of the novel becomes a crucial part of the story.’
Discuss.
- How does the use of natural imagery become such a vital part of Agnes Magnúsdóttir’s story?
- “Everything I said was taken from me and altered until the story wasn’t my own.”
In what ways is Agnes disempowered in *Burial Rites*?
- In what ways, and how successfully, does Agnes maintain her dignity until her execution?
- ‘If there is anyone deserving of blame for the events in the novel, it is Natan Ketilsson.’
Do you agree?

- ‘All Agnes has wanted in life is to be loved and it is because of love she is executed.’
Discuss.
- ‘The wielding of power over others is a central theme in *Burial Rites*.’
Discuss.
- “But poverty scrapes these homes down until they all look the same, and they all have in common the absence of things that ought to be there. I might as well have been at one place all my life.”
What role does absence play in Agnes’s life?
- ‘Ambivalence and truth lie at this novel’s heart, for the two narrative accounts of Agnes’s life leading up to the murders lie on shifting ground.’
How does this ‘shifting ground’ create tension in the novel?
- “I’ve told the truth and you can see for yourself how it has served me.”
‘The question of what is truth and what is not is at the heart of *Burial Rites*.’
Discuss.
- ‘*Burial Rites* isn’t just the story of Agnes Magnúsdóttir. It is also the story of a landscape of deprivation and poverty.’
Is this how you see the novel?
- ‘Although *Burial Rites* is a story of secrets and lies, there are still many truths to be learned from the novel.’
Discuss.
- ‘Although death is at the centre of *Burial Rites*, Hannah Kent is still able to show there is value in life.’
Do you agree?
- How do dreams, omens and superstitions play an important part in the novel?
- ‘Women have no power in *Burial Rites*. The patriarchal society dominates their lives.’
To what extent do you agree?
- “I cannot remember not knowing Natan. I cannot think of what it was not to love him. To look at him and realise I had found what I had not known I was hungering for.”
How does Agnes’s journey towards death allow her to appreciate the importance of love?
- “If no one will say your name, you are forgotten. I am forgotten.”
How does Hannah Kent ensure that Agnes Magnúsdóttir’s name will not be forgotten?

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<<http://www.killyourdarlingsjournal.com/2014/04/burial-rites-and-the-stella-prize-an-interview-with-hannah-kent/>>. An interview with Hannah Kent in *Kill Your Darlings*, the online journal she co-edits.

<<http://www.sagadb.org>>. This website contains the text of the Icelandic Sagas, including those referenced by Hannah Kent in the novel.

<<http://www.sagatrail.is>>. Although this website is in Icelandic, the maps and photographs are useful.

<<http://www.picador.com/blog/august-2013/burial-rites-a-photo-essay-from-iceland>>.
An excellent series of photos on the publisher’s website.

<<http://www.theguardian.com/travel/2014/sep/20/hannah-kent-north-iceland>>.
Hannah Kent writing about her travels in Iceland.

<<http://www.indies.com.au/IndiesAdmin/Objectlibrary/27062013121634.pdf>>.
Q & A with Hannah Kent as a downloadable PDF.

<<http://icelandica.net/tag/hannah-kent/>>
A Word Press blog with a review of ‘Burial Rites’, also including an excellent slide show of the area with quotes added from the novel.

<<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01s8qx9>>
Melvyn Bragg discusses the Icelandic Sagas in a fascinating discussion on BBC radio.

<<http://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2013/05/16/3760644.htm>>
ABC radio interview: Hannah Kent with Richard Fidler.

<<http://www.abc.net.au/tv/bigideas/stories/2014/04/24/3991292.htm>>

Interview with Hannah Kent on ABC radio: 24 April 2014

<<http://www.abc.net.au/austory/specials/nomorethanaghost/default.htm>>

The 'Australian Story' episode featuring Hannah Kent, which can be watched in full.

Video links

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TiN_YTyaNtI>

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uOVQ0aCE2Us>>

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tq4seuBFxIM>>



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Burial Rites

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