

Burial Rites Study Guide

Burial Rites by Hannah Kent

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Plot Summary

"Burial Rites" by Hannah Kent is based on true events. It is the dramatization of the final days of Agnes Magnúsdóttir who had been tried and convicted of murdering two men and then setting the farm where they were killed on fire. Agnes Magnúsdóttir was the last woman ever to be executed in Iceland.

Agnes had two accomplices who were also convicted of the crimes. Agnes and the others were sentenced to be executed by beheading. One of the convicted murderers, Sígga, had her sentence reduced because she was young and not very bright and Agnes has allegedly led her astray. Fríðrik the man who murdered one of the men, confessed to the crimes. The authorities gathered that Agnes had killed Natan Ketilsson because he had reportedly spurned her.

The District Commissioner Björn Blöndal requested the assistance of a young priest, Assistant Reverend Þorvatur Jónsson who everyone called Toti, in a matter that involved the condemned woman, Agnes Magnúsdóttir. She had asked that her spiritual advisor be replaced. It was one of the last worldly rights she would have and Blöndal had to see that it was granted. It was important that this murdering sinner find redemption and find the Lord. Toti who had just finished his studies was bewildered. Why would this condemned woman ask for him? And as a new priest, was he equipped to handle such an unusual and demanding task? His father, also a reverend, told him that he had no choice. It was his calling and he had the Lord to rely upon.

Since there were no adequate prisons in Iceland, it was decided that Agnes would spend her last days under the custody of a government official. Jón Jónsson, District Officer, was called upon to take Agnes into his home to await her execution. His wife and daughters were frightened and appalled by this turn of events, but Jón was a dedicated officer and felt it his duty to comply with the request. Agnes was brought to the farm and initially treated with great derision. Jón and Lauga, the younger daughter, would not speak to her. Only Margret, his wife, and Steina, his elder daughter communicated with her.

Agnes turned out to be a good servant and worked hard at the chores that Margret gave her to do. She was visited by Toti and at first thought she made a mistake because the assistant reverend was so young. He persisted, however, spurred on by his father who told him he could not abandon his responsibilities. His sermons, prayers and readings from the New Testament had no impact on Agnes. He began to just talk to her like a friend and began to know about her tragic and tumultuous life which was marked by abuse and abandonment and poverty.

Toti did his best to bring Agnes to God before her death. At the end, she could not evade the executioner. But oddly enough, it was in the last few months of her life that she shined. She impressed those around her, proved herself to be a good and faithful worker as well as a kind soul with a bright mind.



Chapters 1-3

Summary

There was a public notice posted by Bjorn Blondal, District Commissioner announcing that the belongings of Natan Ketilsson would be put up for auction on March 24, 1828 at Illugastadir. These items included stock, hay, furniture, and dishes and would go to the highest bidder.

In a letter from Bjorn Blondal dated March 20, 1828, to the Very Reverend Johann Tomasson, the commissioner replied to a letter from Tomasson who asked how Petur Jonsson would be buried. Jonsson was murdered and burned with Natan Ketilsson between the 13th and 14th of March. There was a question whether he should be buried on consecrated ground because he had been convicted and punished for robbery and other crimes. Since he was not listed in the letter from His Majesty the King as outside the Christian way, Tomasson was buried alongside Nathan with Christian rites.

In a letter from Blondal dated May 30, 1829, to Tomasson the commissioner congratulated Assistant Reverend Thorvador Jonsson on the completion of his studies and approved his decision to begin his chaplaincy under the supervision of his father in the north. Blondal then referred to the heinous Illugastadir murders and his intention to execute the murderers. He asked for Thorvardur's assistance.

Blondal then repeated the circumstances of the crime. Sometime between March 13th and 14th, three people murdered two men: Natan Ketilsson and Petur Jonsson. Their bodies were found in Natan's burned down barn in Illugastadir. Upon close inspection, deliberately inflicted wounds were found on the corpses. On July 2nd, the three people charged with these murders – one man and two women – were found guilty in District Court which Blondal presided over. They were sentenced to be beheaded. The sentences were upheld in Land Court on October 27th of the previous year. The case was currently being tried in Copenhagen's Supreme Court which was also likely to uphold the sentence. The convicted man is Fridrik Sigurdsson, the son of a farmer. The women were Sigridur Gudmundsdottir and Agnes Magnúsdottir. They were being held in the north where they would remain until their executions.

Fridrik was taken to Thingeyrar by Reverend Johann Tomasson and Sigridur was taken to Midhop. Agnes was to be kept at Stora-Borg until her execution but would be moved to Kornsa in the valley of Vatnsdalur next month. She had used one of her remaining rights to request a new priest. She was discontented with her current spiritual advisor. Agnes had requested that her new priest be Thorvardur.

Blondal gave Thorvardur an out by offering his understanding that as a new priest he may not feel equipped to bring a condemned woman to the Lord and may want to decline the request. If he were to take on the responsibility, he would have to travel to Kornsa regularly and administer God's word to Agnes, inspire her repentance and



evoke her acknowledgment of justice. Blondal concluded his letter stating that he would await Thorvardur's decision.

Thorvardur was working in the farmstead next to the church of Breidabolstadur repairing a hearth when he received the message from Blondal. The messenger was to wait while Thorvardur read the letter. He told the messenger to wait while he showed the letter to his father who read the letter and told his son that it was his choice. Thorvardur was bewildered. He didn't know this woman. Why had she asked for him? That question, his father said, should be addressed to the woman. He told the messenger that he would meet with Agnes.

A young woman, Steina Jonsdottir, was working in the yard outside her family's residence when a man on horseback rode up at a fast pace. It was Commissioner Blondal. He was her father's overseer and was there to see him. Her parents were visiting friends and weren't home. He came inside and waited in the parlor while Steina found her sister, Lauga who was weeding the garden. She wanted her younger sister to talk to him.

Lauga was hoping that Blondal had good news. Perhaps her father had been promoted or would be receiving a stipend. She served Blondal and snack and coffee. Blondal would have preferred to tell their father directly, but he was forced to tell Steina and Lauga. Blondal handed Lauga a document about the murders at Illugastadir the year before. Lauga thought the matter was over, but Blondal advised her of their appeal before the Supreme Court. The King would be advised of his decision and must agree with him in order for the sentences to be carried out.

They would not be taken to Denmark. They had been found guilty in this country, in Iceland, and would be executed here. It was an opportunity for the community to witness the ramifications of crime. There was a need for custodial holding until the execution. Since Iceland had no prisons, it had been decided that the condemned would be placed on farms, in the homes of Christians, who would inspire repentance in them. They would be calling upon government officials to provide these accommodations. It would be too costly to place them in holding cells in the court in Reykjavik. The family would be compensated for providing accommodations for one of the condemned women. Steina did not hide her puzzlement.

Agnes wondered why she wasn't already dead. She was forced to wait in the silence and darkness. It had been better in the winter. The Stora-Borg folk were as imprisoned as she was when the snow stormed. Then they took her to the storeroom. She thought it might be summer. She closed her eyes to envision the valley in the summer and the swans on the lake beneath a bright blue sky.

Three days after Blondal's visit, Jon and Margret Jonsson set off for home. Their daughters had continued their chores hardly speaking after the disturbing visit by the District Commissioner. Lauga was angry with Steina who threw the Commissioner's letter into the fire. Lauga was worried about her sister's reaction to Blondal's news. It could impact their father's standing. As for Steina, she was trying to avoid thinking about



the murderers. Thoughts of the crime made her sick. While working outside, they spotted their parents riding toward them. The girls hurried inside, heated some broth and readied the house for their return.

Lagua told her father she had something to tell him. He feared it was the death of an animal but she assured him it was nothing like that. They all headed inside. Lagua brought them each a bowl of broth. Steina had gone to fetch water and hadn't yet returned. Lagua told her father that the Blondal had been by to see him. He brought a letter, which Steina burned, but Lagua knew exactly what it said. Just then Steina burst in soaked from the water from the buckets sloshing on her as she walked. She blurted out that they'd never guess what they have to keep locked up. She told them that Blondal was forcing them to keep Agnes Magnusdottir – the murderer – in their home.

Jon told Lagua to begin at the start and tell him everything she remembered about their conversation with Blondal. Margret was certain that they couldn't be forced to take in a murderer. After absorbing the entire story, Jon pulled his boots back on and prepared to leave for Hvammur.

Jon returned some hours later. He told Margret what Lagua had told them had been confirmed. It was his duty as a District Officer. Margret was upset. This woman was a murderer! There would be remuneration for their inconvenience. Jon would be required to be in Hvammur on the night that Agnes arrived in their home. Margret was dismayed – she and the girls would be alone with the murderess until Jon returned. He told her that they would be safe. Jon had to attend the meeting at which the executioner would be named. Margret was not happy with the situation, scowled at her husband and fell silent.

Men sometimes tie Agnes' legs together at night like they do horses. They wanted to make sure she didn't run away. She was feeling more like an animal as the days passed. No one ever spoke to her as she sat in the darkness. She heard only whispers and the pages of the Bible turning now and then. When she was declared guilty of being an accessory to murder, they could not meet her eyes. She tried to hold on to herself and recall the poems she composed as she did her work. The others saw only a murderess and madwoman dripping with blood.

It had been a month since Thorvardur accepted Blondal's offer. He had questioned the wisdom of his decision ever since. His stomach was in knots and his body exhausted from the conflict in his heart. He prayed for guidance and strength. There was no turning back. He had given his word. He told his father that he planned to arrive early at the farm and be present when the criminal arrived. His father told him that only he knew in his own heart if he was ready for the task ahead of him. He should only seek to please the Lord.

On his ride to Kornsa, he thought about the woman who had asked for his spiritual counsel. She was only a workmaid but... she was also a murderess and had killed two men. They had been slaughtered like animals. He had to remember that they were all



God's children – this woman included. She was his sister in Jesus. He must guide her hope. He whispered to himself that he would save her.

Chapter Two

May 3, 1828

Undirfell, Vatnsdalur

Agnes was born at Flaga in the parish of Undirfell in 1795 and confirmed in 1809. She was known to have “an excellent intellect, and strong knowledge and understanding of Christianity.” (83)

A young officer of the court retrieved Agnes. She knew she smelled and that her hair was like a greased rope. Agnes and the officer were joined in the hallway by other men and led into the yard. It was raining. It was wonderful to breathe fresh air again, even in the rain. She stumbled to the ground and was pulled back up. A crowd had gathered but not to see her. All they saw when they looked at her were two dead men, a burning barn and a knife... and blood. She smiled at a woman she knew, but it was a mistake. They screamed “Devil!” at her.

Agnes was strapped to the saddle of a horse like a corpse and they road north. Her arms were tethered in front of her. The ride was miserable; the irons pinched her legs. She had become used to abuse from the beatings she was subjected to by her captors. Perhaps some of them had known Natan. She didn't know where they were taking her, and thought perhaps they would kill her. They told her nothing. As horrific as the journey was, it was a blessing to have movement and have the warmth of a horse beneath her. She heard a roar; perhaps it was the sea.

Agnes remembered back to that first spring at Illugastadir. The sea was calm and Natan silently oared through it. But she really didn't want to think of him. They had been riding for an hour or two. She was familiar with the area. It would be as close to home that she'd ever be again. The caws of black crows were like omens in the bright blue skies. She remembered how Sigga her co-murderess and she had fed the crows one day. But they had taken Sigga away. She wondered where she was now.

Suddenly a loud voice announced that she would be held at Kornsa until the time of her execution. It would be gentle people she would be staying with. She was familiar with Kornsa; it was a place of her childhood. People would know her there – it would be a complete humiliation. She would be remembered as a baby and then a child and now a murderer.

Thorvardur, or Toti as he was known, was at the farm awaiting Agnes' arrival in the middle of the night. Margret stood with him and said she hoped that a few officers would be left behind to protect them. Margret said that her daughters would not join them to “greet” the murderess. She asked Toti to use his influence to have her moved elsewhere. He responded that they all had to do their duty.



Margaret told him that the name for a flock of ravens was a conspiracy as they watch several settle on the barn. He thought it was called unkindness. The officers and Agnes arrived. The officers greeted Toti and told him that his charge was weary from the journey. The officers would be staying the night and camp outside. They would compensate her for her trouble. All she wanted was to make sure that the murderess stayed away from her kitchen knives.

Toti told the officers the woman had asked to speak to him. They told him that the older woman had been brought here. The younger one, Sigga, would probably receive a pardon because she was young and sweet. Agnes' chances for appeal were not promising. They warned her that Agnes had a temper.

Agnes saw the officer walk up to two figures standing outside the house. No one had noticed or cared that she hadn't had a sip of water or bite to eat all day or that her leg irons were cutting into her skin. Suddenly, a man was walking up to her. He introduced himself as the Reverend Thorvardur Jonsson. He added that she had asked for him. She looked at him. He didn't recognize her. She said nothing. He promised to call on her again soon.

Margret cleaned up the dishes from the officers who retired in their tents outside. She covered her sleeping daughters and assessed her deteriorating house that was in need of repair. She had acquired a persistent cough ever since hearing the news brought by the Commissioner. Margret felt down and depressed. She had only caught a glimpse of the murderess when the officers had gone to fetch her. It was inevitable that she would soon be face-to-face with her. If Jon were there she could withstand the ordeal. Margret vowed to show this woman no sympathy or charity.

The officer called out that he had the prisoner and asked for permission to enter. The officer pulled the woman into the room. Margret was unprepared for the filthy wretch before her. Her working dress was caked with dirt. Her shoes and stockings were covered in mud. Her hair was matted in grease. The woman stared at the floor. "Look at me!" Margaret demanded.

Agnes raised her head. Margaret was startled by the blood across the woman's face and the grime on her face. There were yellow bruises from blows leveled at a prior time. Her eyes seemed brighter and paler than they were in contrast to the dirt on her face. Margaret looked at the officer and declared that the woman had been beaten.

Agnes only had the clothes on her back and no other possessions. Margaret told the officer to unbind her hands. She wanted some time alone with Agnes but wanted one of the officers to sleep inside that night. She told Agnes to follow her. She heated some water in a kettle and told Agnes to strip and wash herself. Margaret was startled when Agnes plunged her head into the water. She pushed up on her forehead. She was gulping water. She was thirsty. Margaret told her to ask for a cup next time.

Toti returned to his father's home. His thoughts were on the woman... the criminal... Agnes. He had seen how she had been bound to the saddle and noticed her pungent



odor. He had the urge to run when he first saw her. He felt like a coward. He saw the bruises and signs of abuse. He deluded himself thinking that she may have been bruised in a stumble. He hurried into the church and prayed for strength to fight his cowardice and to withstand the sight of suffering. He prayed for Agnes' soul. She committed a terrible sin but asked to be an inspiration to her. He confessed his fear and asked Him to protect him against the sheer horror the woman evoked in him.

Margret woke early the next day. She saw the sleeping officer in the next room who looked like a boy. That was her protection against a murderess?! She saw Agnes asleep in one of the servant's beds. She wondered what to call her. It wouldn't be right to call her by her Christian name given what she'd done. She wondered if she should call her "Prisoner" or "Condemned". Perhaps she should not call her anything. It was strange to have the woman there in her house after wondering about her for a month. What kind of woman kills, she asked herself frequently.

Lauga had asked if there would be an outward sign of the Devil on the woman – a snaggletooth or birthmark. But Margret wondered if the woman might be beautiful. A beautiful woman could be capable of murder. Would Agnes be more attractive than she was? But the woman was neither beautiful nor ugly. She was slender and ordinary. Her most unusual feature was her coal black hair which was rare in those parts. Her eyes were a very pale blue.

Margret recalled how the night before she had to help the woman remove her clothing. She had fumbled with her ties and couldn't do it alone. Margret had to hold her breath to keep from retching. Margret helped her wash herself. She would burn her clothes that morning and give her others to wear. As she helped her wash, Margret saw signs of abuse over her entire body. She dressed her wounds with an ointment and lard. She said it was Natan's medicine. Agnes did not react other than a slight tightening of her neck. "God rest his soul" Margret added. When Margret walked by her room again, Agnes lay on her side watching Margret.

Chapter 3

It was said that Fridrik, Sigge and Agnes entered Natan's house at midnight and stabbed him and Peter Jonsson, a guest there. After they killed the men they burned the farm down.

At Stora-Borg, Agnes had hardly slept after the fire. She wondered if that was part of God's punishment. But there at the Kornsa, she slept and dreamed of Natan. He was boiling hers for a draft as she watched. He stepped toward her with his beaker. She opened her arms to him laughing and in love. But the beaker fell and broke. Natan was dead.

Agnes saw Margret lying awake in her bed and then turn and look at the sleeping officer. Margret told Agnes to get up. She handed her a servant's garb of blue wool to wear. Margret watched her nervously the whole time. She saw other people asleep and didn't know who they were. She spotted her filthy clothes stacked in the corner. Margret



told her there was much work that had to be done. She bluntly told her that she had great displeasure in her being there. She warned her to stay away from her children. Margret made it clear that her husband would be back that morning and that her farmhands would also be returning soon.

Agnes had been a servant since she was fifteen. She knew how to spin and knit and cook and take care of animals. She was shocked when Margret asked her if she could wield a knife – a scythe to cut hay. She could wield a knife. Agnes would work for her keep. She didn't need a criminal; she needed a servant. Agnes wanted to say that the word "criminal" didn't fit her; it fit someone else. Margret said if Agnes showed any sign of violence, she would drag Agnes out of there by her hair.

Margret spotted some neighbors walking toward them. She told Agnes to get inside. They were curious, nosy about her guest. They'd heard about the situation. Her neighbor, Roslin, had brought a loaf of rye bread for her. Roslin's husband, Snaebjorn, and a young boy named Pall, ostensibly had come to repair Margret's scythe. Margret felt nervous and had another coughing fit.

Roslin claimed she came by because she was concerned about her – her bad chest. Roslin asked a number of questions about the dark-haired woman she'd seen with Margret. Finally, Margret grew weary of Roslin and told her who the dark-haired woman was. Roslin was outraged that Margret and her family was going to have to allow a murderess to live under the same roof with them. Margret said that the two men didn't deserve to die but they weren't pure themselves. Peter was a thief and Natan was known to sleep with multiple married women. Roslin advised Margret to watch her back. Agnes was the ringleader and had stabbed Natan eighteen times. She would rather sleep with the cows than with that murderer. Although Roslin wanted to linger and meet the murderess, Margret urged her on her way.

For a brief time Agnes was alone in the house. The daughters and the officers all had gone. There was no guard watching her, no ropes, and no locks. The thought of escape crossed her mind. She could slip out of the yard and run down the valley. There were no chains or ropes to restrain her movements. But she knew that she wouldn't get far and would still be facing death. She looked around the room and noticed the fissures in the walls. It would be cold in the winter, but she might be dead by then. She quickly got that thought out of her head. She looked around the rooms and noticed every detail.

Agnes thought back to when she was a foster child. Her mother had brought her to Kornsa when she was just 6-years-old and now she was there again because of two dead men and a fire. Kornsa would be the scene of the closing days of her life. To survive, she would pretend that she was a servant and that this house was her new quarters. She would do her best for her new mistress. She thought of all the places she had lived. The place just before Kornsa was Illugastadir which was a mistake, a nightmare.

Agnes spotted a shiny object under one of the beds. It was a brooch and she picked it up. A slender young woman told her to put it down. Lauga came in. Steina told her that



she had touched her confirmation gift. They called for their mother who came in hobbling a bit. Steina told her that Agnes was holding her brooch. Margret told Agnes not to touch a thing in the house. Agnes said she was not a thief. Steina responded that she was a murderess. Margret sent her daughters outside. She had work for Agnes to do.

Toti was to visit Agnes. He asked his father what he should say. His father told him he didn't have to say anything.

Margret had Agnes help her milk the sheep. After which they burned her dirty clothes inside. It was the only possession she had. Margret had Agnes help her weed the herb garden. She sensed that Margret was ill from her cough and her red-rimmed eyes. She told Agnes to get her daughters. Agnes found the daughters in the pantry and told them her mother wanted them. Steina didn't take her eyes off Agnes. She recognized her as having been a servant in the valley before. Steina remembered that Agnes had been kind to her and her sister when they encountered her on a walk. She'd given them two eggs.

Toti and Agnes were sitting outside. He suggested they begin with a prayer for her absolution. He was holding a copy of the New Testament. He told her about the letter he received from the Commissioner. She had been unhappy with her spiritual counselor and that she wished for him to be replaced. The Commissioner said that Agnes had specifically asked for him. The Commissioner and he wanted to return her to God. She said she had a date to do that already, but that wasn't what he meant.

Agnes asked if he remembered her. She did look familiar but he couldn't place her. He helped her once when she was on horseback and crossing a flooded pass. He pointed out that he was only an Assistant Reverend, but if she required a spiritual advisor he would consider it his duty to pay her visits. He would help prepare her for what she must face and provide her with spiritual comfort and hope. She responded that she may have made a mistake. She walked him toward the wall where Margret and the daughters told him goodbye.

After Toti left, Agnes ate lunch with Margret and the girls. They worked in the yard again. Agnes was working on mending the stone wall. Margret only spoke when necessary. Toti was too much of a boy to help her. The only person who would understand how she was feeling was Natan. He knew her better than anyone. Perhaps she should tell the Reverend that there was nothing he could do for her. God didn't free her when there was the chance.

Analysis

Chapter One

An ominous note is struck at the beginning at this the beginning of the story. An official notification in austere, business-like language is in contrast to what lies underneath. A man's worldly possessions are being auctioned off because he no longer needs them or



anything – he is dead. The man has been murdered. Then the reader is privy to a conversation as to whether a murdered man deserves to be buried in holy ground. There is a coldness and remoteness about the disposal of one man's possession and another man's body.

A young reverend is called upon for the most unusual assignment. He has been requested by a condemned woman to become her spiritual advisor. He has just recently completed his education. Will such a young man be able to face the challenge of redeeming a murderess before her execution? It is quite a lofty task and, despite his devotion, will his lack of depth and experience in life prepare him for the dedication and tenacity that he surely will need to successfully bring this sinner to the Lord? There are many doubts that the young minister must have. And a question that surely occurs to him is why she requested him. He doesn't know her and he is so young and new to his calling that he can't be well known enough for this condemned woman to ask for him.

In an unusual move, Agnes, the murderess was transferred to stay with the family of a government official who was to have custodial authority over her until her execution. The perils of such an arrangement are immediately apparent. A woman who was convicted of killing two men and who had been sentenced to death would be living with the official and his wife and two daughters. A woman in this circumstance was certainly desperate and placed great risk on the vulnerable family of rural farmers. Though Jon Jonsson, the government official in question, could have protested, he felt duty-bound and perhaps afraid to sully his reputation and damage his career, so he accepted the task as his responsibility.

Although Toti, the young minister, had doubts about his ability to deal with the condemned woman, his father who was also a reverend, allowed him no option. Perhaps the elder reverend wondered why he had not been chosen to save the woman's soul and had a little professional envy over the request that his son take on such an unusual challenge. Toti's father tells his son that he must go because all he needed do was rely on the Lord to see him through.

The two daughters of the government official presented an unusual dynamic. The elder sister was unsure of herself and rather scatterbrained. She depended on the strength of her younger sister who was bright and displayed good sense. The contrast between the two sisters may very well come into play as the story progresses. When the Commissioner came to the Jonsson farmhouse with a message for her father who was away at the time, it was too much for the fragile older sister to deal with. She ran and got her younger sister to speak with her father's boss.

Chapter Two

Agnes understood her notoriety. The curious who watched her be moved from her cell had gathered not to see Agnes, a condemned woman with a story to tell; the people looked past that woman and saw only murdered men and a bloody knife. She was Bloody Agnes. This wasn't the way life was supposed to turn out for Agnes, hard-



working Agnes who was bright and attractive and had much to give. She wasn't an angel but she also wasn't the devil that the angry crowd called her.

Agnes didn't know where she was being taken, but she didn't really care - she was just happy to be moving and out of the dark cell and into fresh air that was not putrid from her own waste. What she had endured would break many people, but Agnes held onto her sanity - a sign that she was strong of mind if not of character.

Margret had put up the most resistance to having Agnes in her home. Even before Agnes arrived, she asked the priest to use his influence to have her moved. He said they had to do their duties. Perhaps those words had meaning for Margret. She was a religious woman and the priest alluded to serving the Lord when he said they must do their duty.

Although Margret was the most outraged of the entire family that they would have a murderess living under their roof, something about Agnes sparked a maternal instinct in Margret. When she noticed bruising about Agnes' face Margret sternly voiced her disapproval to the officers that Agnes had been beaten. Without hesitation Margret helped Agnes undress and cleanse herself. Margret tended to Agnes' wounds. Margret did not want a condemned woman in her home; however, to her, Agnes was another human who needed help and nurturing. Margret's behavior showed her humanity and kind heart. Unlike the curious at the prison who called Agnes "Devil", Margret saw Agnes and not the two dead men and the bloody knife.

Seeing a living, breathing human being who was hurting was somewhat jarring to Margret. For the month she had been anticipating Agnes' arrival, she had been dreading it. But to see the frail woman who was in such agony, so vulnerable and facing such an unspeakable future, Margret felt an inexplicable protectiveness toward her. Margret tried to resist having too much feeling for the woman who had been convicted of brutally murdering two men. Margret had dreaded Agnes' arrival, fearing that her family would be in danger, but those worries seemed to go away. Margret was not afraid of Agnes. Although Margret tried to hide or deny it, she had sympathy for Agnes. And Agnes had a friend in Margret.

Chapter Three

Agnes; wondering if her lack of sleep was part of God's punishment is an incriminating thought that indicates that she did, in fact, commit the murders. God would only be punishing her for a sin or a crime. She had nightmares about Natan's death. Were her nightmares from her grief over losing him or her guilt over killing him? There has been no definitive statement from Agnes or anyone else that Agnes actually killed the two men. This aspect remains a mystery at this point.

Although Margret gave Agnes a stern warning about staying away from her children and bringing no harm to them, she trusted Agnes with a scythe. Margret was a devout Christian and, therefore, placed her trust in God that Agnes would not be a danger to her family. Margret was a practical woman assessing her experience with Agnes with



the comment that she didn't need a criminal, she needed a servant. Although it flashed across Agnes' mind that she was not a criminal, she didn't speak up to Margret. She rightly concluded that the timing would not be right to debate her guilt or innocence with a stranger who had reluctantly opened her home to her. But why did Agnes immediately think that "criminal" was the wrong thing to call her? Is that a sign of her innocence? Perhaps she didn't kill the men. Or, if she did kill them, did she feel justified and therefore not a criminal?

Agnes was alone in the house long enough that she could make a run for it. She considered escaping but did not. She was a bright woman and knew that things could be worse for her – although what could be worse than being beheaded? There were no chains or ropes to restrain her; it was only her thoughts and logic that keep her from running for it. Her discarding the idea to escape shows that she was resigned to her fate. To deal with her destiny, Agnes decided to pretend that she was a new servant at a farm, and she vowed to work hard for her new mistress. Perhaps this pretense would soften and blur what is inevitable.

Just as Toti had doubt about his ability to bring a condemned woman to the Lord, Agnes' first experience with him leaves her thinking she made a big mistake. The young priest was too young and naïve to help her. She had taken his act of kindness as an omen that he could help her, but he only wanted to pray and read from the Bible when they met. She needed to talk to someone who would listen to her. Whether Totil will continue to be Agnes' spiritual advisor is in question for readers.

Discussion Question 1

What final right did Agnes exercise?

Discussion Question 2

How did Margret react to the bruises on Agnes' face and body? What does this tell readers about Margret?

Discussion Question 3

What did Steina recall about Agnes?

Vocabulary

consecrated, parishioners, diligent, chaplaincy, waywardness, societal, chastisement, impassive, fixedly, overseer, bemusement, stipend, squalid, tremulous, remuneration, ambivalence, plaited, tethered, tussocks, forfeited, invigorated, croft, pungency, maladies, horde, penitence, absolution



Chapters 4-6

Summary

Chapter Four

Blondal wrote a letter to the Deputy Governor of Northeast Iceland regarding the size and cost of the axe that was built to behead Fridrik, Agnes, and Sigge who had been sentenced to death. There was a question as to who should be charged for the cost of the axe and what should be done with it after it had been used for the executions.

Toti had decided to write Blondal and renege on his promise to minister to Agnes. His second encounter with her was worse than the first. He hadn't even said a prayer for her. But two weeks had passed and he had put off writing the letter. His father asked if the murderess prayed. Toti wasn't sure whether she prayed or not. His father told him not to disgrace himself. He was a servant of the Lord. His father knew that he wasn't visiting Agnes as he should. She did not seem to be religious, however, so Toti didn't know why she wanted him. His guilt and shame would drive him back to Kornsa.

On his way to the farm, Toti stopped at the croft of Undirfell and asked for the Reverend Petur Bjarnason. While he waited for the Reverend Daga, a young woman with a toddler sitting inside the croft spoke to him. She said that it was a pity that Natan Ketilsson was dead. Her son was ill with the grippe and Natan had cured her of whooping cough when she was a child. He wasn't a friend of the family but was an herbalist who could mix up cures. Gudrun, an old woman, spoke up and said that Natan was a sorcerer and got what he deserved. She referred to him as "Natan Satan". There was a story that Satan came to his mother when she was pregnant with him and told her to name the baby after him. The priest changed the baby's name from "Satan" to "Natan".

Toti told the women he was Agnes' priest and had come there to learn more about her because she was from this valley. Gudrun knew her and said that Agnes never cared about anyone but herself. She was a pauper who would do anything to rise above her station in life. Dagma said she was liked at one time but became bitter as she matured. She couldn't keep a man. She had a sharp tongue and loose skirts.

Toti met with the Reverend who asked how the family was taking it – having to live with a murderess. Toti confessed that they were a bit upset. The Reverend Petur said that the family would do their duty. Lauga, the younger daughter was quite a beauty. Toti guessed that Agnes was more than thirty years old. The priest had only been there a year and didn't know her. Natan's dead body was an indication of her character. If there was anything to know about her, it would be in the ministerial book.

The priest looked in the book and found her date of birth and parentage. Her parents were not married. She was confirmed in May of 1809 when she was fourteen. The dates



indicated Agnes would have been thirteen, Toti pointed out. The priest didn't think it was of any importance. It was noted that she had an excellent intellect and a strong knowledge of Christianity.

Margret was glad to see Toti. As he sat at the table waiting for the coffee that Margret was brewing, he heard Agnes in the next room. He asked her to come sit by him at the table. Margret served coffee to Toti and then left them alone. Agnes said she was being well fed at the farm and they seem to tolerate her. Jon did not speak to her. She had no problems with the daughters. He told her he returned because she asked him to help her. He asked that she not think of him as too young. He spent three long years at study.

The priest at Stora-Borg refused to listen to her and twisted her words. She asked that he speak to her in an ordinary way. He wanted to know more about her life but she said it was impossible. Before she could explain what she meant, Steina interrupted them and said that her mother needed Agnes. Although Toti protested, Agnes asked him to come back the next day.

Agnes had vowed to keep her past locked up inside of her. At Hvammur during the trial, they did not let her say what happened in her own way. They took her words and turned them into something sinister. Her words were distorted and altered. The priest told her that she would burn if she did not pray for forgiveness. She would have to think of what to say to this young priest.

At the beginning of the day, the family, Agnes, Kristin, their maid, and their two male farmhands gathered together before hay cutting. Jon bowed his head and led them in prayer, thanking the Lord for the fine weather he had given them. Agnes would be cutting with Kristin. Gudmundur and Bjarni, the farmhands, would be cutting with Kristin and Agnes. Gudmundur questioned that wisdom of giving Agnes a scythe. Margret glared at Gudmundur and reiterated the order. When Gudmundur handed Agnes a scythe he held on to it too long and then let go suddenly and made her fall back. Steina asked her if she was hurt.

Agnes got into a rhythm as she swayed the scythe back and forth. It was a good feeling like when she was first with Natan. She was so happy to be desired. She noticed that Gudmundur was watching her. Men had been looking at her like that since she was fourteen.

Reverend Toti returned the next morning. As he drove up to the idyllic setting, he wondered what went through Agnes' mind when she was told she would die for her crime. Toti met Jon outside. He told Toti that Jon Thordarson had volunteered to be the executioner for the payment of one pound of tobacco. Blondal had someone else in mind to be executioner – Gudmundar Ketilsson, Natan's brother.

Toti sat outside with Agnes. She told Toti that she had lived on most of the farms in the area as a child. She didn't have a family. Her mother abandoned her leaving others to deal with her. She wouldn't recognize her mother if she ran into her. She only knew



about her mother from what others told her. One thing that was true in this valley was that if one made a mistake it was never forgotten. What others think of a person was what counted. Her mother was unlucky. She did what others did in secret but she was exposed. The identity of her father was unknown despite what was written in the ministerial book. Even though Magnus Magnusson was listed as her father, she'd been told that her real father was Jon Bjarnason. Her mother probably listed Magnus as her father because Jon was a married man.

Agnes said she never asked Jon about possibly being her father. She added that there was no such thing as the truth. Toti told her that there was truth in God. Not for her, she responded. She told the truth and he can see how it had served her.

It wouldn't matter what the Reverend read in ministerial books about her; only what other men thought of her counted. She imagined that her mother wanted to keep her but no one would hire a servant with a newborn. Her memories were confused but if she shared them all, she might be all the more confused about what really happened. Surely her mother didn't look at her newborn and think that someday she would leave her.

Chapter Five

In June 1828, Agnes responded to a poem written by Poet-Rosa who spoke of the pain that she caused by taking away the person who gave her life meaning. Agnes responded with a poem that she was seeking grace from the Lord and reminded Rosa that Jesus brought both of them.

Inga, a neighbor, told Margret that it would be difficult for her to sleep with Agnes there. Roslin was afraid that Margret would be strangled in her sleep. Margret felt certain that Agnes would not harm them. As for Roslin, she was just a big gossip. Inga wanted to hear about the murderess. Agnes was nothing like she thought – she worked, ate and slept. She didn't talk much. The young Reverend was visiting her regularly. Margret does wonder about Agnes' thoughts. Her mother was Ingveldur Rafnsdottir. Inga knew her – she was a loose woman.

Margret was a bit worried about Steina. She had caught her smiling at Agnes several times and asking her questions. Steina seemed to be somewhat fascinated by Agnes. Apparently Agnes had a good deal of influence on Sigga, the other murderess. She feared that Agnes could have the same effect on Steina. Lauga hated having Agnes there.

Agnes dreamed of the execution block. It frightened her because it reminded her of what will happen. Natan always believed that dreams were meaningful though he laughed at the thought of God. He believed in nature, but a watchful and secretive nature. She had been at the farm a month. The work had made her forget what would ultimately happen to her. Only Steina and the Reverend talked to her. She still didn't know what to say to the Reverend. She thought he'd help her because he helped her across the river. She could tell him about her siblings but there are no strong ties – different fathers and one sister is dead. Most of her childhood was in a dark shadow.



There were bizarre images that she fully didn't understand. She and her brother Joas were fostered to the same family for a year. Her mother came and got Joas but left her there.

Agnes was sitting outside when Steina came looking for her. Steina pointed to gray clouds that would be bad for the hay. Agnes told Steina she should go back inside, but Steina wanted to stay. Agnes pointed out that her parents didn't like her being alone with Agnes. Steina asked what Agnes and the Reverend talked about. It was private, Agnes told her. Agnes agreed with Jon that it was better not to talk to Steina and leave her to her chores. Lauga was scared of Agnes because she listened to Roslin's gossip. Steina didn't believe what was said about Agnes and didn't believe Agnes murdered those men.

Steina thought she might be able to help Agnes. She would be willing to start a petition for an appeal. She told Agnes that Blondal had started one for Sigga, Fridrik's sweetheart. It was upsetting news to Agnes. She walked away from Steina toward the river, but Steina followed. Steina said maybe Blondal would make an appeal to the King. She could tell them what really happened at Illugastadir. Agnes became weak and fell to her knees. Steina rushed to her. It was pouring down rain and the ground was getting muddy. Steina apologized for telling her about the appeal. She couldn't get Agnes to stand up and go back to the house. Steina ran back up the muddy hill and let Agnes stay there on her knees.

Steina ran inside and told her mother that Agnes needed help. Steina told Margret that she told Agnes about the appeal for Sigga and became very upset. Jon asked where Agnes was as he pulled his shoes on. Steina only wanted to help, she told her father. He gripped her shoulders angrily. He had told her to stay away from Agnes. Lauga told Steina to be careful or she'd be as wicked as Agnes.

Agnes overheard the family talking about her. Sigga would be freed, but not Agnes – she was Agnes of the fire and Agnes of the dead bodies. There was no escape for her.

Toti received an urgent message from Jon Jonsson asking him to come quickly. It was about Agnes. Toti took off immediately and caught up with Gudmundur, the farmhand, who had delivered the message. Agnes was "wild" according to him. She had a fit and fought off he and Jon as she laid in mud like a madwoman. All he knew was that one of the girls said something about Sigga. Agnes was sitting in the corner of the dark bed chamber when he arrived, her hands locked in irons. She told him immediately that Blondal was making an appeal to the King for a reduction in her sentence. They pity Sigga, because they think of her as young and dumb, but they hate Agnes and offer her no pity because she is considered smart. Agnes lamented that if she were considered dumb, they would blame the whole thing on Fridrik.

Agnes pointed out that Blondal and the others were defying God's word that "Thou shalt not kill". She tried but she could not love them. She hated them. Margret got the key to unlock Agnes' irons after Toti asked her to be unbound. Agnes told Toti she had a dream about dying. Toti prayed for the strength to bear the burdens that they were made to



carry and the courage to face the fates. He thanked the Lord for the family who took Agnes in. He told Agnes that she was not alone, that God and Toti was with her. Agnes had a half-brother but had no idea where he was. Everyone else was dead. Her only visitor at Stora-Borg was Rosa Gudmundsdottir of Vatnsendi. Toti recognized her as Poet-Rosa. She brought a poem to Agnes at Stora-Borg accusing her of making her life meaningless. Rosa loved Natan but she was a married woman.

Agnes felt sorry for Steina. She wanted to start a petition for her. She asked Toti if he thought it was possible to organize such an appeal. He didn't know; she asked him to inquire about it with Blondal. Toti wanted to know more about Agnes' life. She had been a foster child in the valley and then a pauper. Her foster parents were Inga and Bjorn. Inga died when Agnes was eight. She remembered Inga's death; she had died in childbirth. That day was written deeply in her memory.

Chapter Six

The clerks stationed at Stapar at Vatnsnes made a list of the possessions and assets of prisoners Agnes and Sigga. The list consisted of clothing, books and personal and household items.

Agnes decided she would tell Toti that death happened. She recalled when she was eight and her foster brother, Kjartan, was three. She called Inga "Mamma" but Bjorn wouldn't let her call him "Pabbi". Inga saw the Agnes was bright and could learn. Bjorn didn't like Inga teaching Agnes, but when he was away, Inga taught Agnes stories and Agnes would recite them back to Inga. One night Bjorn had Agnes and Kjartan come outside to see the Northern Lights. The sky was lit up with beautiful color. The next morning Inga wasn't feeling well and remained in bed. Agnes peaked out at the sky which was dark and ominous. Bjorn scolded her for opening the door and letting the cold in. The next day Inga was in labor. Bjorn sent Jon, their workman, to get his sister-in-law to help with the birth, but the storm raged so that he wasn't able to see his way to walk past the barn.

As Bjorn stayed at Inga's bedside, Agnes and Kjartan huddled together, frightened as they heard Inga's whimpers and cries. Hours later Bjorn emerged with a tiny baby and put it in Agnes' arms. It was a girl. The wind was whipping through the cracks in the house. Agnes shielded the baby against the wind and chill as best she could. Inga's cries were still coming from her bed. The children fell asleep. When they woke later, Bjorn was standing over them. Inga had died. Agnes tried to hand him the baby but he told her that the baby was dead, too. Agnes was devastated. She said she wanted to die, too. "Maybe you will!" Bjorn told her. Agnes screamed and cried and rolled on the floor angry at Bjorn and at Inga for dying. She sneaked up the stairs later and saw Inga in death. A blanket near her was soaked in blood. Blood was everywhere. She called to her but she was silent with eyes wide open. She was stiff and cold to the touch. Agnes kissed her and crawled into bed with her.

Agnes would tell this story to the Reverend. She knew that the others would be listening so she could not ask the question that she wanted to ask: was she in this situation



because she had said she wanted to die after Inga and the baby died? And did she kill the baby? Hold it too tight? So many things were foggy in her memory. Inga's death was crystal clear. Bjorn told Agnes to put the baby in the storeroom. Bjorn's brother and sister-in-law came over. They carried Inga's body downstairs from the loft. Aunt Rosa's servant came to help as well. She comforted Agnes telling her that God would watch over her and that the baby wasn't meant for this world. Toti asked where this servant was. Agnes responded that she was dead.

There was a wake of sorts for Inga for just the few people who were present. Jon fetched a priest to give her a blessing. Agnes heard the priest tell Jon to keep Inga's body in the storeroom until spring. The earth was frozen and a burial was impossible. At least he would have time to construct the coffins for Inga and the baby. The burials didn't take place for months. Kjartan didn't understand why his mother was gone and cried a lot. One day, Agnes was told that Bjorn no longer wanted her. She was thrown onto the mercy of the parish.

Agnes had a dream in which Natan's face was looming before her. She saw Fridrik's knife deep in Natan's stomach. Agnes screamed at the horror. She woke from her dream and tried to wake Toti who was in the next room and had stayed the night at the farm, but he was sleepy and did not wake. She returned to her bed and dreamed of her foster mother Inga lying in the cold storeroom for months. Inga called to her begging to get out of her cold prison. Agnes burst into the storeroom. Inga was dead. Her mother was dead.

Analysis

Chapter Four

An official note from Blondal shows the cold of the attitude of the government toward the condemned. They were not concerned about their burial rites or whether they had been reformed and found the Lord, they were concerned about the cost of the axe that would remove their heads and how they would dispose of the bloody instrument. This matter of official business is in stark contrast to Toti's work in trying to lead Agnes to God.

After a second failed attempt to work with Agnes, Toti felt that he was not the right person for the task of reforming Agnes and bringing her to peace with the Lord. His father was also a priest and a seasoned veteran of dealing with sinners. As a religious man, he felt that Toti has been called to serve Agnes. He believed that his son would be committing a sin against the Lord if he refused to fulfill the role that God had recruited him for. He was harsh and unbending with his son because he knew that it was for Toti's own good that he not renege on his agreement to help the condemned woman.

Toti was young is finally able to give Agnes what she needed. An older priest – like his own father – who was more set in his ways and in the traditions of the church would not have been able to establish a successful relationship with Agnes. What Agnes needed was someone to listen to her. She had heard all the prayers and passages from the



New Testament many times. She needed to be able to express herself and tell her story. She apparently did not have an adequate enough opportunity in the courtroom. In fact, the prosecutor twisted her words and used them against her.

The priest Anges was first sent to be her spiritual advisor, told her she would burn in Hell if she didn't pray for forgiveness. Before she could ask for forgiveness, however, Angled needed to tell another human her feelings and her version of what happened. It was locked inside her and needed to come out. Agnes needed a friend, and Toti finally began to understand that. While it was still is duty to bring her to the Lord, he decided that he can do so in an unconventional way.

Agnes slowly revealed who she was as a person - not as a murderess or criminal. There are hints that her childhood was troubling and that it most probably had an impact on her adult life and the choices she made.

Chapter Five

Margret began seeing a dynamic between Agnes and her elder daughter Steina. Steina is portrayed as a little scatter-brained and may even slow or addled. Margret did not want her vulnerable daughter to be taken in by a criminal, a murderess. There was speculation that the other convicted murderess had been drawn into the crime by Agnes, and Margret did not want the same fate for her daughter. Although Margret no longer feared that Agnes would hurt her daughters physically, she was concerned that she could corrupt them. It is a natural protective stance for a good and protective mother to take.

As it turned out, Agnes did not have a bad impact on Steina, it was the other way around. Steina lacked a filter; she did not spare what she said nor the feelings of Agnes when she told Agnes that Sigga, the other female convicted of the murder, would possibly have her sentenced reduced. An appeal was being sent to the King by Blondal. Agnes, naturally, was disturbed because her case was not being appealed. It was a form of discrimination and unfair treatment, but Agnes had no recourse and she was smart enough to know that she had come to the end of the line and that no one in authority planned to help her. Agnes pointed out the hypocrisy of the government officials. While they were charged with her redemption before she was executed, they were defying God's laws: "Thou shalt not kill".

Margret was not mistaken in her belief that Steina was impressed by Agnes. In her innocent way, Steina thought that she could do something to save Agnes. Just based on knowing Agnes, Steina didn't believe that Agnes committed the murders.

Toti felt that in order to help Agnes, he must fully understand her. To accomplish that, he believed that he must know everything there was to know about her. She began talking about a foster mother that she loved but whom had died when Agnes was just eight years old. Perhaps this woman was the only adult who loved and appreciated Agnes when she was a child. Losing her had to have been traumatic for Agnes, especially since her biological mother had abandoned her and placed her in the foster system.



Chapter Six

Inga was the foster mother that Agnes loved and even called “mother”. Her husband Bjorn did not allow her to call him father, which signaled perhaps some resentment toward the child. Inga died in childbirth and Agnes was devastated. She had lost the woman who had become her mother. Bjorn committed a cruel act when he handed the newborn baby to Agnes. It was alive, but he knew that it would not live. He allowed the baby to die in Agnes’ arms. It caused her guilt that lasted a lifetime. She thought she killed the baby, that perhaps she had held it too tight or had smothered it with her body and blanket trying to keep it warm.

Agnes was also traumatized after Inga’s death when it was decided that it was too cold to dig a grave for her. Her burial had to wait until the ground thawed which was months away. Until that time, Inga’s body was kept in cold storage in the store house. Agnes was able to visit her dead mother and kiss her and crawl into bed with her in the storage room. It was not a healthy situation for a young girl to be exposed to.

To top everything off, Agnes learned that Bjorn no longer wanted to keep her. He threw her to the mercy of the parish. Agnes had been abandoned over and over again by the time she was eight years old.

Discussion Question 1

What had Roslin heard about the murderers and the victims?

Discussion Question 2

What did Toti learn from Gudrun in Undirfell about Natan?

Discussion Question 3

What was the exchange between Poet-Rosa and Agnes?

Vocabulary

grippe, pauper, conniving, ministerial, victuals, malevolent, fanciful, scythe, adjoined, sensibilities, sully, acidity, cursive, surreptitious, averse, compulsion



Chapters 7-9

Summary

Chapter Seven

On May 6, 1810, Reverend Johann Tomasson confirmed in a letter that Fridrik was of good intellect and a good knowledge of the catechism but that he had blatantly disobeyed his parents and had a character that was unbending. On September 5, 1829, Blondal wrote to Toti inquiring about his progress with Agnes.

Toti responded to Blondal in person. When he arrived, a servant named Karitas seemed to want to talk to him but Blondal ordered her to leave them to their privacy. Toti reported that Agnes had settled into her new custodial holdings on the farm at Kornsa. Jon informed him that she labored well and had a humble demeanor. He explained that initially he relied on prayers and passages from the New Testament. She was well-versed in the passages but told him to leave. He understood later that the condemned needed other ways to prepare for death. He came to believe that he would be able to expose her soul if he talked to her as a friend. He encouraged her to speak of her past. She did not pray with him but he was sure she did in private.

Blondal described the night of the murder claiming that Agnes hid Fridrik in the cowshed. There plan was to kill and rob him. Petur happened to be with Natan that evening. Fridrik had confessed to the crimes. He killed Petur first but only wounded Natan who begged for his life. Fridrik stated Natan was killed with a knife. Toti asked if Agnes killed them. Blondal replied that she was in the room. Again, Toti asked if Agnes killed Natan. Blondal replied that she had incentive to do so. He claimed that Agnes picked up the knife and killed Natan. Toti asked if that was Fridrik's claim. Sigga was too simple-minded to kill anyone according to Blondal. Agnes was jealous of Natan's attentions to Sigga. It was Blondal's theory that because Agnes was older, she wanted more than an affair— she wanted to marry Natan but Natan preferred Sigga. Blondal thought Agnes killed Natan because she was spurned. Toti thought for a while and finally said that he didn't believe it.

Blondal said that Agnes was a loose woman and, like many older servants, was adept at deception. Toti had found her to be sincere. Toti vowed to do his best to achieve her redemption. After Fridrik was arrested, he was not initially remorseful. He had been raised in a household that was not guided by morality or Christian teachings. The Reverend Johann Tomasson became his spiritual advisor and through his guidance and daily prayer, Fridrik has repented and accepted his fate. Blondal noted that since he was named District Commissioner, he has seen many criminals and now murderers. It was his role to see that justice was done. He intended to deliver God's justice on earth. Blondal refused to discuss his selection of Natan's brother to carry out the executions.



Toti left Blondal's study with a headache and images of Agnes and Fridrik killing Natan. As he hurriedly left, Karitas called after him. She confirmed that he was the reverend attending to Agnes. Karitas worked at Illugastadir with Natan Ketilsson, leaving just before Agnes began working for him. She was replacing Karitas as housekeeper. Natan broke his word. He promised her the job but then decided to give it to Sigga. Since Sigga was only fifteen or sixteen, Natan knew that it would be humiliating for Agnes to work under her. Karitas left her job because she couldn't stand Natan. He toyed with people and was a liar. Neither Agnes nor Blondal had said anything bad about Natan. But Blondal was beholden to Natan; she cured his wife who was very ill. Karitas urged Toti to ask Agnes about Natan.

Agnes was assisting Margret in the kitchen at harvest time. She was helping Margret prepare for the harvest celebration. In her private thoughts, Agnes felt sorry for Steina who she believed to be unhappy and dependent. She looked at Steina as overly protected by her parents and had been denied the chance to make her own decisions. Agnes had a child named Indridi. The child died when he was just a few years old. Steina knew nothing of dead babies. Agnes left the family she worked for after he died. The family gave her kisses and a letter of recommendation and two eggs which she gave to two young girls she met on her way. Now those two youngsters were her guardians.

Steina and Lauga were sent to the mountains to harvest berries. They were upset to go and miss the harvest. Agnes overheard Jon tell them to not get close to her or pity her and that she must meet her God. He sent them away so they would have less time around her. The guests began arriving for the celebration. Margret introduced Agnes to Inga and Roslin. Immediately, Roslin was upset that Margret invited them with Agnes there. Margret told her to calm down or she might bring on her labor. Agnes shocked them by speaking up and saying that the baby was a girl. Roslin called her a witch and stormed out. Inga was curious how she could tell that the baby was a girl. Agnes learned from a midwife, Poet-Rosa.

As more guests arrives, Margret kept Agnes busy in the kitchen to keep her out of sight. Toti found Agnes in the dairy churning butter. He told her that he'd talked to Blondal who thought that more focus should be on prayer and sermons. He told her that he spoke with Karitas who could not bear working for Natan. She had something to tell him. She had not lied to him when she told him why she asked for him. He had helped her cross a flooded river. But they had met before that... in a dream. When she was sixteen she dreamed that she was walking barefoot in a lava field. She was lost and afraid when a priest appeared. He held her hand and comforted her before she fell into a chasm, dropped to earth and was buried. When she saw him at the bridge, she knew that they were somehow connected. She recognized him from her dream. Toti reminded her that she was not in a black chasm. Not yet, she responded.

Toti tried to assure Agnes that she had God and His love to take away the fear. He held her hand to comfort her. He asked her to tell him about Natan. She met Natan when she was working at Geitaskard in Langidalur, her sixth farm as a workmaid. It was around the time he helped her across the river. She heard that Magnus, the man named as her



father, was working there. She thought she might be able to stay with him. When she told him he was named as her father, he became angry. He paid her to leave. It was the first time she'd ever held money.

Agnes went into Geitaskard where she encountered her younger brother, Joas. It was a happy reunion but he did not seem to be doing well. Their mother ultimately abandoned him, too. Anger welled within him over their mother who he said was no good. Joas was running with a gang. Agnes and Joas stayed a few nights with Maria, a maid that Agnes knew. When she woke up one morning, Joas was gone and so was the money that Magnus had given her. She'd never seen him since. She had been saving the money for when she got married. A servant named Daniel Gudmundsson was telling everyone that they were engaged.

Agnes talked about how she preferred to read than talk with others. Toti loved to read, too. She also liked confirmation. His mind was filled with doubt about Blondal's contention that she killed Natan because she was spurned. She met Natan at harvest day in Geitaskard. His reputation preceded him. He was involved with married women and some said he was a sorcerer. Many thought he was a thief because of all the money he had. Blondal and he were friends. He wasn't handsome or tall, but he was friendly and very charming. She noticed that when someone said that Natan was not a stranger amongst women, some of the guests laughed but some looked uncomfortable. Given a choice, Natan chose to set next to Agnes. He told her later that he'd watched her all day and could not read her although he was usually good at it.

Agnes was aware that Toti wondered what the nature of her relationship with Natan was. In truth, Agnes could not remember when she didn't know him or what it was not to love him. She didn't tell Toti that she stayed behind as the other guests left to talk to him. He took her hand and told her that it held secrets and the empty part could be filled with bad luck. It could only be avoided if another hand covered hers. He held her hand in his and she felt the flames of desire.

Chapter Eight

It was autumn in the valley. Margret's lung condition had worsened. The daughters said there was a frost every morning. Margret could no longer walk up the mountain to herd the sheep. She let the others take their turns except Agnes; she couldn't let her walk that far away. Margret and Agnes stayed behind on round-up day to prepare the food. Margret didn't like the looks of the sky. It was gloomy and foreboding. People had gone missing on that mountain. She talked to Agnes about her fears to try to relieve them. It was a conversation about death but, oddly, Agnes felt some comfort speaking aloud about it.

Suddenly, Inga burst in. It was Roslin. She was in labor. Roslin stumbled in and immediately Agnes went to her and touched her stomach. Roslin recoiled and batted her hands away but Agnes persisted. She could tell the baby was in breech position. Roslin stopped fighting Agnes who told her to lie on the floor. Throughout the whole birth, Agnes was at her side. She told her children to stay away, stroked Roslin's hands



to calm her, called for hot water and clothes and had someone fetch wild angelica. The baby was born breech and was alive. Agnes was a heroine.

To Margret, Agnes seemed like part of the family – at least for that hour. Lauga seemed to detest Agnes more than ever. Margret wondered if she was jealous of her. Margret was used to having Agnes around. She avoided thinking about what would happen when the day of execution was announced.

The bad weather was making Agnes very gloomy. The farmhands have kept enough animals aside to feed everyone through the winter. Agnes wondered if her mouth was counted among them. She fantasized about having Jon kill her with the knife he was using to butcher the sheep. Agnes and the entire family work on preparing the butchered meat and the innards for smoking and preserving and rendering the suet. Jon thanked Agnes when she served him lunch. He treated her differently after she helped with Roslin's baby.

After lunch, Agnes measured out the saltpeter to mix with the salt. It reminded her of when she worked with Natan in his shop, measuring out sulfur, leaves and seeds. She remembered how they laughed with Sigga and Fridrik. Agnes preserved the meat that would be shipped away in salt and the meat that would stay there in whey. Steina was amazed by her knowledge and kept asking her questions. Between the smell of the meat and her memories when things were different, she rushed outside for some air. When Margret found her, she was certain she would berate her for shirking her duties, but Margret surprised her and sat down next to her and just talked. Margret's breathing was becoming more labored. When Margret stood to return inside, she offered her hand to Agnes and helped her up.

Later when just Steina and Lauga were working on the meat, they argued about Agnes. Steina was impressed with her knowledge of storing meat. Lauga said she probably poisoned it all. Steina saw her mother sitting with Agnes outside. She believed that their mother was growing fond of her. Lauga was upset because all the people in the valley gave them strange looks now because of Agnes. Lauga said that Steina treated Agnes more like a sister than she did her. Lauga couldn't wait until she was gone. Steina didn't know how her sister could say such a thing.

Even though it snowed most days, Toti was reluctant to stay home and not visit Agnes. There was an invisible link between them. She had told him about Natan. Now he hoped she would tell him what happened that night.

After the harvest celebration, Agnes did not see Natan for some time. Suddenly, he appeared when she was on a ladder working in an out building. She was so surprised to see him that she nearly fell off the ladder. He told her that he needed another housekeeper because his current one, Karitas, was leaving. Petur Jonsson was with him that day. He was an odd man who laughed at the wrong time. Agnes didn't take to him.



Suddenly, Lauga entered the room. She said she knew about Natan's dreams; Roslin told her about them. Jon told her not to interfere with the reverend and his charge. Lauga became enraged. It was Agnes who was interfering in all their lives. She ridiculed the stories that Agnes had been telling Toti.

Agnes asked Lauga to tell what she had heard about Natan's dreams. Lauga said that Natan dreamed of an evil spirit stabbing him in the stomach and then dreamed he was in a graveyard. Everyone was now openly in the conversation. Agnes said that Petur was notorious for slitting the throats of sheep for the fun of it. Lauga thought Natan might have wanted to recruit Petur to steal sheep. Maria, a friend, told Agnes to beware of Natan. Agnes thought she was jealous and wanted to become his housekeeper, but Agnes wanted the position, too, and she didn't dishonor herself to attain it.

Natan continued to visit Agnes and they became friends. Maria ignored her and others became unfriendly. Everyone was further incensed when she told them that Natan had offered her the housekeeper job. Everyone was weary and needed sleep. Toti accepted the offer to stay the night. He wondered if he had been right to allow Agnes to speak so openly in front of the others.

Agnes wondered what the others thought about her stories. It was difficult to convey exactly how the early part of her relationship with Natan was. They walked together in the snow. He named all the constellations and wondered if that was where everyone went when they died. Natan didn't believe in heaven. Natan admired Agnes. She didn't belong on a farm. She was different... fearless. They shared philosophical discussions about life but to the point that they sacrificed their relationship in a sea of words. They made love that starry night in the cowshed. She feared discovery; she didn't want people to think she was a loose woman. Agnes felt too much to see it for what it really was. Their relationship endured throughout the winter. For the first time in her life, someone saw HER, someone who was important, famous and admired. She loved him because he made her feel good about herself. They agreed that Agnes would move in with him. He would take her out of the valley and out of her lonely life. She didn't know that Sigga was also in his life.

Chapter Nine

The next day, it was too snowy for Toti to travel so he stayed on at the farm. Agnes told him about Illugastadir. It was remote and less populated than the valley and near the sea. She went there at the end May of 1827, starting out on foot and carrying all her possessions. When she neared the croft, a young girl of fifteen emerged and began waving at her. She was too pretty to be a peasant. Agnes wondered if she might be Natan's daughter. It was Sigga and she greeted Agnes with great warmth. Sigga showed her to her quarters. Illugastadir was cramped and dirtier than she anticipated, but she would be the mistress of the croft, not a servant. Natan would be back later. He was fox hunting.

Sigga had grown up in Stora-Borg. Her mother had died and she was new to service work and had never been a housekeeper before. She hoped that Agnes would teacher



her. Agnes was surprised by her words. She asked Sigga directly if she was the housekeeper. Sigga said that she was; she had taken Karita's position. Agnes would be working for her as her servant. Agnes thought that there was a misunderstanding.

Agnes waited until the next afternoon to ask Natan about Sigga. He told Agnes that Sigga was not his housekeeper. Sigga was young and simple-minded. She was impressed when Natan showed her the workshop where he made all his medicinal concoctions.

There was a knock at the door. Lauga opened the door to find Reverend Bjarnason from Undirfell standing there. He came to enter everyone in the current registry. The priest conversed with each person assessing their reading skills and knowledge of the catechisms. Toti walked outside with the priest after he completed his work. He allowed Toti to read what he'd written about Agnes. Next to her name, which was entered as Agnes Jonsdottir, was the phrase, "a condemned person" and her age of 34 years. He noted that she read well and that her character was uncertain, mixed. The priest found her surprisingly well educated and well spoken.

Agnes thought about her name in the registry: Agnes Jonsdottir. It was probably who she should have been: Jon and Margret's daughter, a housekeeper with a husband and children and sister of Steina and Lauga. That Agnes would not have been foolish enough to fall for a man like Natan. Looking back it was difficult to believe she'd been happy at Illugastadir – but she had been at least for a while. Natan showed her the pelts of the fox that he killed. They looked at his books. He said Sigga was a terrible reader. They laughed and kissed. Each night after Sigga was asleep he would come to Agnes. He would leave in the morning before Sigga awoke.

Agnes and Sigga worked well together. The first few months were happy ones. Natan spent most of his time in his workshop. He showed her some of the techniques he used. Sigga was a good worker but not interested in what Natan called the things of the intellect. Agnes was able to read as much as she wanted to. She learned a lot from her books and from Natan. He brought gifts for Agnes and Sigga every time he was away.

Agnes asked if Toti had learned whether Sigga was granted an appeal. Toti had not heard.

Sigga was a gossip, always speculating about people and who should marry whom. Natan found her amusing. She was childish. Agnes didn't care that she called herself the housekeeper. Fridrik visited Illugastadir soon after Agnes first arrived. Agnes found Fridrik unsettling. There was something off about him. He and Natan both had a tendency to get into dark moods. Strangely, she saw many similar traits in both men – murderer and victim. However, Natan was far more sure of himself than Fridrik was. Fridrik wanted to prove that he was a man.

Fridrik was not more than a boy and was the son of a local farmer. The first time she met him he came with a young servant woman named Thorunn. Agnes did not take to either one. She thought Fridrik was a braggart and a show-off. Thorunn had horrible



teeth and grinned at everyone. They came inside and visited and had a bite to eat. After they left, Natan checked his belongings. Fridrik was known to be a thief. But everything was a game to Natan. They didn't have a relationship; they had a rivalry. Agnes pointed out that Fridrik was twice his size and could overpower him. Natan was insulted and told Agnes never to speak of him like that again. She saw firsthand how a dark mood could overtake him.

Sigga had eyes for Fridrik and wondered if he was engaged to Thorunn. Agnes told Sigga that Natan had said that Fridrik was a thief. Sigga thought he was an upstanding person. Agnes also reminded Sigga that Natan would have to approve of a wedding. Natan was away at lambing season. When a ewe began to give birth, Sigga fetched Fridrik to help them. Fridrik was a true farmer's son and helped immensely. He stayed on for a week. Agnes kept her eye on Fridrik to make sure he didn't steal anything, but Sigga seemed blind to his flaws. Agnes saw that a romance was blooming between Sigga and Fridrik.

When Natan returned, he praised the girls for doing a good job with the ewes. He was upset that they had allowed the thieving Fridrik on to his property when he was away. Sigga began to cry. Agnes told Natan that they needed the help of a man. Natan said he would hire another man to help when he was away. It would not be Fridrik.

Analysis

Chapter Seven

As it turned out Toti was the perfect spiritual leader for Agnes to pick despite his young age and lack of experience. In fact, those may be the factors that will make the spiritual intervention a success. He was young and not weighed down by tradition and convention. Toti began to understand what Agnes needed. Although he had to stand up to pressure from the District Commissioner and his own father, he instinctively knew that Agnes needed a friend, a confidante; prayers and reading passages from the New Testament were not going to bring the woman to redemption.

Agnes had never had the chance to express herself even at her murder trial. No one had heard her story, and while it wouldn't save her life, she would be able to share her version of events and cast doubt on her conviction. While Toti's goal remained the same – Agnes' redemption – he decided that he could only achieve that goal by treating Agnes with respect and dignity and allowing her to tell her story in her own words.

Toti showed his temerity by standing up to Blondal who professed to know exactly what happened that night. When Blondal concluded that Agnes killed Natan because she was a spurned woman, Toti said that he didn't believe it. Toti was determined to reveal the entire story and allow Agnes to finally have her day in court. Toti countered Blondal's claim that Agnes was a loose woman with his belief that she was sincere.

The character Karitas is used to cast doubt on the integrity and character of Natan. Karitas had worked for Natan as his housekeeper, and she saw him as duplicitous and



disingenuous. As Karitas told Toti about Agnes' murder victim, he was able to sense that there was another story to be told about the murders and that Agnes has more to say about her relationship with Natan and how it may have led to the tragic events that had her heading to the executioner. Karitas also hints at another dimension to Agnes' dilemma; Blondal was beholden to Natan because one of his herbal remedies cured Blondal's wife from a serious health concern.

Agnes compared herself to Steina. She viewed Steina as over-protected by her parents and inexperienced in the real world. Agnes had a child that died when it was young. Steina knew nothing of dead babies. By contrasting these two characters, the author is presenting Agnes as a person who was free to live her life despite the tragic turn it took. Steina may be safe and sound in the confines of her home, but she will never experience an independent life, one in which there may be sorrow but will also be joy.

Agnes was particularly vulnerable when she first encountered Natan. She had been paid by her "father" to leave his sight. She became reunited with her brother who she hadn't seen in years. It was a joyful reunion for Agnes but it was destroyed when she woke one morning to find her brother and her savings gone forever. Immediately following these two unpleasant experiences, she met Natan who was charismatic and charming and... deceptive.

Chapter Eight

Margret who appeared to be facing her own death sentence due to her mysterious lung ailment, was beginning to trust Agnes. She discussed her doubts and feelings with Agnes who was a sympathetic listener. Everyone looked at Agnes with new eyes after she saved the day and helped Roslin deliver a breech baby. Agnes showed her leadership skills and her ability to be successful under great pressure. Jon, who would not speak to her and even breathe her name before, began to treat her with more respect at that incident. Agnes demonstrated that she was a valuable member of the community and that she had talents and abilities that she could contribute to society. The incident also showed her strength of character. Roslin had been Agnes' harshest critic, but Agnes was able to put that aside and do the right thing for the woman and her baby.

Lauga had been the dominant sister because she was smarter and more attractive than Steina even though Steina was a year older. Steina who was unsure of herself and may have been a little addle-brained and always looked up to her younger sister and depended upon her. When Agnes came on the scene, Steina had someone else to admire and look up to.

Lauga resented Agnes' presence not only because of her crimes but because she suffered a loss of status with her sister and perhaps even with her parents. Lauga saw signs that her mother was growing fond of Agnes and also depended on her for so much. Even her father recognized that Agnes was a bright and talented woman dealing with an awful circumstance.



Her family's acceptance and even admiration of Agnes was bothersome for Lauga. She had been the bright and attractive child who received the lion's share of her mother and father's attention and admiration. Now she had another "sister" to contend with. It was easy for Lauga to shine in contrast to Steina but Agnes was a more formidable challenge. Her resentment for Agnes made Lauga eager to spread Roslin's gossip about Natan's dream that he was stabbed to death by an evil spirit.

Chapter Nine

Hints that Natan was deceptive began presenting themselves to Agnes. She had given up her life in the valley – the only place she had lived and worked and where she had some connections – to become Natan's housekeeper. She was attracted to him and had hopes that their relationship would blossom into a personal one and that she could have had a chance for a normal and happy life. But when Agnes arrives, a young girl, nearly young enough to be her child, greets her and claims to be housekeeper. Agnes confronts Natan about the girl's claim, which shows that Agnes is open and direct and expects Natan to be the same. He tells Agnes that the girl, Sigga, misunderstood and is not very bright. Natan assures Agnes that she is the housekeeper.

Of course, as it turns out, Natan had told the young girl that she would be his housekeeper. He also became sexually involved with both Agnes and Sigga knowing full-well that Agnes thought she was the only one and that their relationship was special. When Agnes learned the truth about Natan, she was devastated. Her one chance for success and happiness had been stripped away from her. Natan's cruel deception set the stage for the tragedy that was to unfold.

Natan exhibited other disturbing character flaws. He egged on the young Fridrik to compete with him even though Natan was far more worldly and sophisticated than the inexperienced farm boy. Agnes also learned that Natan had a dark side; his mood could turn from happy to black in an instant. When she told Natan that he shouldn't rile Fridrik because he was twice his size and could overpower him, Natan was insulted and outraged. Natan warned Agnes to never speak to him like that again. Natan could not bear the thought that Fridrik could outdo him in any way. He had referred to his relationship with Fridrik as a rivalry – not a friendship.

Discussion Question 1

What did Toti report to Blondal about the progress he was making with Agnes?

Discussion Question 2

How did the family treat Agnes differently after she helped Roslin deliver her baby?



Discussion Question 3

How was Agnes listed in new registry?

Vocabulary

catechism, regalia, labyrinth, grandeur, unorthodox, treachery, chastisement, peevish, vagrant, sorcerer, dreg, foreboding, ravenous, offal, furtive, malaise, exultant, glowering



Chapters 10-11

Summary

Chapter Ten

April 13, 1828

An anonymous clerk wrote up the deposition of Rosa Gudmundsdottir who testified that Agnes spoke well about her master Natan. The baby she had with him was three now and wondered where he was. She knew that Natan had a considerable amount of money. She did not know Agnes or Sigga. Fridrik expressed his desire for her but she rejected him. He had wanted to stay at Rosa's because Natan told him that she had hidden some of his money there in the storeroom. Natan told him he could have it if he could find it. However, Rosa did not keep money for Natan in the storeroom. Fridrik was allowed into the storeroom and tore it apart looking for the money to no avail. After that he hated Natan. She noted that Natan would often bury money in the ground.

After Toti returned to his father's house, he fell ill with a fever. His father found him lying on the floor. He told him that he had overextended himself. He helped him up but as they started to walk, Toti collapsed.

Agnes wondered where Toti was. She hadn't seen him in days. November was passing on and he still did not come. Steina thought the weather was keeping him away or he was busy with his pastoral duties. Agnes thought perhaps he had grown tired of her stories and was convinced that she was guilty and must be punished and abandoned. No matter what the cause, she thought it cruel that he left her without any word. She thought about having one of the farmhands take an axe to her. Then it occurred to her that Blondal was keeping Toti away. He wanted to break her. Why wasn't she being told when she would die?

Agnes thought of asking Margret if she could attend church with her the next Sunday. She wanted the sound of the priest's voice to wash over her. If only Natan had allowed her to attend church. She may have made friends, even found another family to work for. She may have even been friends with Rosa. Natan said they were complete opposites but they had one thing in common – they both loved him. Natan admired Rosa. She was a good midwife and a poet, but she suffocated him. He had written her that their love affair was over. He told Agnes that his love for her was stronger than it had been for Rosa. Rosa came by one afternoon with their daughter. Agnes didn't know that they still spoke. Natan had agreed to keep their daughter for part of the year, but Rosa was resentful of Agnes and did not want her to watch her daughter.

Toti was suffering from a raging fever. He hallucinated that Agnes had been allowed to visit him. Their lives were entwined. She told him to stop struggling as she climbed on top of him with a knife.



Lauga had heard a story about Agnes that Steina didn't believe. When she was little, a man prophesized that an axe would fall on her head. It was a man on horseback who said that she would be beheaded one day. Margret was overcome by a coughing spell. Lauga helped her to her bed. Suddenly, Lauga screamed. Margret was bleeding from her mouth. Agnes said that Margret needed a jelly of lichen. She offered to make it for Margret.

Winter settled in but still the reverend did not come. Agnes wondered if he came should she tell him that she and Natan lived as man and wife and then how things changed? Natan began to travel a lot. Each time he returned he was more and more remote to Agnes. He accused her of being involved with Fridrik and Daniel, the new farmhand. She had no interest in either one. He became cross with her and didn't want to be around her. But then there were tender moments. She knew he needed her like he needed air. She hated being his servant. She would be making love with him one minute and doing workmaid chores the next.

One day Daniel told Agnes that he was fond of her. Agnes was angry with him because he told everyone in town that they were engaged. He was hoping that it would come true. He told her that everyone knew how involved she was with Natan. On another day, Daniel and Natan had gone fishing. As they neared, she could see that there was tenseness on Natan's face. She learned from Daniel that they had been hit by what Natan called "death waves" three large waves that almost capsized the boat. Natan felt the waves were an omen and that he was doomed.

When Agnes tried to talk to him, he accused her of meddling in his workshop without his permission. She accused him of deceiving her about her position in his household. After an argument, she tried to smooth things over but he rebuffed her affection. He had been traumatized by the death waves. She assured him that he was not going to die, but he dreamed of death every night. He saw death everywhere. He had dreamed about Agnes and saw himself in bed with blood running down the walls. He grabbed Agnes by her hair so hard that it hurt. She told him that he wasn't so important that people were out to get him. She twisted away but then he grabbed her and slapped her across the face. He told her to remember her place.

Agnes waited for Natan that night but he never came to her. Instead, she saw him pulling the curtain back over Sigga's bed and crawling in with her. She was nauseated as she heard the sounds of them making love. Rage worked its way through her body. She thought of leaving but had no place to go.

Chapter Eleven

According to the court records of 1828, Bjarni Sigurdsson, Fridrik's 10-year-old brother, Fridrik slit the throats of two milking sheep and one lamb the autumn before.

Margret heard Agnes crying in the night. She contemplated going to her, as it could have been a trick. Margret decided to take a candle to go to Agnes' bed. Agnes was crying in her sleep and she was shivering. Margret covered her up against the cold.



Agnes woke. She had been dreaming. Margret coughed a few times and brought up blood. Agnes made the comment that they were two dying women. Margret did not take offense. Agnes had been dreaming about Fridrik's farm. It was where she died in the days before Natan's death. Natan had thrown her out and she had no place to go. They went to the kitchen to talk about the murders.

Thorbjorg, Fridrik's mother, would serve prison time for lying in court. She knew that Fridrik had stolen some sheep but lied about it. Thorbjorg saved Agnes' life. She found her on her doorstep after Nathan threw her out. Margret asked if Fridrik burned the farm. Agnes inferred that the fire was caused by pots of boiling herbs in the kitchen and spread from there. Fridrik had visited Illugastadir when Natan wasn't there. He had a crush on Sigga. Natan and Fridrik had a terrible fight when the whale was beached at Hindisvik. Natan had paid the family that owned that part of the beach for whale meat but Fridrik had not. They fought over the whale meat and Fridrik pushed Natan on the ground and attacked him. The family who owned the property said that it was Natan who had started the fight and beat Fridrik.

Life at the farm was more difficult after the fight. Natan began accusing Agnes and Sigga of not working hard enough and of trying to steal his money. Another argument erupted between Fridrik and Natan ending with Natan's threat to report him to the Commissioner if he ever set foot on his property again. Natan accused Sigga of betraying him. He threatened to throw her out but she pleaded with him – she had nowhere to go. Natan told Agnes that Fridrik had asked permission to marry Sigga. He asked Agnes why he allowed Sigga and Fridrik to carry out behind his back. Fridrik and Sigga never married, but when Natan was gone they become engaged. They all celebrated with brandy. Fridrik became drunk and stayed the night. The next morning Agnes caught Fridrik kicking a dead sheep. Natan would be enraged. Fridrik had ruined the skin and the meat and blood was all over the snow. It was an omen.

Agnes interrupted Sigga and Fridrik who were talking in low tones. She told Fridrik that there were two dead sheep. The one he kicked and another one. Fridrik told her that Natan had been taking advantage of Sigga. Sigga started crying. She had wanted to tell Agnes. Agnes knew and thought that Sigga had agreed to it. In Fridrik's mind, Natan had been raping Sigga, so Fridrik vowed to kill Natan. Sigga didn't want Fridrik to kill anyone. Agnes assured her that Fridrik wouldn't kill Natan. They knew that Agnes was having sex with him, too, but they figured she enjoyed it. Daniel walked up and told Fridrik to leave the farm. Daniel said that Natan sleeping with both women was unholy. Natan would murder Fridrik for killing his sheep.

When Natan returned a few days later, Fridrik was gone. He was not happy hearing about the engagement. He accused Agnes of being a matchmaker which she denied. She told him that Fridrik seemed more thrilled about the engagement than Sigga did. Natan apologized to Agnes for hitting her. He told her he was glad to see her and that he had been distracted by too much travel. That night Natan came to her bedroom.

Sigga was terrified seeing Natan again. She was in hiding. When he found her, he gave her his blessing to marry Fridrik. One night Agnes told Natan that she knew that he had



had relations with Sigga and that she forgave him. Natan knew that Agnes knew. Agnes asked him if he loved her. He wouldn't answer and they got into a heated argument. Finally, Natan said that Agnes was a cheap sort of woman. She had come there because she wanted him, but now she can't stand it there. Natan told her to get out. He dragged her out of the bed, down the corridor, out the door, and slammed the door on her. She was naked in the snow and in the freezing cold air. Agnes went to the cowshed and covered with a saddlecloth. Some time later, Sigga brought her some clothes and shoes. The next morning she woke wanting to leave before Natan came to feed the stock.

Toti's fever finally broke in December. He told his father he had to see Agnes, but his father would not approve of his leaving until he fully recovered.

Margret was shocked that Natan threw her out in the snow. Agnes said he'd gone mad. He wanted Sigga but realized that she wanted Fridrik. She left the cowshed and headed to Katadalur, Fridrik's farm. Fridrik's mother told him that Natan was trying to deny him of a wife. Agnes thought that Natan glanced at a knife. Fridrik's mother said he would not have Sigga while Natan was still alive. Agnes told him to speak to a priest who could report Natan to a District Officer. While Agnes slept, she figured they decided to kill him.

Analysis

Agnes felt depressed and confused when Toti stops visiting. There was no word from him that he had resigned his position or had ended it. She was hurt. She had trusted another person only to be abandoned again. However, Toti had not abandoned Agnes at all. He fell deathly ill and was unable to travel. Agnes didn't know about his illness, however, and could only conclude that he chose to stay away.

Gradually, Margret began to take Toti's place as Agnes' confidante. Toti's goal of returning Agnes to the Lord was being realized even in his absence. Agnes considered asking Margret if she could attend church with her, as Agnes wanted the sound of a priest's voice to "wash over her." She looked back on her experience with Natan and wonders how things may have been different had Natan allowed her to go to church. Natan further deceived Agnes by telling her that his love for her was stronger than it had been for Rosa.

Natan had premonitions about his own death. His dark mood emerged when he nearly drowned when death waves hit his fishing boat. Natan was in such a foul mood that he accused Agnes of meddling in his workshop, and he became abusive and cruel, telling his "servant" to remember her place. Despite all this, Agnes loved him and wanted to hold on to him and the dream that she had about their future together. She was crushed when she learned that he was also sleeping with Sigga. She realized then how Natan had deceived her and that has used her and lied to her.

Chapter Eleven



Margret began feeling more compassion for Agnes, even treating her like a daughter in some respects. Margret had had enough respect for Agnes to never ask her about the murders or if she was guilty of the crimes, but Agnes opened up to Margret after losing Toti as her spiritual advisor. Agnes needed to get out her version of what happened and why before she died. Margret, of course, had been curious about the incident because the Agnes she had come to know was not an evil person.

Margret's sympathy for Agnes grew as Agnes began revealing what happened and how her experience at the farm had a murderous conclusion. Agnes' description of the dynamic between Fridrik and Natan explained why Fridrik became frustrated and angry with Natan. Fridrik was in love with Sigga and wanted to marry her. In the time in Iceland, landowners apparently had a say-so in the personal lives of their servants. Natan had eventually given permission for Fridrik to marry Sigga. Later, he revoked his permission and told Sigga that he would marry her. Sigga was not happy with this turn of events but felt powerless to do anything about it. Fridrik was outraged that Natan was preventing him from marrying the girl he loved. Fridrik's mother fueled his anger by warning him that Natan was preventing his happiness.

Margret sympathized with Agnes over the cruel and inhumane treatment that Natan subjected her to. He had lured her to his farm under false pretenses, and he had lured her to his bed with promises of a real future. In the end, he threw her out in the snow, naked and freezing. She had to stay in the cowshed like an animal in order to survive the elements. The man she loved, who she had pinned all her hopes on, didn't care if she lived or died.

Discussion Question 1

Why did Toti stop coming to see Agnes? What does Agnes think about Toti's absence?

Discussion Question 2

Why did Fridrik murder Peter? Why was he enraged with Natan?

Discussion Question 3

What were the "death waves" that Natan referred to and why was he so disturbed by them?

Vocabulary

prophesized, obstinately, vulgar, assuage, plaintive, feign, portentous



Chapters 12-13 and Epilogue

Summary

Chapter Twelve

At Laugar, in Saelingsdale, Gudrun woke early and woke her brothers. She ask Opsak and her other brothers what they planned to do that day. It would be a quiet day. There wasn't much work. She scolded them for not doing anything about the disgrace and dishonor that Kjartan had brought to the family. She angered her brothers and they jumped up and dressed; they would ambush Kjartan.

Natan was not home when Agnes and Fridrik arrived. Natan left to see to a sick friend. He had been in a bad temper. Fridrik asked Sigga if he had touched her again but she didn't answer. He began to go through Fridrik's things looking for "compensation". Natan had changed his mind; he would not permit Sigga to marry Fridrik and Natan would marry her instead.

They spent the next two days at Illugastadir making plans to leave. Agnes would accompany Sigga back to the valley as soon as the weather cleared up. Fridrik knew of someone who might hire Agnes. They were talking outside and did not see Natan approaching on horseback. Sheepkiller Petur was with him. Natan was enraged to see Agnes again and told her to leave. Fridrik told Natan that he would not be marrying Sigga. Natan said that Agnes could stay in the cowshed. He and Peter were leaving on a journey the next morning. If Agnes was there when he returned, he would turn her over to the District Commissioner.

Agnes stayed the night in the cowshed and drifted off despite the horrid conditions. She woke to footsteps in the middle of the night. It was Fridrik. He had come there for what was his. He told Agnes to admit it. She wanted this, too. Agnes decided to ignore him and went back to sleep. Later she woke and tried to find Fridrik. Agnes went inside the house to find Sigga crouched against the wall of the corridor. Sigga told Agnes to go to the sleeping room. Agnes heard movement and whimpering. Suddenly, Fridrik emerged saying that he couldn't tell if he was dead. Agnes followed him down the corridor. When Agnes lit a lamp, she saw that Fridrik was holding a bloody hammer with hair attached to it. She also saw Petur; his head was crushed and blood running down onto the floor. Natan was bleeding, too. One side of his face had been flattened.

Agnes screamed. They both heard a voice. Natan opened his eyes and looked at Agnes, calling her name. Agnes was enraged at what Fridrik had done. Natan tried to get up but his arm had been broken by Fridrik's hammer. He tried to walk but fell. They lifted him back up onto the bed. He tried to speak but only gargled. He was choking on blood. Fridrik told Agnes to make him stop. She picked up a knife off the floor and handed it to Fridrik. She told him to finish what he began, but he couldn't. Agnes looked



at Natan who pleaded with her with his eyes. Agnes plunged the knife into him. Fridrik told Agnes that she killed him.

Fridrik removed the knife. It was his. Agnes told him he would hang. He told her she would burn. She looked down and there was blood all over her. She remembered the whale fat that Natan had bought.

Chapter Thirteen

On December 22, 129, Blondal was presented with the decision of the King. Sigga was pardoned from the death sentence. She would serve the rest of her life in a prison in Copenhagen. The death sentences for Fridrik and Agnes stood. The execution should take place as close to the crime as possible. Blondal was required to confirm when the executions had taken place. Blondal had to see that the condemned had spiritual advisors and that a platform be build with a chin groove covered in a red material. The executioner must be trained so that the beheading is carried out in one blow. Rings must be built around the platform to keep the citizens back. The second one to be beheaded cannot witness the first beheading. The bodies must be buried immediately.

Blondal issued an announcement to the District Offices that the executions would take place on January 12th at noon. All District Officers must be present at the executions. The district officers must recruit neighbors to act as witnesses.

On January 6th, Toti was awakened by a knocking. It was a messenger from Hvammur. He handed Toti an envelope. He was still dizzy from his illness. He sat in the kitchen and read the letter three times. Toti began to dress. Agnes was to die in six days. He just got the letter because it had been impossible for the messenger to get through before then. He had failed her. His father didn't want him to go. The weather was threatening and he was still very ill. It was God's will that he go to her he told his father.

Margret was shocked at how thin Toti was. "You look like death," she told him. He had been ill which was why he hadn't come of late. He wanted to speak to Jon. He gave Jon the letter who told Margret and Lauga that it was the announcement of the execution. It would take place in six days. Margret went to get Agnes so Toti could tell her. She'd want to hear it from him.

Toti was speaking to Agnes, but she didn't hear him clearly. He told her he would be there with her. She felt she was underwater.

The family and the servants were all nearby listening. Steina said she'd get water. Toti told Bjarni to get brandy instead. She had six days left. She asked if she could go to Blondal and beg him for her life. Margret said that it wasn't her fault; it wasn't right. Margret asked Toti if there was anything they could do for her. Margret began crying and left the room. Jon followed her. Agnes kept herself together. Toti stayed with her all night until she drifted off. He fell asleep sitting up, shivering from the cold and his illness. Margret could not sleep and noticed that Lauga wasn't in her bed. She found her in the pantry. Lauga had needed a moment to herself.



Fridrik never found the money he wanted. Agnes had tried to clean up the blood with whale blubber.

The family tried to get Agnes to eat but she refused.

The night before the execution, the family sat together. Steina's face was streaked with tears. The servants were huddled together. They all watched as Agnes and Toti sat together. He held her hands and whispered quietly to her. She only looked at the floor, trembling. Margret had Steina help her lift a trunk up on the bed. She took a fine wool shawl from the trunk, walked over to Agnes and put it around her shoulders. Margret took out a skirt, blouse and apron from the trunk and laid it on the bed. She asked Lauga to give her the brooch. After a slight hesitation, she gave the brooch to her mother.

Margret clasped Agnes' fingers so tightly that it hurt. Margret told Agnes that she was not a monster. They will remember her. "You'll be all right, my girl. My girl," Margret told her. Steina hugged her sobbing in her ear. Lauga called her name and nearly collapsed. Toti said it was time to go.

Toti knew that it was all over. He brought his horse next to Agnes'. Jon was on his horse on the other side of Agnes. A neighbor ran out and gave Toti a flask. He told Agnes to drink it, drink it all. When they arrived, Jon and another man helped Agnes down from the horse. Toti held her hand as they walked. Forty men had gathered around the platform. They stayed back. Fridrik was going first. Jon was on his knees muttering the Lord's Prayer. Agnes told Toti she wasn't ready. He promised not to let go of her. Then the sound of the first axe fall echoed throughout the valley.

Epilogue

Blondal sent a letter confirming the execution and listing the names of the witnesses. The executions were carried out by Gudmundur Ketilsson. The heads were placed on stakes near the execution site. The bodies were placed in coffins.

Analysis

Chapter Twelve

Agnes had no place to go after Natan threw her out other than to Fridrik's farm. She didn't like Fridrik but she was out of options. She planned to leave the area and offered to accompany Sigga back to the valley as soon as the weather would allow. It was clear that Agnes had absolutely no plans to kill Natan. There was nothing that pointed to premeditated murder on the part of Agnes. However, Fridrik did have thoughts of killing Natan. He saw Natan as standing in the way of a happy life with Sigga who he was in love with. All Agnes wanted to do was leave the area and go on with her life. She had been hurt by her relationship with Natan but she just wanted to get away from him – not murder him.



Fridrik had broken into Natan's house for the purpose of killing him and getting Sigga back. His act was premeditated. Petur was an innocent by-stander. He was killed because he happened to be visiting Natan at the time. Natan was the focus of Fridrik's murderous plot. Fridrik exploited Agnes' misery by urging her to finish Natan off. Agnes believed that Natan was signaling for her to kill him. He knew he was going to die. He wanted to be put out of his misery. She plunged the knife in and although she didn't plan to kill him, it apparently felt somewhat good to her. She made the comment that she couldn't stop stabbing him.

Chapter Thirteen and Epilogue

Toti was roused from his sick bed by the devastating announcement that Agnes would be executed in just six days. He had been delirious from a high fever and had lost track of time. Even though he was still very ill, he could not abandon her in her final days.

The family's feelings for Agnes were exposed when they learn that their charge at last had a date with the executioner. The family loved Agnes as one of their own. She had finally become part of a loving family. Steina wanted to go to Blondal and beg for her life. Margret said that the murders weren't her fault. How could they help her... save her?! Margret couldn't bear the thought of Agnes' execution and left the room. Margret got out an outfit of fine clothing from a trunk for Agnes to wear. Lauga allowed Margret to include her silver brooch for Agnes' outfit. When they said goodbye to Agnes, Margret called her "My girl" and said that they will never forget her. Steina devolved into sobs and Lauga nearly collapsed. At the execution site, Jon was on his knees praying for Agnes' soul. Toti held her hand until that final moment when he had to let her go.

Blondal stayed true to form by issuing a cold letter about the executions and the witnesses who attending the beheadings. The primitive practice of placing the heads on stakes at the execution site was employed after the sentences were carried out.

Discussion Question 1

Why did Natan throw Agnes out in the snow? What did this reveal about his character?

Discussion Question 2

What did Natan threaten Agnes with if he ever saw her on his property again?

Discussion Question 3

Why did Agnes help Fridrik murder Natan?

Vocabulary

thwarted, impassively, bodice, dexterity



Characters

Agnes Magnusdottir

Agnes Magnusdottir was a real person. She was tried and convicted of murdering two men and then setting the farm where they were killed on fire. She was the last woman to be executed in the country of Iceland.

Agnes had two accomplices who were also convicted of the crimes. They were all sentenced to be executed by beheading. Agnes was considered by the general public to be a devil. It was speculated that she had led, Sigga, the other murderess astray, because Sigga was young and not very bright. The authorities believed that Agnes had a motive for the murder and concluded that Agnes had killed one of the victims, Natan Ketilsson, because he had reportedly spurned her.

Since there were no adequate prisons in Iceland, it was decided that Agnes would spend her last days under the custodial control of a government official. Jon Jonsson, District Officer, was called upon to take Agnes into his home where she would work for him and his family as a housemaid and await her execution. Agnes was brought to the farm, and though Jon's wife and daughters are appalled and frightened by Agnes' presence, she proved to be a good servant and hard worker.

Agnes had one right left in the world and that was to request a new spiritual advisor. She selected a young man who just finished his studies because he had acted kindly to her in the past. She didn't want prayers or sermons; she just wanted to talk to him in an ordinary way. He wanted to learn why this bright and attractive woman was ending her life so tragically. He learned about her childhood of abuse and abandonment and her adult life as a pauper.

Although Agnes couldn't evade execution, she finally got her chance to tell her version of events which varied from the official version. In the end, it was apparent to those close to her that she was treated unfairly and unjustly and that she should not have been beheaded.

Assistant Reverend Thorvador Jonsson

Assistant Reverend Thorvador Jonsson, or Toti as he was called, had just finished his studies at the ministry and was called upon to take on an unusual and extremely challenging task. The District Commissioner requested his assistance by becoming the spiritual advisor for Agnes Magnusdottir who was a convicted murder and had been condemned to execution by beheading. Toti's task was to secure her redemption for her crime and bring her to the Lord. Agnes had specifically asked for him. Toti was bewildered as to why this woman would request him. He had just finished his studies and was not a well-known priest. His father, who was also a priest, encouraged him to take the assignment. It was his calling and his duty, his father told him.



Toti traveled out the farmhouse where Agnes was in the custodial care of a government official. When he first talked to her, he prayed for her and read from the Bible. But it wasn't what Agnes needed. She had not been able to say her piece at her trial; she needed to talk to someone -- to have a friend. Toti's self-doubt about his ability to help the condemned woman only doubled when on the second visit, he made no progress.

Toti finally figured out what Agnes needed and since he was young and not steeped in tradition, he decided to listen to Agnes' story. She was able to tell him her version of events which was quite different than the official version. Toti became devoted to Agnes and felt they had a genuine connection. He told her he would stay with her until the end and he did. He held her hand and stood by her as she faced the executioner.

Margret Jonsson

Margret Jonsson was the wife of the District Officer of Vatnsdalur, Jon Jonsson. She was outraged when she learned the news that condemned murderess Agnes Magnusdottir, who killed two men, would be spending her last days before her execution on their farm. Over time, however, she and Agnes grew close, and by the time Agnes faced her execution date, Margret had come to think of Agnes as a daughter.

Jon Jonsson

Jon Jonsson, District Officer of Vatnsdalur, was not pleased when he was called upon to allow condemned murderess Agnes Magnusdottir, who killed two men, to spend her last days before her execution on his farm with his family. However, he did not hesitate to take on the task because it was his duty as District Officer. Like the other members of his family, Jon eventually grew to know and care for Agnes, and he spent her execution praying on his knees for her.

Steina

Steina was the elder daughter of Jon and Margret Jonsson. She was initially terrified that Agnes, the condemned murderess, would be staying with them at their farm until her execution. Eventually, Steina was drawn to Agnes and thought she was not guilty of the murders.

Lauga

Lauga was the younger daughter of Jon and Margret Jonsson. She was considered a beautiful and bright young woman. Although she was younger than Steina, she was the stronger and wiser of the two sisters. For her, Agnes had no appeal whatsoever.



Bjorn Bondal

Bjorn Bondal was the District Commissioner. He decided that Agnes should be transferred to the custody of one of his District Officers while she awaited her execution. Bondal played favorites with the convicted murderers. He appealed Sigga's sentence but did not make an appeal to save Agnes' life.

Sigrídur Guðmundsdóttir

Sigrídur Guðmundsdóttir, who was called Sigga for short, was, along with Agnes and Fridrik, convicted of murder and sentenced to death. However, the District Commissioner appealed her sentence because she was young and not very smart.

Natan Ketilsson

Natan Ketilsson was murdered. Agnes, Sigga and Fridrik were convicted of his murder and sentenced to death. Natan was a celebrity in the area due to his ability to cure illnesses with the potions he made from herbs. He had some serious personality defects, however, including a violent temper.

Fridrik Sigurdsson

Fridrik Sigurdsson was convicted of murdering two men. He confessed to killing Petur Jonsson but inferred that Agnes either killed Natan or helped him kill him. Fridrik was sentenced to death by beheading.



Symbols and Symbolism

The Executioner's Axe

A blacksmith was commissioned to construct an axe for execution of the murderers. There was question about who to charge for the axe and what to do with it afterwards.

Agnes' Soiled Clothing

When Agnes arrived at the Jonsson farm, her clothes were so filthy that Margret had to help peel them off of her. They were beyond washing and Margret burned them the next day. The clothes symbolized the poor treatment Agnes had endured since her arrest.

The Storage House

The foster mother who Agnes loved like a mother died in childbirth. The ground was too hard to dig a grave so they put her body in the ice cold storage house until the ground thawed. Eight-year-old Agnes used to visit her foster mother's body in the storage house, severely mourning the loss.

The River Crossing

Agnes asked for Toti to be her spiritual advisor because one time in the past, when she was having trouble crossing a flooded river, he was kind enough to help her. She had also dreamed about him prior to that and believed he could help her.

The Ministerial Book

In an effort to learn more about Agnes, Toti checked in the ministerial book and found that she had been considered intelligent and having a good knowledge of Christianity. The name listed as her father in the book probably wasn't her real father.

The New Testament

Whenever Toti came to counsel Agnes, he always brought with him the New Testament. Agnes preferred that he not read from it or sermonize from it. She wanted to just talk to him.



The Herbal Potions

Natan was an herbalist. He had a workshop on his farm where he made his herbal potions and concoctions that were used far and wide for cures for diseases.

Poetry

Poet-Rosa was a married woman who was in love with Natan. She was also a poet and wrote a bitter poem to Agnes when she was in prison for killing Natan. She was in great pain because Agnes had taken away her lover. Agnes was also talented at writing poetry and answered Agnes with a poem reminding her that Jesus had brought them both.

The Eggs

When Steina and Lauga were little girls, they encountered a nice young woman on their walk. She was kind to them and gave them each an egg. That woman turned out to be Agnes.

The Silver Brooch

When Agnes first came to the farmhouse, she saw something shiny under the bed. When she picked it up Lauga scolded her for touching it. It was her brooch, a confirmation gift. When Margret prepared the clothing that Agnes would wear to the executioner, Lauga gave Margret her brooch for the outfit.

Settings

Hvammur

Hvammur was the township where the District Commissioner, Bjorn Blondal, had his governmental offices. It was also where Agnes' murder trial was held and where the district office that Jon Jonsson reported to was located. It was at Hvammur that officials decided who would execute Agnes and the other murderers.

Breidabolstadur

Breidabolstadur was where Assistant Reverend Thorvador Jonsson lived with his father who was also a priest. Thorvador would travel by horse each day to the farm where Agnes was staying until her execution.

Kornsa

Jon Jonsson and his family lived on a farm in Kornsa. He was called upon by his Commissioner to take custody of Agnes, a convicted murderer, while she awaited her execution.

Stora-Borg

Agnes was held in a store room as temporary quarters until she was transferred to the farm of Jon Jonsson in Kornsa where she would work as a farm maid until her execution.



Themes and Motifs

Abandonment

Agnes Magnúsdóttir was condemned to death. She had been tried and convicted of being a murderess. As with any criminal, there was an inherent curiosity as to what brought a young woman who was bright and attractive to such a tragic end. As one of her final rights, she asked for a new spiritual advisor, specifically requesting Assistant Reverend Thorvador Jonsson, a young priest who was just starting out in his calling.

Even though she had asked for Assistant Reverend Thorvador Jonsson, or Toti, as he was called, Agnes was at first reluctant to talk to him. He was too young. How could he understand her miseries? But young or not, he persisted and eventually Agnes' story began pouring out of her. As with many criminals, Agnes' childhood left much to be desired. She was the unwanted child of a single woman who was not sure who the baby's father was. Although her birth certificate lists one man's name, Agnes was almost certain that her father was a married man whom her mother could not list. But Agnes would never know.

Having been unwanted when one starts out in life, is a rough beginning. Unfortunately, Agnes' life got worse after that. When she was very young, she became a foster child because – in her mind at least – her mother couldn't find work with a baby or young child. Later, she and a younger brother were both in foster care. One day her mother came to the house where they were staying and took Agnes' younger brother but left Agnes behind. It wasn't even a Sophie's choice situation. Her mother wanted her son but didn't want her daughter. The pain of that incident understandably stayed with Agnes her entire life. Her mother loved her brother but didn't love her. She abandoned her daughter both physically and emotionally. The scars never healed.

Agnes told Toti that she had lived in the valley where she was spending her final days for the entirety of her life. She was a foster child on many of the farms and after she grew too old for the foster system, she was a pauper in that same valley. She had a foster mother she loved named Inga, but Inga died in childbirth. To a child, this was another form of abandonment. A short while later Agnes was told that her foster father no longer wanted her. It was yet another abandonment for a child of eight.

Being abandoned as a child is not a recipe for the creation of a murderer, but neither is it a recipe for a successful person who will contribute positively to the community.

Deception

Deception is an important element in "Burial Rites" a story that is based on the last woman to be executed in Iceland. Agnes was a lonely young woman who'd had a very rugged childhood and a struggle to survive as an adult. She felt that no one really ever loved her. She was, therefore, very vulnerable to a kind word or an affection touch.



Agnes worked as a servant her entire life. At a gathering she met a charismatic and charming man named Natan who had a farm and was a celebrated herbalist whose concoctions were said to heal the sick and save lives.

When Agnes met Natan at a gathering, the two young people were immediately attracted to each other. They became friends and Natan told Agnes that he needed a new housekeeper, because his current housekeeper had resigned. In the household hierarchy, the housekeeper was the boss and the maids and servants worked for them. Agnes had always been a servant and she was thrilled that finally she would have an important and elevated position. She felt that finally the gods were smiling upon her.

Agnes quit her current job as a servant and traveled to Natan's farm. She was greeted by Sigga, a 15-year-old, who said that she was Natan's housekeeper. Agnes was sure that there was a misunderstanding. Natan would not have such a young and inexperienced girl as head of his household. Agnes asked Natan about it and said that Sigga was not very bright and was just a child. He assured Agnes that she was the housekeeper.

Eventually, the attraction that Agnes and Natan had for each other led to a love affair. Agnes saw herself as the lady of the house, married to Natan with a family. As time went on, Agnes learned that Natan had indeed told Sigga that she was the housekeeper. And further, he had an on-going love affair with her as well.

Agnes was hurt and angry. After confronting Natan with the truth, he became angry and threw her out – naked and in the snow. Agnes did not plot to kill Natan after this incident. But when Fridrik beat him with a hammer, Agnes was urged by Fridrik to finish Natan off with a knife. She plunged it in him again and again. Perhaps had he not been deceptive, Agnes may have had a different reaction.

Humanity

Humanity is an underlying theme throughout the story of Agnes Magnúsdóttir, the last woman ever to be executed in Iceland. While the word “humanity” is not automatically evoked when considering the crime of murder, it emerges in this story based on tragic but true events when Agnes is finally able to speak.

Childhood abuse and emotional abandonment are not direct routes to murder, but these factors are direct routes to a life filled with self-doubt and isolation. The hurt child recoils in the corner so that he can fend off more hurt. He keeps himself remote from others to protect the ego and survive. Agnes began life unwanted and she experienced that same sentiment over and over again in her life. Allowing herself to be open and vulnerable with others was not in the cards for Agnes. When she did expose herself to that risk by reaching for love and a normal life at last, it backfired on her in the worst way.

Agnes was not able to tell her story at her murder trial. Her words were taken by the prosecutor and twisted and turned to use against her. She was Agnes the Axe Murderer or Bloody Agnes and the public had decided she would stay that way.



A humble District Officer was asked to take Agnes into his home where she would await her execution. He could have begged off citing the danger to his wife and two daughters but he saw it as his duty to comply with the wishes of his superiors. Thus, Agnes arrived at Jon's farm much to the derision of his wife and daughters. They feared her and resented her presence – quite the normal response considering the circumstances.

As much as Margret protested taking Agnes in, she almost immediately felt something for her. She looked at the bruises on this murderess' face and frail body. She was appalled and reproached the officers who brought the woman: "This woman has been beaten!" There was a sense of fairness, of humanity, that was stirred within Margret. The filthy clothes and the greasy hair that hadn't been washed in months were other signs to Margret that Agnes was being treated worse than an animal. The woman was sentenced to death – wasn't that enough? Margret helped Agnes wash herself, she tended to her bruises and wounds and gave her new clothes. It was the decent and humane thing to do.

A neighbor, Roslin, was the most critical of Agnes. She gossiped and spread stories about Agnes not knowing if they were true or not and not caring. However, when Roslin went into labor at the farmhouse, it was Agnes who helped deliver Roslin's breech baby. The family and neighbors looked differently at Agnes after that incident. She was a hero who saved the life of both mother and child. They didn't see her as a bloody knife and two murdered men... they saw Agnes as a human. She was finally able to tell her story and demonstrated that there are two sides to every story and that both sides must be heard.

Agnes' journey to her death was witnessed by a family that didn't want to be part of it. However, living under the same roof with Agnes, they came to know her as a person... a person with flaws but a person. Agnes' spiritual advisor saw the human Agnes early on and stayed with her until she met the executioner. He saw her qualities and how she, like most anyone, could be drawn in and mixed up into a tragic affair.

There was a reason that Agnes was the last woman to be executed in Iceland. The people saw the unfairness of her sentence and decided that her ending was inhumane and something that they would never be associated with again.

Styles

Point of View

“Burial Rites” by Hannah Kent is written from several perspectives. The narrative is written in the third person limited omniscient which provides the reader with the points of view of the main characters in the story. The reader is able to understand the story by learning the characters’ thoughts, fears and motivations.

The second perspective is written in the first person from the protagonist Agnes, who is doomed to execution by beheading for her conviction in the murder of two men. It is a powerful way to present the condemned woman’s story. The reader is privy to the agony of a condemned person who has little time left on earth. Every person knows that there is an end to their lives, very few now exactly when and how. Agnes struggles with what she considered an unfair trial and conviction. As the story progresses there are hints that she was not guilty of the murders although that truth is subtly dealt with.

By having Agnes’ point of view front and center in the story, the reader is able to piece together how she wound up in the horrid dilemma she finds herself in. Through her recollections of an unwanted and abused child, the reader is able to see the making of a murderess or at least an individual who was somehow involved and definitely on the scene when the crime occurred.

Hannah Kent, the author, was intrigued by the true story of Iceland’s last woman to be executed and did in-depth research in Iceland when writing the book.

Language and Meaning

“Burial Rites” by Hannah Kent is an intriguing and captivating story to read. The only element that slows pace – at least for the English reading audience – are the cumbersome Icelandic names of the characters. Here are some examples: Sigríður Guðmundsdóttir, Agnes Magnúsdóttir, Björn Blöndal, Þorvaldur Jónsson and Steina Jónsdóttir to name just a few.

Near the beginning of the book the issue of Icelandic names is addressed by the author. It is helpful to read this section in preparation for the names that will be encountered in the story. Icelandic naming conventions mimic those of the Russian culture. “Son” on the end of the father’s first name indicates a boy child while “dóttir” indicates a girl child. When Agnes is listed in the revised registry she is not called Agnes Magnúsdóttir, she is referred to as Agnes Jónsdóttir because she is staying in Jón Jónsson’s house. There is a guide on how to pronounce vowels and the use of accents.

Presenting a similar problem for most English readers are the names of locations. For example: Breiðabólstaður, Þingeyrar, Illugastadir, Stora-Borg and Hvammur. Once the reader becomes somewhat accustomed to the names, the flow of the story improves.



There are also some Icelandic terms interspersed to add tone and ambiance. For example, when people enter a “croft” they are entering an enclosed area. The word for father is “pabbi”. A “cowshed” is a barn. And when one is in a badstofa he is in a bedroom, or sleeping room. There are also several poems written in part in the Icelandic language.

Structure

“Burial Rites” by Hannah Kent is separated into thirteen chapters followed by a short epilogue. The story begins after Agnes Magnúsdóttir has been convicted of the murder of two men and sentenced to death. The story proceeds in a chronological manner; however, there are many flashback scenes that describe Agnes’ life and how she came to her tragic end. The story is inspired by true events. Agnes Magnúsdóttir was executed and was the last woman in Iceland ever to receive the death penalty and be put to death.

Preceding the story’s beginning, there is a section entitled, “A Note on Icelandic Names and Pronunciation” which is helpful to the English language readers when being confronted with the tongue-twisting names and locations cited in the book. This section explains the naming conventions in the Icelandic culture and the pronunciation of vowels. There is also a map of Iceland with the area where the story takes place highlighted.

In a brief “Prologue” the thoughts of the accused are presented in a lyrical fashion. Facing a certain death, it hints at what the thoughts of the condemned must be and how the ego handles such an impossible situation.



Quotes

It was not me they stared at. I understood that these people did not see me. I was two dead men. I was a burning farm. I was a knife. I was blood.

-- Agnes (Chapter 2 paragraph Page 86)

Importance: Agnes reacts to the crowd that gathers to see her transferred from the prison. The curious are reacting to the crime not to the person.

They have strapped me to the saddle like a corpse being taken to the burial ground. In their eyes I am already a dead woman, destined for the grave." "It is necessary to keep her bound like a lamb ripe for slaughter?"

-- Margret (Chapter 2 paragraph Page 114)

Importance: Although Margret does want Agnes to stay with her family, she shows Agnes kindness when she insists that the woman be untied.

That dress was my 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.

-- Agnes (Chapter 3 paragraph Page 183)

Importance: Margret burns the filthy clothes that Agnes arrived in. Condemned to death, Agnes has nothing now.

Memories shift like loose snow in wind, or are a chorale of ghosts all talking over one another. There is only ever a sense that what is real to me is not real to others, and to share a memory with someone is to risk sullyng my belief in what has truly happened.

-- Agnes (Chapter 3 paragraph Page 263)

Importance: This passage captures Agnes' confused memories about her childhood. By not sharing her memories she can keep them intact and control what they are. Sharing her memories puts them at risk of being debunked.

The treachery of a friend is worse than that of a foe.

-- Karitas (Chapter 7 paragraph Page 407)

Importance: Karitas, a housemaid, prefaces her remarks about the murder with this truthful adage. She is about to tell him something about the murders that he does not know.

It was only later that our tongues produced landslides, that we became caught in the cracks between what we said and what we meant, until we could not find each other, did not trust the words in our own mouths.

-- Agnes (Chapter 8 paragraph Page 515)



Importance: Agnes was describing the disingenuous relationship that she shared with Natan, the man she was ultimately accused of murdering.

But Fridrik unsettled me. There was something off-balanced in Fridrik. And Natan, too. They both got into moods and the feel of a room would fall from high spirits to a glowering in an instant. It was contagious, too. With them you'd feel every small injustice done against you like a thorn in your side.

-- Agnes (Chapter 9 paragraph Page 553)

Importance: This passage captures Agnes' impression of Fridrik who became a murderer and Natan who was murdered. Ironically, she saw them very much alike.

My mother would never let the hearth die in her home. She believed that as long as the light burned in the house, the Devil couldn't get in. Not even during the witching hour.

-- Margret (Chapter 11 paragraph Page 633)

Importance: Margret and Agnes are leading up to a discussion about the murders. Margret obviously wants to keep the devil out while they talk about the darkest hour in Agnes' life.

The knife went in easily. It pierced Natan's shirt with neat rips, sounding like an ill-practiced kiss – I couldn't have stopped if I'd wanted to.

-- Agnes (Chapter 12 paragraph Page 706)

Importance: Agnes is telling Margret what happened that night. Natan was dying from the injuries inflicted by Fridrik's hammer. Natan's eyes were pleading with Agnes to put him out of his misery.

I looked down and saw the blood on my hands. On my neck, soaking my dress. I saw the candle flame flicker in an unseen draft, and wondered at what the room would look like in the gray light of day.

-- Agnes (Chapter 12 paragraph Page 708)

Importance: Agnes is realizing what she had done. In the light of day the room would look like a murder had taken place there.

And what of the Son of God? Did He die only for the righteous?

-- Toti (Chapter 13 paragraph Page 728)

Importance: Toti was responding to his father. Toti was going to see Agnes who was going to die in six days. His father didn't want him to go because he was still very ill. He said it wasn't worth it to die for a murderess.