Giants in the Earth Study Guide

Giants in the Earth by Ole Edvart Rølvaag

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Giants in the Earth was O.E. Rolvaag's most influential novel. It chronicles the story of a group of Norwegian pioneers who make the long trek from a fishing village in Norway through Canada to Spring Creek, in Dakota Territory. Although the westward migration means opportunity, the settlers must contend with the isolation and monotony of prairie life; primitive housing; long, frigid winters, and crop-destroying infestations in summer. These conditions are hard enough for people of robust nature, eager for a new life, but for people of delicate sensibility, like Per Hansa's wife Beret, life on the prairie becomes unbearable. *Giants in the Earth* deals with timeless themes of immigration, fear and loneliness, myth, and religion. The novel does not end happily but it is, nonetheless, an exuberant sprawling work that has won consistent praise for its unsparing account of the spiritual as well as the physical experience of its characters

Author Biography

O. E. Rolvaag was born April 2, 1876, on Donna Island off the coast of Norway, where he lived until he was twenty Despite an early and voracious appetite for literature, both Norwegian classics and writers such as Charles Dickens and James Fenimore Cooper, Rolvaag seemed destined to be a fisherman. A violent storm at sea in which several of his friends lost their lives was a defining experience for him. Unwilling to face the prospect of the hazards and desolation of life on the North Atlantic, Rolvaag opted instead to emigrate to America, asking his uncle in Elk Point, Minnesota., to lend him money for the passage.

His first two years in America he worked as a farmhand. But farming was scarcely more appealing to R6lvaag than fishing, and he decided to further his education. He studied first at Augustana Academy in Sioux Falls, South Dakota., then at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota, where he graduated in 1905. At SL Olaf, Rolvaag studied the works of Norwegian novelists and discovered Norwegian folklore. The work of Henrik Ibsen was a powerful influence on him, and it was while at St. Olaf that Rolvaag recognized his desire to become a writer. After graduating, Rolvaag returned to Norway for advanced study at the University of Kristiana in Oslo. This sojourn in his own country drove home to him the importance of preserving one's cultural identity in an alien land, and in fact Rolvaag would be adamantly opposed to the idea of a melting pot his whole life.

Once back in America, Rolvaag took up a p0sition at SL Olaf teaching Norwegian language and literature. He introduced Norwegian immigrant history as a subject at the college and helped to found several organizations for the preservation of Norwegian culture. Rolvaag's first fictional work, titled *Amerika-breve* (Letters from America), was published in Norwegian in 1912 under the pseudonym Paal Morek. It was an account in epistolary form, that is, told through a series of letters, of a young immigrant's dubious exchange of the perilous life of a fisherman in Norway for the servile life of a farmhand in America. He published two more novels, also in Norwegian, before taking a sabbatical from St. Olaf to work on a trilogy titled *I de dage* (In Those Days), the first volume of which was published in Norway in 1924, and in the United States in English in 1927 as *Giants in the Earth.*

Rolvaag's saga of the settling of South Dakota by a group of intrepid Norwegian immigrants was an immediate success and sold more than 80,000 copies by year's end. Critics praised the true-to-life thoughts and feelings of the characters and Rolvaag's powerful descriptions of nature. Over the next four years, despite a series of heart attacks, he completed the second and third volumes in the trilogy. *Peder Victorious* (1929) and *Their Fathers' God* (1931), however, lacked the universal import of *Giants in the Earth,* which stands as Rolvaag's singular contribution to American pioneer literature. Rolvaag died in 1931.

Plot Summary

Book I: "The Land-Taking"

As the novel opens, Per Hansa leads his family with their meager possessions over the vast emptiness of the Dakotas' grassy plains. With him are his pregnant wife Beret, his sons Ole and StoreHans, and his young daughter, And-Ongen. The family is searching for their traveling party, whom they had to leave when their rickety wagon was damaged. The family, especially Beret, fears that they are lost and may never locate their settlement, a predicament that could prove fatal, Unable to sleep, Per Hansa travels out at night and discovers evidence of a campsite. proof that they have the right trail.

At the settlement itself (called Spring Creek), Per Hansa's friends fear for him They are soon reunited, however, and realize that Per Hansa had traveled too far west. Per Hansa and the other settlers' Hans Olsa and his wife Sonne, Syvert Tonseten and his wife Kjertsi, and the Solum brothers, Henry and Sam, all gather and speak enthusiastically of their opportunities as the first farmers on this land. Only Beret feels a sense of foreboding.

Per Hansa goes to see his quarter-section of land and realizes that it contains an Indian burial mound. He does not fear the possible implications of building on such a sacred place. After registering his land in Sioux Falls, Per Hansa plows energetically and builds a mud house that contains the house and barn in one structure. A traveling Indian band appears, scaring everyone in the settlement. Per Hansa heals one Indian man's infected hand wound, however, and receives a pony in return.

A panic overtakes the settlement when their cows, which are necessary for their survival, run away. Over Beret's frightened protests, Per Hansa leaves to retrieve them. He brings them back, along with a borrowed bull and some chickens.

While walking over the fields, Per Hansa discovers someone else's land markers on Tonseten's and Hans olsa's lands. He secretly takes and burns the stakes, though this act is considered a grievous transgression. When she discovers his deed, Beret is deeply ashamed and afraid, for their religious traditions prohibit such actions. The Irish settlers who planted the stakes (but did not register their claim in Sioux Falls) soon come. When they Cannot find their markers, a physical conflict ensues, which the large, gentle Hans Olsa ends by soundly defeating one man. The Irish families move a little further west, and the Spring Creek residents are delighted when they find how Per Hansa protected their claims. Beret, however, fears they are all turning into savages and upbraids them for celebrating an obvious sin.

When Norwegian travelers arrive, Tonseten convinces twenty of them to stay in the region, expanding the settlement. The Spring Creek men travel to town for winter supplies. On the trip, Per Hansa trades potatoes for a number of items that baffle his

companions, including net twine. Always inventive, he plans to use the net to catch ducks that his sons had discovered in the swamps. At one stop, he learns how to whitewash the inside of a mud house, an accomplishment which astonishes his friends.

Winter arrives and the snow traps everyone indoors for extended periods. The lonely Solum boys intend to leave for Minnesota, but the others convince them to stay. The settlers appoint Henry, who speaks English, the settlement schoolteacher.

Beret begins to see this harsh life as retribution for her passionate love for Per Hansa, which led to their conceiving their first child out of wedlock and her leaving her family to come to America. She becomes convinced that she will die giving birth to their fourth child and wants to be buried in her only family heirloom: a large trunk. The birth is strenuous and Per Hansa is frantic. Beret and the child almost die, but fortunately Sonne and Kjertsi save them, and the baby is born on Christmas. Per Hansa has a reluctant Hans Olsa baptize the child, and, to honor Sorine, he names his son Peder Seier, which means Peder Victorious.

Book II: "Founding the Kingdom"

Two factors help the settlers withstand the winter: the new child and the school they all attend, both of which bring everyone together.

The men must journey again for more supplies. Per Hansa, though he has only oxen rather than horses, goes along. A blizzard strikes, and Per Hansa is separated from the others. He and the oxen forge their way through snowdrifts, almost freezing to death. Eventually, the oxen ran into the wall of a Sioux River house, in which Per Hansa finds his companions. The men stay at the village for two days, chopping wood and attending a dance, before returning home.

Back in Spring Creek, the families discuss the future of this territory and the possibility of taking new, more American names Per Hansa decides on Holm for a last name. Everyone except Beret applauds his choice. She thinks it wicked to abandon one's baptized name, and she silently fears that their new ways are stripping them of their civility and belief in the sacred.

In March, Per Hansa undertakes a trading expedition to the Indian settlements. He buys Indian furs and travels to Minnesota to sell them, making a large profit. He cannot understand Beret's lingering depression or her lack of excitement over his venture He hopes the coining spring will revive her spirits.

The time for planting comes. Since Per Hansa's property sits highest in the settlement, the land dries quickly and he begins planting early.

Soon, an unexpected snow comes, leading Per Hansa to believe that his impatience has destroyed the crop and, thus, his family's future. A week later, though, the wheat unexpectedly begins to sprout from the ground. Per Hansa is overcome with joy.

A disturbing episode occurs when a wandering, poverty-stricken family arrives at the settlement. The father, Jakob, must tie his wife, Kari, into their cart so she will not try to return to the grave of their youngest son, who fell ill and died on the plains. Per Hansa goes with Hans Olsa to place the dead boy in a coffin, but they cannot find his grave. The family leaves to locate their traveling party. Beret sympathizes with the woman and contemplates the misery that she has suffered and that Beret, in part, shares. She begins covering the windows to block out the evil she sees on the prairie.

After Per Hansa's wheat is harvested, a locust plague strikes the region, destroying everyone's crops. Returning home, a horrified Per Hansa finds Beret, And-Ongen, and Peder Victorious in the family chest, which was blocking the door. Beret says they must all climb inside to protect themselves from the devil. The locust plagues last from 1873 to 1878, leaving destitution in their wake. Many in the settlement hang on, however, because they have nowhere else to go.

In June of 1877, a traveling minister stops in the settlement, to everyone's delight. He holds a service at Per Hansa' s, since his home is the largest. Per Hansa has done well in the intervening years, now owning three quarter-sections of land. The minister preaches about the entrance of the Israelites into the land of Canaan. He baptizes many children. When he begins baptizing Peder Victorious, however, Beret violently protests fixing her son with such a sinful name. The minister later consults with Per Hansa, who tells him of Beret's growing insanity She talks with her dead mother, and he even fears she will try to kill her children. Per Hansa blames himself for bringing her to the prairie. Still, he cannot see any sin in this way of life and often protests against the minister's religious admonitions. The minister consults with Beret and puts her mind at ease about her son's name.

That fall, the minister returns for a communion service. He makes Beret's trunk into his altar. Though the minister has begun to doubt his own faith and feels he delivers an incomprehensible sermon, he successfully speaks to the villagers by referring to the common features of their lives. Soon after, Beret experiences a reawakened happiness and returns to her old self, much to everyone's surprise.

In the final chapter, "The Great Plain Drinks the Blood of Christian Men and Is Satisfied," the winter of 1880-81 comes with an eighty-day snowstorm, bringing great privation to the village. Hans Olsa, in an attempt to save his cattle during a blizzard, comes down With a fatal illness. A now vocally religious Beret attends him on his sick bed and makes him realize his need for a minister since he is dying. Both Hans Olsa and Beret want Per Hansa to travel to find the minister, though the snowed-in prairie is impassable. Because of his previous feats, however, Hans Olsa and Sorine believe he can accomplish the task, and Beret believes it would be a sin not to try. Finally, angry at Beret, Per Hansa takes skis and makes the Journey into the swirling snow.

That May, two boys discover a frozen, dead Per Hansa sitting by a haystack. The book ends, "His face was ashen and drawn. His eyes were set toward the west."

Book 1, Chapter 1 Toward the Sunset

Book 1, Chapter 1 Toward the Sunset Summary

Per Hansa and his family are moving west from Filmore County, Minnesota to Dakota Territory. The family travels in a wagon pulled by a team of oxen with a second wagon tied behind the first. Per, the father, and his oldest son, Ola, walk ahead of the team of oxen. Beret, Per's wife, drives the team and Anna Marie, called And-Ongen, and Hans Kristian, called Store-Hans, ride beside their mother while Rosie the cow trails behind the small wagon train. For almost four weeks the family travels forlornly across the land heading for the distant sky line surrounded only by tall grasses that swish in the wind. Per has lost his way and is unsure of how to find their path again since the tall grasses do not leave a trail behind them. Beret realizes that her husband walks so far ahead of the caravan because he is lost and she begins to cry.

As night approaches the family stops and begins to make camp. Porridge and milk from the cow are the family's only rations. And-Ongen is fascinated by the moon which she refers to as "she." After the family has fallen asleep Per Hansa lays awake and reflects on all that has happened. At Jackson the family's wagon became so mired in mud that it needed repairs that would take four days. The rest of the wagon train - Syvert Ttznseten and his wife Kjersti, Hans Olsa and his wife Stzrine, and the two Solum boys - insisted on waiting for the family so they would not have to travel alone but Per Hansa would not hear of it. Reluctantly the others had moved on after giving strict instructions on how the family could catch up. Per Hansa thought the instructions very simple at the time but now his family is utterly lost and alone. Beret had not wanted to come to the new land and Per Hansa knows he should have listened to her and come the following spring after the baby was born.

Unable to sleep Per Hansa rises from their makeshift bed and begins to search out a path through the high grass using the North Star as a guide. After over an hour of searching Per Hansa comes to a small circle of flat ground in a thicket where he finds what he has been looking for: evidence of the wagon train. This must be Split Rock Creek where Ttznseten had told him to camp and the ruts where the others had forded the river are still visible. Per Hansa returns to his sleeping family to find his wife sitting awake and crying because he left them alone. Beret runs to her husband and he tries to comfort her by showing her a mutton leg which must have been left behind by Hans Olsa at the creek.

Book 1, Chapter 1 Toward the Sunset Analysis

Per Hansa and his family are the center of Rolvaag's novel but they are merely instruments used to tell a universal story. There were probably many settlers who became separated from their companions during the long trek westward and were forced to find their own way in a strange land. Every settler experienced the worry and

the fear associated with plunging into the unknown. The wagon train became an extended family in which everyone looked out for the safety of everyone else. This mentality makes the separation of the Hansa family from the others hard to understand until the reader learns more about Per Hansa.

Per Hansa and his family are the archetypal pioneers searching out a better life. However, Per Hansa is Norwegian and this strong heritage refuses to fade into the background of the story. Per is a sailor unfamiliar with traversing the waving plains grasses. He navigates by the stars but the immense sky mirrored by the never-ending prairie confuses his senses. Per is an extremely proud man unwilling to accept the assistance of others; it is this quality that has resulted in his family's aimless wanderings through the plains. At the same time Per Hansa's pride will benefit him throughout the story and bring the simultaneous ridicule and approval of his friends.

Book 1, Chapter 2 Home-Founding

Book 1, Chapter 2 Home-Founding Summary

Hans Olsa, a man of large build surprisingly agile for his size, works to construct a sod house. Often he gazes towards the East for any sign of the lost wagon while his wife, Stzrine, works at a makeshift stove and their ten-year old daughter Sofie runs about. Syvert Ttznseten has finished his sod house a half mile across the prairie and smoke rolls from the stovepipe. Over a small hill to the North the two Solum boys are busy working to raise their own soddies. These few homes are the beginnings of the settlement on Spring Creek.

As Hans Olsa sits after dinner worrying over the fate of the lost companions, his wife suggests that her husband try to look for Per Hansa and his family. Stzrien tells her husband that at least they would be doing something but Hans Olsa fears that Per Hansa may have passed them. Ttznseten arrives to see if Hans has seen anything and says that he has had Per Hansa in sight. The family is off to the West but should be arriving soon. Within the half-hour Per Hansa arrives and tells the others to stop lazing about. As Beret looks about her, she has a sense of foreboding and wonders how anyone will be able to survive in such a place. Hans Olsa tells Per Hansa that he has taken the liberty of staking out a piece of land near the creek where they will be the closest of neighbors as was planned.

Anxious to get started on something Per Hansa stands and calls Beret to accompany him to their new home. Hans Olsa tells them not to feel obligated to take the quarter he has chosen but to make sure they file their claim wherever they decide to settle. As Per Hansa walks across the prairie to his piece of land, he stops on a small rise pocked by depressions and realizes that the land is a grave. Although further inspection reveals arrowheads, Per Hansa refuses to move his claim and says he will build his house close to Hans so that the women will be near one another. Having thus decided to stay, Per Hansa travels to Sioux Falls to file his claim. Meanwhile, Beret tries to come to terms with her new surroundings but finds little comfort in the barren prairie. Beret goes over in her mind the long journey which brought them to this point and during which she balked at each further step.

Per Hansa returns from Sioux Falls excited by the knowledge that he now owns land. Beret feels afraid to reveal her true feelings to her husband and mentions only that there are so few people. Per Hansa tries to comfort his wife by telling her that soon the settlement will be overrun with people. Furthermore, Per Hansa has brought back potatoes and is anxious to begin planting; they will build their house later in the summer. Per Hansa has grand plans for their new life; plans which Beret cannot enjoy because of her worry her husband does not share. Per Hansa throws himself wholeheartedly into his work, resting little and toiling from dawn till dark. Per draws the entire family into the work and in short order both the house is built and the fields are ploughed.

Per Hansa builds a house so large that Ttznseten tells him to tear it down because there are not enough willows to thatch such a structure. The house and barn are constructed together and separated by a single wall. Trtznders live near the Sioux River where Per has heard there is a great growth of trees. Anxious to see familiar people and gather wood for the coming winter and their new roof, Per Hansa takes Store-Hans with him and leaves Ola behind. After three days Per has not returned and Beret, worrying about his welfare, goes to speak with Hans Olsa. However, Per Hansa returns with the wagon loaded full. He has brought not only wood but plum trees for planting, a bag of fish, and the carcass of an antelope. Per Hansa's early trip serves the family well over the following years.

Book 1, Chapter 2 Home-Founding Analysis

This second chapter lays more of the story's foundation. The reader learns about the other members of Per Hansa's wagon train and the settlement they are working to establish. It seems as if their choice of land is completely random. There is nothing around for miles and miles except each other and an endless sea of grass. The men view the spot as fortuitous and hope to gain great wealth from the promising earth. Per Hansa is eager to begin working on his dream and takes little time to rest after their long journey. Per Hansa's attitude seems to be the driving force behind the journey west and indeed the reader learns that he is the one who convinced Hans Olsa to leave Filmore County. Per Hansa's pride leads all of them to this empty wilderness.

While her husband relishes the promises contained in the unploughed fields, Beret is disgusted with her new home and wishes they had never come. She feels a sense of foreboding that she can not share with her husband or come to terms with. The land is desolate and silent. Beret refuses to believe that others will make the arduous journey to this inhospitable land. Beret is probably not the only frontier wife to find her new surroundings less than satisfying. More often than not the women are content to raise their families at the first settlement and do not relish the thought of starting over somewhere new.

In many ways the rigors of the pioneer life is hardest on the women. Trying to keep a house of dirt walls and floors would have proved nearly impossible. Leaving behind family and friends for the solitude of a new land would reek mental havoc on women unable to openly share their concerns with husbands eager to begin planting. A pioneer woman faced a lonely life in which her only bit of normality would be the comings and goings of her children. However, Beret is unable to take solace even in her sons and daughter. In fact her current pregnancy only serves to heighten her depression. The thought of bringing forth new life in a land seen as hostile and evil is no comfort. Beret's transformation will engage much of the story and show the toll frontier life exacted on the hopeful souls filling up her landscape.

Book 1, Chapter 3 "Rosie! Rosie!"

Book 1, Chapter 3 "Rosie! Rosie!" Summary

The food is running low and the settlers decide to make the almost eighty mile trip to town for much needed supplies even though they have little to sell or trade. Because of the many fears of the women it is finally decided that Hans Olsa, Ttznseten and Henry Solum will make the journey because they own horses and wagons. Per Hansa is not happy about being left behind and determines to plough his entire farm before the men return.

The second day that the men are gone Indians come to the settlement. Per Hansa sends his youngest son to fetch Sam Solum and Ola to fetch Old Maria - his gun. Otherwise the family continues about their chores acting as if nothing out of the ordinary is happening. As Per Hansa works on his roof, he realizes that the Indian party is nothing more than families wandering the plains. He tells Ola to put the gun away and tell Ttznseten's wife that she can come stay with them. They continue to watch the Indians as the party climbs the crest of the hill and camps in a ring. Meanwhile, Stzrien and Kjersti come with their cows to stay at Per Hansa's. As the family sits eating dinner Stzrine's cow runs off towards the Indians as does Kjersti's. Per Hansa first tells the women to see to their cows but when they stare at him in shock he agrees to fetch the animals after a bit.

Per Hansa and Store-Hans leave the women to bring back the cows. Per Hansa greets the Indians with the little English he knows and Store-Hans, who knows more English, tries to converse with the party. Per Hansa receives some tobacco for his empty pipe from the Indians and counts them as good people. As he turns away, Per Hansa sees a man laying very near the fire wrapped in a blanket and moaning. The man's hand has been badly injured so Per Hansa calls for clean rags and hot water. Store-Hans is sent home for white rags, salt, and a bit of alcohol from Hans Olsa's bottle which Beret brings to her husband. Per Hansa stays with the Indians throughout the night caring for the injured man. In the middle of the night Per Hansa sees someone walking around the camp and realizes that it is Beret who has been crying. Over the next several days Per Hansa spends more time with the Indians than at home. The Indians never come near the settlement or allow their women away from the camp. As the Indians break camp, the injured man presents a saddled pony to Per Hansa before joining his party. The following day Hans Olsa, Henry Solum, and Ttznseten return from town. The families gather at Hans Olsa's house to celebrate the men's return and Per Hansa inquires about the happenings in town. However, the men are more interested in hearing about the Indians and praise Per Hansa's capable handling of the situation.

Two days after the men's return misfortune comes to the settlement. Hans Olsa is out in the field using the new mowing machine purchased in town when Kjersti realizes that her cow is missing as is Stzrine's. Per Hansa tells Ola to take the Indian pony and ride to the creek in search of the cows. However, the cows do not return and no sign is seen

of them. The men assume that the Indians have returned and stolen the animals. Since Per Hansa is the one who made friends with the Indians the others say that it is his responsibility to find the lost cows. Per Hansa sets off in search of the cows and Beret stays behind, bitter at her husband's leaving. Two days after he leaves, Per Hansa returns driving a herd of cattle before him. The cows were found at the Trtznders and besides their original four Per Hansa has brought back a bull.

Book 1, Chapter 3 "Rosie! Rosie!" Analysis

The laid back exposition of the first two chapters gives way to the action-packed third chapter which fully engages the reader. There are three major events which take place in this chapter and each one deserves attention.

First, the settlers are running short on food; a phenomenon which, sooner or latter, every pioneer faces on the frontier. Crops could not be planted or harvested until the following year leaving the newcomers to forage for supplies to last the coming winter as best as they could. This often made the first year the hardest and usually prompted many settlers to return east the following spring rather than continue to starve and struggle.

The second event and also another prominent concern of early settlers is the coming of Indians. Per Hansa's personality shines through in this encounter and serves the settlement well. By observing before acting Per is able to determine that the arriving Indian party poses no threat, however Per proves prudent by taking precautions and sending word to the women that they can gather at his house in case they are fearful. Per remains calm as he approaches the Indians and is rewarded with a gift of tobacco. He also remains friendly and the level-headed translation services of Store-Hans appear to appeal to the Indians. By extending friendship to the Indians Per Hansa is rewarded with a pony and the Indians are never seen again. Not every early settlement would have been so lucky.

The last event provides a bit of humor and also showcases Per Hansa's wisdom. The Indians have left but when the settlers' cows come up missing several of the men are eager to blame the disappearance on the Indians. Per Hansa's response to the lost cows is comical even if his wife does not see it that way. Per Hansa is matter-of-fact and straight forward, much to the frustration of Beret. However, Per Hansa's honest manner gains them a bull which can be used to increase the herd come spring. Per Hansa rarely makes a trip that does not result in some further gain for his family. His desire to provide more for them drives his every action and he considers each step carefully even if his friends often find him rash and foolish.

Book 1, Chapter 4 What the Waving Grass Revealed

Book 1, Chapter 4 What the Waving Grass Revealed Summary

Per Hansa continues to dream about the life he will make for his family and works continually to make his dream come true. The boys have made a long journey into the west and found a pond with thousands and thousands of ducks. Per Hansa goes with the boys to see the ducks and on his way home finds the stakes that mark the boundaries of their property. However, the names on the stakes are not those of Hans Olsa and Ttznseten; they are O'Hara and Gill. With this discovery Per Hansa realizes that trouble, or trolls, will soon reach them. Per Hansa keeps the discovery to himself for some time and will not even discuss what lays heavy on his mind with Beret.

Beret knows that something is deeply troubling her husband but cannot figure out what it is. One morning Per Hansa leaves at dawn but does not go to the fields. He goes to where he found the stakes and pulls them from the ground planting grass in their place. When Per Hansa returns home he hides the stakes in the barn where Beret finds them and believes the names to be Indian names. Before Beret can ask her husband about the stakes, Per Hansa chops them into kindling and throws them in the fire. Beret then realizes what her husband has done and deems it the blackest sin imaginable.

After four months on the settlement, Ola is out riding when he sees a white speck moving across the plains and rides home to tell the others that someone is coming. The wagon containing four men goes straight towards Ttznseten. However, these men are Germans planning to continue traveling another seventy miles and only passing through. The visitors purchase potatoes and vegetables from Per Hansa; the first produce sold from the settlement. The appearance of the Germans affects the entire settlement as they realize that people really are coming through. Another caravan of six wagons arrives a week later and stops between Hans Olsa's and Ttznseten's Per Hansa knows that the stake owners have come. In an effort to appear friendly Per Hansa takes over some potatoes to sell.

Ttznseten says that these are the men who claim that his quarter and Hans Olsa's quarter belongs to them. An argument breaks out and the Irishmen are challenged to show the stakes with their names on them. The following morning all the men go back to where the stakes had been and Hans Olsa produces his document for his claim. When the stakes cannot be found, the Irishmen finally move on and settle on two quarters west of Ttznseten's. Before the Irish move on, Per Hansa sells them over ten pounds of potatoes and finds the men to be fine folk.

One evening Per Hansa reveals the truth of the stakes and gains great praise from Hans Olsa and Ttznseten. Beret views her husband in a different light at his admission.

Per Hansa's wife tells the company that where she came from it was a sin to destroy others property but here it seems a thing to garner praise. Beret makes clear her disgust at her husband's actions and their relationship is strained.

Book 1, Chapter 4 What the Waving Grass Revealed Analysis

The discovery of the ducks is overshadowed by the discovery of the stakes. Per Hansa is faced with a moral dilemma that he should not have had to shoulder. The arrogant Ttznseten has placed an unnecessary burden on his friend's shoulders by hiding the truth.

Per Hansa has been working steadily to increase the size of his farm and now the unearthing of the stakes puts all his hard work in jeopardy. If the men come back and try to claim the land as theirs, everything the settlers worked for over the past months will have been in vain and they will be forced to move further west. There may even be a fight which could result in lives lost. Per Hansa considers the matter very seriously and takes it upon himself to formulate a solution. For the first time Per Hansa does something that could damage his reputation as an honest trader: he takes the stakes and burns them. His actions save the settlement from potential problems but cause tension between himself and Beret.

In what could be called true Per Hansa style, he manages to make a little profit from the Irishmen's arrival. In his attempt to appear friendly to the newcomers he takes potatoes to sell which in stereotypical Irish fashion the men eagerly buy. Per Hansa manages to take a bad situation and turn it into a positive one which he benefits from. While Ttznseten states that the Irishmen are loathsome people, Per Hansa finds them to be delightful folk much the same way he did with the Indians. Per Hansa's laid back and open manner wins him many friends much to the consternation of Ttznseten who is skeptical of everyone he meets and gets along with very few people. Not only does Per Hansa profit from the selling of his produce but the boys' discovery of the pond and ducks will later benefit the entire settlement during the long winter months.

Book 1, Chapter 5 Facing the Great Desolation

Book 1, Chapter 5 Facing the Great Desolation Summary

In October a memorable event happens at the Spring Creek settlement. Hans Olsa, Per Hansa and Henry Solum are out collecting wood on the Sioux River while Ttznseten stays home because of his rheumatism. Looking out the window Beret sees a large wagon train moving towards the settlement and feels sorrow for what she calls "lost souls." Beret sends Store-Hans to aide the travelers while she gathers And-Ongen and heads over to Ttznseten. The new arrivals are deemed "decent folk" by Ttznseten upon learning that they are Norwegians. However, these settlers are intent on moving farther Southwest but are excited to see friendly faces.

Ttznseten wishes that Per Hansa whose demeanor is more suited to dealing with newcomers was not away at this moment but does his best to convince the strangers to stay in Spring Creek. After a day of showing the visitors around the settlement and patiently answering numerous questions, Ttznseten feels sure that he has persuaded the travelers to stay but that night the men hitch up their wagons and leave. They will return in the spring to begin building.

The men decide to make another trip into town for supplies. Per Hansa tells Store-Hans to stay in the house and tend to his mother because there may soon be another Store-Hans running about. Per Hansa takes vegetables and potatoes with him to town hoping to sell them. Late the second day the men come upon two sod houses where the find a family by the name of Hallings from Norway and stop to speak with them. The only food the Hallings family has is milk from their cow so Per Hansa gives them potatoes with the understanding that he will be repaid the following year.

The next day the men reach Worthington where Per Hansa goes from house to house selling potatoes with little luck. At the edge of town Per meets a Danish widow who will swap potatoes for chickens. While eating lunch with the woman Per Hansa sees white-washed walls for the first time. The widow tells Per that a Norwegian lumber man sells lime and would gladly trade some lime, lumber, and nails for potatoes. At the store Per Hansa asks for netting twine. Hans Olsa and Henry find this a ridiculous purchase but Per Hansa tells Henry to order as he asks. (Henry interprets for Per Hansa because of the man's limited English.)

At the settlement Store-Hans and Ola become bored with their work and want to snoop around the empty Irish houses but instead Beret sends them to Ttznseten's for a darning needle. The boys find Ttznseten and Kjersti skinning a "bear" which turns out to be a badger and offer to share the meat. On the way home the boys decide that if there are bears there must be other wild animals to hunt and propose to get their father's gun

and bring home meat. Beret stops the boys' plan by ordering them inside to read. However, the boys wrestle over who will sit by the window and knock over the table. Beret leaves the house and returns with a willow switch in her hands which she uses to beat the boys with. The event is unnatural to the boys who have never been struck by their mother. Finally Beret breaks the switch on the table and seems to realize what she has been doing. Their mother leaves the house again and the boys feel sorry for what they've done.

Over dinner Per Hansa tells his family about the trip and they in turn tell him about the "bear" meat. Per Hansa sees a large read welt on Store-Hans' neck but Ola tells his father that the boys had only been playing around. When the supplies are brought in Per Hansa makes his wife take two drinks of liquor before telling his wife that the next day he needs to take a wagon load of potatoes to the Hallings'. That night while his family sleeps Per Hansa finishes making fishing nets and tells Beret how he will now be able to catch fish and ducks.

Book 1, Chapter 5 Facing the Great Desolation Analysis

Ttznseten's ability to be sociable is put to the test when several wagons arrive carrying Norwegian families. Syvert wishes that Per Hansa was at home instead of making a trip into town because Per Hansa is much better dealing with new people. However, Ttznseten manages to remain calm and patient while answering questions and is rewarded with the newcomers promising to return in the spring to join the settlement. For Ttznseten this agreement is a substantial victory. Syvert does not like anyone who is not of Nordic descent and would prefer to keep the settlement free of interlopers. Ttznseten is very much still connected with the clannish attitude of the "old country" and seems unable to accept the melting pot of America.

Several things happen on the trip to town. First, along the way the men come to the Hallings' home where they find a family on the brink of starvation. Per Hansa takes pity on them and supplies them with potatoes and vegetables. However, Per remains business savvy by striking a deal with the family that the debt will be repaid in the spring. Per's generosity extends to anyone in need but he is always sure to recoup his loss so that he does not fall behind in achieving his dream. Secondly, Per Hansa learns the art of white-washing walls from a widow that buys potatoes from him. Per Hansa is excited by the idea of making his sod house appear more sophisticated by decorating the walls.

Unfortunately, Per is unable to fully consider what white walls will look like in a sod hunt in the dead of winter. This is a mistake that will bring more unhappiness to Beret. Lastly, Per Hansa purchases twine which he weaves into a net for fishing and capturing ducks. Per Hansa has found a new way to provide for his family. His purchase strikes his companions as odd and they tease him for it, but not for long. Per Hansa is constantly shown to be an intelligent man always considering each situation and evaluating how to

gain as much as he can from it. Almost every action Per Hansa takes is carefully thought out and is only carried out if deemed to be productive and beneficial.

Book 1, Chapter 6 The Heart That Dared Not Let In the Sun

Book 1, Chapter 6 The Heart That Dared Not Let In the Sun Summary

Snow begins to fall in early October but is quickly driven away by an Indian summer. Then at the end of October the cold settles in and people are chilled to the bone soon after setting foot outside. Snow falls steadily for several days and the sky is gray. Per Hansa and the boys work throughout the days trying to finish all necessary tasks before winter sets in. Per Hansa whitewashed the walls immediately after returning from the Hallings' and now white encompasses them inside and out. Beret can only stare at the brown floor because the whiteness blinds her.

Per Hansa learns to fish from the Trtznders and is able to haul in large quantities of fish which will last them through the long winter. Per also takes his sons duck hunting for three days. Every day they splash through the pond returning home cold and wet but always with a catch of ducks. Beret is unable to understand why the men keep bringing in so much food but Per Hansa just laughs at her protests.

Per Hansa willingly takes parcels of meat to his neighbors but the others rarely visit his home. Beret's strange behavior scares them off because they do not know what she may do or say next. However, when the boys bring home a large catch of ducks all the settlement comes to Per Hansa's to learn the secret to hunting ducks. The whitewashed walls distract the company from their original reason for visiting and they all want to know how Per Hansa got snow to stick to the walls. Ttznseten takes offense to Per Hansa's accomplishment and doesn't understand the purpose of whitewashed walls.

To pass the lonely days people come to visit. First Ttznseten and Kjersti spend an evening and then another day Hans Olsa's family comes for supper. When the visits end Per Hansa begins to take notice of his wife and realizes that she is too thin for a pregnant woman. Furthermore he notices that she acts strangely and his once well kept wife has become disheveled and unwashed. Per Hansa prompts her to wash up for their guests and her appearance improves but her demeanor does not change. Per Hansa continues to assume that his wife's strange behavior is caused by the pregnancy although he cannot remember her acting this way during any other pregnancy.

Henry Solum comes to visit and offers their cow to Per Hansa for the winter. The request seems odd to Per Hansa and he eventually draws the whole story from Henry. The boys have built a sleigh and wish to travel back East to spend Christmas with their families. They need someone to look after their cow for the winter. Per Hansa becomes enraged when he hears this answer and his anger increases when Beret agrees with the Solum boys that there is nothing to do.

Later that evening Per Hansa goes to visit Hans Olsa and asks Stzrine if she will check in on Beret occasionally. Stzrine leaves right then but Per Hansa stays to talk with Hans. Ttznseten arrives in a foul temper because he has heard about the Solum boys' plan to leave. Per Hansa and Hans ask what exactly Ttznseten would have them do but Ttznseten produces an answer on his own: have one of the Solum boys teach school since they can speak English. The men pay a visit to the Solum's and subtlety pressure them into staying on in exchange for weekly suppers and mended clothes.

The reader is taken into Beret's fractured mind where she considers her life at the settlement as punishment for having gotten pregnant out of wedlock. Beret's thoughts also reveal that Per Hansa was responsible for convincing Hans Olsa to journey west. Beret has always been jealous of her husband's relationship with Hans Olsa. Beret left her parents and joined Per Hansa as he traveled to America but she has been disappointed with the new land since her arrival. She does not regret destiny pushing her into Per Hansa's arms but deems their arrival in America and subsequent travels farther west punishments set by God for breaking His commandments. Beret tried to postpone the trip west until the new baby was born but Per Hansa would not be put off once Hans Olsa was ready to go.

Beret's thoughts become increasingly morbid as she convinces herself that both she and the child will die in labor. Concerned that Per Hansa will have no lumber to build a coffin to bury them in, Beret begins to empty out the chest again. She even persuades Per Hansa to build a cupboard to store the contents of the chest although he is unaware of her ulterior motives. As quickly as Beret considers the negative aspects of her life she begins to praise Per Hansa's wise decision to build the house and barn as one unit. Beret finds the company of the animals soothing and their house is the warmest one in the settlement.

The day before Christmas Eve snow begins to fall and continues well into the next day. Both Stzrine and Kjersti regularly visit Per Hansa's home to check on Beret. The sun begins to shine on Christmas Eve day and the children have been sent over to Hans Olsa's. That very afternoon Beret goes into labor and Per Hansa is beside himself with worry. Beret calls Per Hansa to her so she can explain that she will surely die tonight and she has prepared the chest for use as a coffin. Per Hansa tries to calm her but Beret will not be pacified. As Beret's mumblings intensify, Per Hansa stands beside her bed and orders Satan to leave his wife alone. Per Hansa walks around the outside of his hut listening helplessly to the wails emanating from his laboring wife.

Sometime in the early morning Beret's cries subside. While Per Hansa stands considering hanging himself Kjersti calls him into the house. Inside Stzrine is tending to Per Hansa's newborn son and the women suggest that he quickly christen the child because the infant is so frail he may not survive. Per Hansa can do nothing but stand and stare as Beret sleeps soundly with the tiny child next to her. Finally Per Hansa goes to fetch Hans Olsa but before he leaves Stzrine tells Per that the child was born with the helmet on. Hans Olsa reluctantly agrees to perform the service and the child is christened Peder Seier.

Book 1, Chapter 6 The Heart That Dared Not Let In the Sun Analysis

Beret's broken mind is briefly opened to the reader. Her level of discontent is made even more clear by her musings about the reason for her current predicament. Beret has never come to terms with her sinful pregnancy although she does not regret that destiny brought her and Per together. However, Beret seems to have never forgiven herself and believes that God still harbors ill will towards her. Beret's soul is consumed by her beliefs that God is punishing her. In many ways it also seems the Beret does not want the child that is about to be born. She seems to feel as guilty about this pregnancy as the first unlawful one.

The episode in which Beret clears out the chest to be used as a coffin is frightening. The reader wonders if Beret intends to kill herself or the unborn child in order to escape what she feels is torture. There is a small sense of relief that the snow has driven Per Hansa inside where he has nothing better to do but observe his wife. If Per had not been forced indoors one wonders if Beret would have done some harm to herself or the child. Per Hansa seems to resist acknowledging the truth of his wife's ailment, choosing instead to pass it off as part of her pregnancy. Either Per is incapable of understanding his wife's odd mannerisms or he chooses not to accept the full weight of the situation.

The birth of Peder Seier is surrounded by pain and madness. Beret finds little relief in the labor of her newest child and instead continues to moan about impending death. The sense of something terrible happening increases in rhythm with Beret's wails and comes to an abrupt halt when the crying ceases. The reader's first assumption is that Beret and the child have died in childbirth. In some ways their deaths would have been a relief. As tragic as it seems, Beret's suffering would have ceased and the child would have been spared future pressures.

The child's birth is significant but for unexplained reasons. Stzrine tells Per Hansa that his son was born with the helmet on and a footnote states that this is a miraculous event at the birth of a boy child. Furthermore, his name is said to be of great importance to the second half of the story but the child's involvement in the rest of the story is minimal and confusing. Much discussion and many future arguments center on the boy's middle name which in English means "victorious." However, the reader never learns what the child grows up to be or how he is victorious. As physically painful as the birth is for Beret, so too is it mentally frustrating for the reader.

Book 2, Chapter 1 On the Border of Utter Darkness

Book 2, Chapter 1 On the Border of Utter Darkness Summary

Snow blankets the entire earth. The "monster" or blizzards might have overcome Beret if the newcomer had not violated winter's plan. The infant lies next to Beret grunting happily as it suckles her breast. Beret finds her newest child marvelous but so soon after the birth she is still weak and tired. Peder Seier, also called Permand, is small and birdlike at first but he continues to grow daily. Beret enjoys taking care of the small bundle and Per Hansa is gentle with her now. As Beret regains her strength she suggests that they invite the other settlers for dinner and Kjersti and Stzrine come to help with preparations. Each settler feels a special responsibility for the newest member of the settlement. At dinner the conversation turns into a debate about what the boy should become when he grows up. Hans Olsa suggests that Peder become a governor since they will eventually need one as the prairie continues to grow.

The school has become a major part of everyday life on the settlement. The location of the school rotates among the houses so that everyone can participate. Along with the children the men and women attend lessons to break the monotony of the long days. Ttznseten often questions Henry's pedagogical methods and sometimes pushes Henry out of the way to conduct a lesson his way.

Sometime in February the men realize that they must make a trip to the Sioux River in order to gather more wood. Per Hansa decides that he wants to go along and works to train his team of oxen to pull a sleigh. During a break in the weather Per Hansa, Hans Olsa, Sam Solum, and Ttznseten set out for the Sioux River. In the late afternoon Per Hansa looks back over his shoulder and sees a dark cloud bearing down on the caravan quickly. The four men try to tie themselves together to avoid losing one another in the approaching storm but Per Hansa's oxen cannot keep up with the three teams of horses. Per Hansa struggles to keep both himself and the oxen from succumbing to the cold, and begins to have hallucinations that he is traveling towards the Rocky Mountains. The only problem with this irrational dream is that he is traveling east not west.

After what seems like hours fighting against swirling snow and severe cold, the oxen run into the side of a house. Per Hansa, nearly frozen, stumbles into the hut and tells the forms he sees inside that his oxen need to be sheltered. As Per Hansa slowly begins to thaw out he sees that the unrecognizable figures in the house are none other than Hans Olsa, Ttznseten, Sam, and the Baarstad family. Furthermore, the men discover that somehow Per Hansa raced past them in the dark. For three days the men stay at the Trtznders settlement cutting wood and listening stories. Sam Solum even finds a few spare moments to talk with one of the Baarstad girls.

One Sunday afternoon the entire settlement gathers at Ttznseten's house where the question of changing their names comes up. Ttznseten says that the others should consider taking names that reflect their Norwegian heritage. Stzrine suggests using the names of the towns they lived in in Norway but Per Hansa refuses to allow Beret to be known by Skarvholmen. Textual footnotes tell the reader that this name means "the holm of the cormorant" and would be used to describe a person of low morals. Stzrine then suggests that Per Hansa go by Holm. Per mulls the name over in his mind trying it out on each of his family members and decides it is a grand name for his new son: Peder Victorious Holm.

In March Per Hansa decides to travel to Flandreau, an Indian settlement the Trtznders told him about. The Indians spend all winter trapping and the furs can be bought for ten cents each but sold in Minnesota for a great deal more. Per Hansa makes the trip three times; each time he barters with the Indians for several bundles of furs which he then sells for a profit in Minnesota. On each trip Per buys necessities for the house but has enough money left over to plunk one hundred and forty dollars on the table before Beret. When Per Hansa returns from his last trip the other men decide to make a last sleigh trip to Sioux River to bring back seeds for planting. While in town Per Hansa purchases a one-year-old heifer. Beret says very little about her husband's business abilities; a situation Per Hansa finds strange and cannot understand.

Book 2, Chapter 1 On the Border of Utter Darkness Analysis

Beret's difficult labor appears to leave her more confused than before the birth. She is uncertain of her surroundings and those around her but she does appear to take enjoyment from the new life she succeeded in bringing forth. The child nuzzles her cozily and Beret finds the infant agreeable although her interaction with her son is minimal. Beret even seems to be throwing off her former stupor when she suggests the neighborhood dinner. Perhaps Per Hansa's hunch was correct and his wife was merely suffering a difficult pregnancy. The reader does learn through Beret's thoughts that she was not completely opposed to the trip west but had asked Per Hansa to postpone the journey until after the child was born. It seems as if Beret knew that the rigorous expedition would be too much for her to bear in her condition. However, the reader also knows that Beret harbors concern about her premarital pregnancy which she subconsciously converts into the reason for Per Hansa's refusal to grant her request and their subsequent arrival in this harsh new land.

Per Hansa's ingenuity is showcased in two separate occasions. First, when the men decide to make a trip to Sioux River for supplies and tell Per that his oxen will never make the trip, he becomes obsessed with proving them wrong. In the days leading up to the departure Per Hansa spends every waking minute working with the team to train them to a sleigh. His perseverance pays off in a major way when he becomes lost in the snowstorm. The oxen listen to their master and manage to bring Per Hansa safely to the Trtznders. In fact the oxen prove to be such good sleigh pullers that the team flies past the other men in the storm. The second occasion comes in the buying and selling of

Indian furs. Per Hansa appears to be the only settler who takes advantage of the availability of furs to bring in some much needed money. Although Per Hansa must be away from his family for several days at a time on each trip, a situation Beret does not like, he manages to earn over a hundred dollars and buy a new cow in the process. Per Hansa is always thinking of ways to achieve his dreams. He refuses to accept mediocrity and strives to be the best among the other settlers.

Per Hansa's desire for recognition becomes more evident during the discussion of choosing new names. The Norwegian method of naming revolves around recognizing a person's father. Therefore, the many Hanson's or Petersons and such are the result of Norwegian naming. This is an important aspect of Nordic culture but is impractical in the Americas. Per Hansa is eager to find a new name for himself but wishes it to be something that not only tells something about his heritage but also sounds dignified and likeable. One meaning of the word "holm" is an island in a river near the mainland. It seems quite fitting that Per Hansa would like the sound of this name. In many ways Per is an island among the river of other settlers and waving prairie grass. He stands alone in his beliefs and work but is near enough to the mainland to be supportive and considered a piece of the same landmass.

Book 2, Chapter 2 The Power of Evil in High Places

Book 2, Chapter 2 The Power of Evil in High Places Summary

Per Hansa, Ola, and Store-Hans sit around the kitchen table sifting through the seed in order to remove any misshapen or bad seeds. As he works, Per Hansa begins to think about how much seed he will reap and the possibility of selling the extra next year. For several days Per Hansa checks the dryness of the ground until finally he deems the fields ready for planting. Per Hansa works long hours spreading the seeds. Looking across the settlement Per sees that he is the first to plant and is happy about his head start. Ttznseten calls Per Hansa a fool for planting so early but Per ignores him and continues working.

Two days after Per Hansa finishes planting a blizzard encompasses the settlement. Worry and frustration consume Per as the snow continues to mount. It is too late in the season to make another trip to Sioux River for more seed and all that he had is now lost under the snow. Per Hansa skulks around the house upset at the wasted seed. However, a few days later on a Sunday Ola and Store-Hans burst into the house shouting that the seeds have sprouted. Per Hansa follows his sons out to the fields where an expanse of small green shoots meet his gaze. When Per returns to the house he is a changed man and calls for Beret to read from the Bible.

That summer the Irish men, the Vossings, and the Sognings return to begin building their sod houses. One of the Norwegian newcomers is a man named Torkel Tallaksen. Torkel is a large pompous man rumored to be worth a large sum of money. Instead of building a sod house, Torkel pitches a tent for his family to live under and sets about ploughing his fields. When he finishes Torkel pays a visit to Per Hansa. Torkel proposes a business proposition between the two men; Torkel will pay Per for the use of him and his team of oxen to drive to Worthington for building supplies. Torkel continues to describe his plans for a wooden house, a painted wooden house, and his desire to buy up one or two more quarters of land before fall. Per Hansa sits silently listening to the other man prattle on before quietly giving his answer. Per advises Torkel to put his time and money into cattle, horses, and machinery instead of building a grand house, but if the man insists on following through with his plan Per Hansa swears that they will not get along.

Beret sits listening to the visitor describe his great plans and her husband's response. Slowly Beret comments that such a house would be nice and that living in a sod house turns people into animals. Per Hansa takes his wife's comments to heart. He cannot believe that Beret finds him a failure after all the hard work he has done for her and their family. However, it turns out that Tallaksen's big plans come to nothing when only two

men are willing to help him. Torkel is unable to haul enough lumber back from town to build a house forcing him to build a sod house before summer's end.

The summer also brings caravans traveling farther west. Each wagon train stops at the Silver Creek settlement but decides to continue on. One day Beret sees a lone wagon coming from the northeast. The newcomers are also Norwegians but there is something different about them. Per Hansa peers into the wagon where a woman sits with her hands bound and the rope tied to a large chest. The man unties the woman and she begins to moan. Beret runs from the house and puts her arm around the woman to usher her into the house. Per Hansa stands wordlessly staring at the man who wanders around distractedly and tells their story in a series of fractured sentences.

The family had been traveling with five other wagons but was left behind. The husband attempted to navigate by a rope tied behind the wagon but the device did not work the way he'd been told. Their youngest boy had died along the trail; that was when his wife began to act strangely and the others left them. The man ties his wife up because she tries to crawl out of the wagon and go back to where they buried the little boy. Beret tends to the woman while Per Hansa goes to discuss the matter with Hans Olsa. When he returns Per tells his wife that they must build a coffin for the boy and give him a proper burial. Beret comments that surely her husband must see that this life is impossible. Per rolls away from his wife and tries to sleep while Beret continues to toss fitfully.

The reader is taken into the mind of the new woman as she climbs from the wagon and into Beret's caring arms. She is reluctant to say too much because she does not want to break the shell of the dream. The woman finds Beret's ministrations pleasant and relishes the warmth of the house. She sleeps until the early hours of the morning when she wakes and tries to take a sleeping And-Ongen outside to their wagon. Beret wakes up at the sound of a far away voice and realizes that the woman is missing. Per Hansa runs outside to see the woman standing atop the hill. When he reaches her Per notices the bundle in her arms and takes his young daughter from the confused woman. Beret takes And-Ongen back to the house while Per Hansa tries to coax the woman back to the house. For four days Per Hansa, Hans Olsa, and the couple search for the grave of the boy but when they return the coffin is still empty.

Two days later the strangers load up their wagon and leave. Beret sits on the hill watching the wagon fade into the horizon worrying over what will become of them. The clouds become the face of a monster as Beret stares into them. She finds Per Hansa's advances towards her that evening unwanted and decides that this is only further proof that the devil has grasped them tightly in his hands. Beret begins covering the windows every evening whether Per is home or not. She continues to see the monster even during the day and constantly feels vague premonitions hovering about her. Per Hansa tries to tease his wife about her peculiarities but eventually the same fear that tugs at Beret begins to affect her husband too.

Per Hansa glories in the growth of his crops. His fields have sprung up before those of his neighbors and Per is sure that his plants are the best in the entire settlement. Even

Ttznseten comes to compliment Per Hansa's wise decision to plant so early. However, Ttznseten soon becomes frustrated by Per's refusal to harvest the wheat when Syvert tells him it's time. The men argue over the proper time to harvest before Per Hansa good-naturedly gives into Ttznseten. That very day after noon the entire settlement, including little Peder, assembles at Per Hansa's wheat field to begin harvesting. Everyone takes part in the event and the men work until after sundown while the women prepare a big dinner for them all.

The men finish harvesting the wheat the following day and sit around telling stories in the cool afternoon breeze. As Per Hansa looks off to the west he sees something that troubles him. Hans Olsa, Ttznseten, and Per Hansa stand looking at clouds that seem to rise and sink on the breeze unlike normal clouds. Ola and Store-Hans come running as the storm breaks over the men, shouting that the clouds are snow clouds. But as the sky opens up the crowd sees that small brown bird-like creatures are falling from the clouds, not snow or rain or hail. While Ttznseten stands around arguing with his wife, Per Hansa tells Ola to bring his gun and Sam Solum calls for his brother to bring horses so they can continue harvesting the field. When they finish for the day the other men return to inspect their fields while Per Hansa walks home wondering how Beret has fared during this harsh afternoon.

Per Hansa comes to the door of his house and finds the hut eerily silent. He calls for Beret to let him in but when no response comes, Per shoves against the door until it opens. Inside everything is silent except for a faint whimpering sound. Per looks frantically around until he sees the large chest barricading the door; inside Beret lays huddled with the baby and And-Ongen crying at her feet. Per Hansa lifts his children out and then pulls his wife from the chest and sits her on top of the chest. Beret pleads with him to put the chest back in front of the door so that the devil cannot get to them. Per sinks to his knees and begins to sob into Beret's lap. His wife pats his head telling Per to cry although it does no good because there is no one in this place to hear him.

For nearly six years the locusts continue to plague the settlers on the prairie and then as quickly as they came the insects are gone. The damage has been done and many settlers are left in utter poverty. The locusts do not discriminate between crops: potatoes, wheat, oats, barley. The people try to deal with the plague anyway they can; some pray, some swear, others try home-remedies but all to no avail. After the fourth summer the people begin to lose their fear of the pests; they say that at least this plague takes neither man nor beast.

Book 2, Chapter 2 The Power of Evil in High Places Analysis

Chapter Two could be divided into two distinct parts: the arrival of the couple who lost a child and the harvesting of the crops. Each of these events delves into the separate lives and concerns of the settlers. The arrival of the couple touches the women's hearts while the planting, harvesting, and destruction of crops weighs heavily on the men. The

separation shows the difference between the emotional and practical sides of pioneer life.

Beret is immediately drawn to the crazed woman in the lone wagon. Like the Hansas this family has become separated from the rest of their caravan. However, this is not what Beret empathizes with; the woman has lost a child to the monstrous plains and is in a state of utter loss and confusion. Beret sees in the woman's eyes her own pain and suffering reflected. Beret's odd behavior has continued and intensified once she regained strength after Permand's birth, but her actions pale in comparison to the newcomer. The reader may realize that Beret is only steps away from becoming the mad woman chained inside the wagon. Perhaps this is what Beret recognizes in the woman which causes her to reach out so tenderly. The women are one in the same. The reader may wonder if the couple's appearance is a foreshadowing of Beret's downward spiral.

The larger concern of Chapter Two revolves around the crops. Per Hansa is impatient to get his seed into the ground before the other settlers in hopes of having a finer crop which he can use to sell for extra money. His impatience leads to what seems like too early planting of Per's precious seed. After all the time Per and his sons spent carefully sorting through each kernel to remove the weak seeds, it seems a dire waste to have planted the entire supply only to have it covered over in a final rage of nature. Ttznseten's warnings go unheeded but prove laughable when he later praises Per Hansa's wise decision to plant when he did. Ttznseten changes his attitude from minute to minute and it is difficult to determine whether he truly cares for the others or not.

In many ways the freak snowstorm seems to be a sort of punishment for Per Hansa's prideful wish to get his seed in the ground before his neighbors. However, Per's sorrow is short-lived and he is rewarded for his rash decision. When the snow thaws and the sun warms the earth the seeds begin to grow and Per Hansa's fields produce crops like no one has seen before. Just as the sorrow was quickly absolved, so too is the settlers' joy. Locusts beset the settlement and stay for years on end, causing heartache to the men hoping for strong crops. Unpredictable weather and unknown infestations frustrated pioneers at every turn. These new torments led many settlers to reconsider their decision to seek the Promise Land and instead feel that their gods had forsaken them for searching out a better life. The lack of real religious instruction and comfort would have made the pioneers feel even more cut off from their God.

Book 2, Chapter 3 The Glory of the Lord

Book 2, Chapter 3 The Glory of the Lord Summary

One sunny day in June a dilapidated old cart pulled by a nag barely resembling a horse clatters toward the Spring Creek Settlement. The man driving the cart is of indiscriminate age and he allows the horse to plod along at a leisurely pace. At sunset the cart stops before one of the sod houses where the man calls out to those inside. Ttznseten and Kjersti stumble out of the hut to gaze on the visitor. The man says that he is a minister and would appreciate it very much if they could lodge him and his horse for the night.

The minister is housed in the spare sod house which he finds delightful and all three retire for the night. Syvert lies awake pondering how to speak privately with the minister the following day; apparently there is some pressing matter Ttznseten wishes to discuss but his thoughts do not reveal the nature of the problem. The issue seems to have been pressed upon him by the others because Syvert was the elected official to handle such matters. Four years ago on a Sunday afternoon Halvor Hegg had asked Ttznseten to marry Johannes Mtzrstad and Josie since he was justice of the peace. Although Syvert had tried to extricate himself from the matter, the ceremony took place and he had wrestled with his conscience ever since.

The next morning the minister tells Ttznseten to call all the neighbors to Per Hansa's house for divine services. Kjersti worries about the strain of such an event on Beret and the minister wishes to know all about her. After hearing everything Syvert and Kjersti can think to tell about the Hansas, the minister decides to meet with Per and Beret privately before the others arrive. Ttznseten follows the minister towards Per Hansa's to speak privately with the visitor. When the minister learns the truth of Syvert's transgression he laughs heartily and tells Ttznseten that this is not the worst sin he's ever committed. The minister counsels Ttznseten to have the children brought to the service so that they may be baptized but to cease worrying over the rest.

People file into Per Hansa's house to begin the church service but so many come that many sit outside on the grass. The minister preaches on the Israelites and the Land of Canaan relating the story to those gathered before him. The preacher then turns to discussing the great future God has provided for them by bringing them to this settlement. As the minister continues, the congregation begins to let their minds wander. Some think about the reasoning behind the preacher's words, others are content to listen, some begin to formulate a plan for constructing a proper church, and Ttznseten wonders if he can be elected a church official. However, in a far corner sits a pale woman who finds the minister false.

Finally the minister calls for the people who have been sitting to exchange places with those who have been standing. He also asks that the un-baptized children be brought forth. As Stzrine holds Peder Victorious out to be baptized an anguished cry breaks over

the crowd. Beret, the pale woman in the corner, pushes through the crowd screaming that such a sin will not be performed and her child will not be taken by the evil one. Per Hansa manages to wrestle his wife out of the house and shortly afterwards the service concludes. The minister takes Peder and walks from one group to another telling people to return to their homes. After all the people have departed the minister hears noises coming from the barn where he finds Per Hansa, Beret, and And-Ognen inside. Beret seems to come to herself in the minister's presence and takes the children back to the house.

Per Hansa stays behind to voice his concern to the minister. The minister says that Per will have to humble himself before the Lord and bear his cross patiently. Per Hansa continues to assume responsibility for Beret's strange illness and condemns himself for naming his youngest son such an audacious name. The minister cannot understand Per's concern over the name saying that it is a glorious name. Per tells the minister that Beret has never cared for the child's name and began to suffer from attacks around the time of the grasshoppers. Per relates how he found Beret and the children huddled in the chest and how his wife dreamt of her own mother's death a full half-year before they received word. Furthermore, Beret once tried to do harm to the child after finding his clothes torn to tatters by locusts. The minister assures Per Hansa that God will soon remove this burden from him and in the meantime will supply the strength to bear it.

As the men return to the house Ola runs out to his father shouting that Store-Hans sits in a fit on the Indian grave mound. When Per Hansa finds the little boy Store-Hans asks if Beret has killed Permand but Per silences the child and they go back to the house. The minister stays to supper after which he says a prayer. Beret bows her head in contemplation and considers the visitor a very fine man. As the minister prays, Permand slides off the bed and walks over to the man. The minister picks the child up and places him in his lap before continuing to pray. The minister begins to pray for God to consecrate the small boy and set him aside as one of the chosen.

The Sunday of the Communion service is beautiful even though the grasshoppers have begun to return. The minister has returned but, although he has prepared a wonderful sermon, he struggles to get the words out. After trying desperately to bring forth the intended message, the minister tells a story of a Norwegian immigrant widow and her nine children. In order to keep the family together in New York City the woman tied herself and all her children to a rope in single file. The minister says that the story shows the love of a mother. After this impromptu message the minister administers communion, tells the people he will return in a month's time to discuss the formation of a congregation, and promptly climbs into his cart and rides away.

Beret has become increasingly tired during the day but she has been able to tend to more of her own chores. Her mood has steadily improved since the day hands were land on her and she was released from Satan's bonds. One day as she sits sewing a new shirt for Permand Beret hears a voice calling to Per Hansa. Hans Olsa has come to offer to take Permand to live with them just incase Beret should have another episode when the locusts return. Beret listens as her husband tells Hans that Beret could not live

without the child and he appreciates the offer but Per sees no reason to remove the boy from his home.

Book 2, Chapter 3 The Glory of the Lord Analysis

The apparent punishment meted out by God in the form of surprise blizzards and plagues of insects is followed by salvation carried along in a broken down cart pulled by a shadow of a horse. The minister's physical appearance is questionable and the reader would not have been surprised if the preacher had proved a false prophet who brings more sorrow to the settlement. However, the minister is able to bring about a subtle miracle.

One interesting revelation in this chapter is the expression of Ttznseten's conscience. The minister's arrival sends the usually uptight and pompous man into a frenzy where he is unable to sleep and worries over some concealed past transgression. The reader may remember that it was Ttznseten who knew about the Irishmen's stakes but did not tell his companions. However, this is not the indiscretion that keeps Ttznseten tossing and turning through the night. Instead the man who swears and drinks behind his wife's back is concerned that he has acted immorally by marrying two people as the acting justice of the peace. It is laughable that such a thing weighs so heavily on Ttznseten and the minister appears to agree with this opinion. The minister is not concerned with the marriage but does wish the children to be baptized properly.

The minister takes a strong interest in Beret and Permand. Per Hansa spends a long while telling the minister about his wife's ailment which appears to have intensified. Beret herself wavers at the preacher's arrival. As the prayer service begins she finds the man an apt preacher and enjoys listening to him. However, when he attempts to baptize Permand Beret becomes uncontrollable and compares the minister to the devil. There seems to be a strong spiritual element to Beret's malady, especially given her eventual return to a healthy state following the minister's visit. No explanation is given regarding Beret's transformation and in many ways it seems to happen suddenly. Per Hansa's heart soften towards his wife and he refuses to allow his youngest son to be removed from the home. Per Hansa evidently believes that Beret will make a full recovery.

The spiritual connection also seems to extend to Permand. The young boy takes an immediate liking to the minister and appears to enjoy the man's presence. There are often mentions of the child's becoming a minister but the reasons for such comments are never explained. Furthermore, there seems to be some significance attached to the child's birth and naming but the importance of these events remains a mystery to the reader. The child's birth appears to be an integral piece of the story line but little comes of it and the child is mentioned only randomly. Overall Permand appears to be a significant link to his mother's illness but little explanation is given to aide the reader's understanding.

Book 2, Chapter 4 The Great Plain Drinks...

Book 2, Chapter 4 The Great Plain Drinks... Summary

The final chapter opens with a general discussion of the life faced by pioneers. The wilderness seeks to destroy the newcomers with years of pestilence, spells of strangeness which force some people to take their own lives and others to end up in asylums, terrible storms and fire which torment the settlers. Despite all these hardships the pioneers continue to charge blindly into the impossible to achieve the unbelievable. When one man falls another comes to take his place and the settlements grow.

In the winter of 1880-1881 the snow begins to fall in mid-October and does not cease until mid-April. Unprepared for this early winter the settlers face famine and rapidly diminishing fuels supplies. Many lose their cattle and their own lives. In the midst of this terrible snowstorm Hans Olsa rides out to his third quarter to look after his cattle. The shed he constructed to house the animals has been blown apart by the high winds and Hans spends the entire day mending the structure and herding the cows inside. As Hans surveys the landscape and the weather he realizes that it would be foolish to start back home now; he will surely lose his way in the swirling snow so Hans decides to stay the night with his cattle. With difficulty Hans tries to keep warm by sleeping between the beasts and running about the enclosure. Finally Hans Olsa decides that it would be better to lose his life outside than among his herd.

Stzrine has not slept through the night so she is awake and ready to aide her husband when he comes stumbling through the cabin door. She hastily bundles Hans off to bed where he remains for many days. When the blizzard subsides, Stzrine skis across the frozen plain to Per Hansa's house to ask him to come see her ailing husband. Per Hansa fetches the Irishwoman Crazy Bridget at Stzrine's insistence and brings the medicine woman to Hans' bedside. Crazy Bridget mixes up a poultice for Hans Olsa and instructs Stzrine on how to care for her husband before departing.

Beret's demeanor has changed. She is no longer sullen and queer acting but instead has traveled far to the opposite extreme, becoming intensely pious. As she sits by Hans Olsa's bedside Beret preaches the merits of confessing his sins and urges the dying man to seek forgiveness for his sins before it is too late. Hans listens to Beret but does not seem ready to give up on himself so easily. Hans Olsa also does not understand why Beret finds him to be such an impious man but her words work on his heart until he finally asks Per Hansa if the weather is such that the minister could be brought.

Per Hansa considers his friend's request as he sits besides Hans Olsa's bed watching the man sleep. Per thinks about all the work he has done trying to make a better life for his family. He has even had to hire extra hands to help with chore because the farm has grown considerably since they first arrived. Per Hansa has cared for his wife even

through her sickness and looks on her as a parent caring for a frail child. He tolerates Beret's new religious attitude although he does not take her preaching seriously. Now Per Hansa's own wife wishes him to risk his own life to bring the minister to Hans Olsa's bedside. An argument arises between man and wife that will fail to be resolved.

Stzrine comes to ask Per Hansa if he will consider making the trip and when she leaves Per sets about procuring a good set of skis and giving his sons their orders for looking after the homestead in his absence. Beret feels bad for her ill treatment of her husband and prepares hot coffee for him when he should return to the house. However, Per Hansa puts on his skis and without looking back at the house sets off to Hans Olsa's and then the James River settlement. Hans Olsa dies from his exposure to the weather and that spring two boys discover a man sitting in a haystack. The man has a set of skis strapped to his back and another pair lying on the ground near him. The man sits clutching a staff in each hand and looking to the west.

Book 2, Chapter 4 The Great Plain Drinks... Analysis

The final chapter truly is the final chapter. Rtzlvaag's saga has followed the course of Per Hansa's life but now that life is complete as is the story. The final line completes the beginning of the chapter. Per Hansa has died in his quest to bring back the minister just shy of his goal. However, the two boys are the youth the author mentions who will take the place of the fallen and the old. Per Hansa's dream of a better life will continue with his children.

Although Per Hansa left his home without saying good-bye to his wife, he leaves secure in the knowledge that she has found a peace for herself that will protect her and his children. Beret has found a new, revitalizing strength which will allow her to survive without Per Hansa. The reader may remember that Stzrine begged Hans Olsa to build two extra bedrooms downstairs in addition to the ones upstairs. It is possible to surmise that these two widows and their children will combine households. The women were unwilling participants in their husbands' mutual desire to seek fortune and plenty in a new land; whether that land was America or Dakota Territory does not matter. While sometimes resistant the women have loyally followed their men and are now left to foster the dream of a better life in their sons.

Perhaps more than any other chapter the final one truly captures the spirit of the pioneer. The beginning relates the innumerable obstacles faced by the people who chose to leave behind everything known for a land full of promises but few guarantees. Those who survive, who persevere in the face of such bleak odds become the settlers of a wild land, paving the path for many others to follow. The first settlers were the strongest and fiercest of them all. Rtzlvaag's Norwegian pioneers were not any different than the Irish or German or any others, but they were what the author knew and understood. As the foreword states, Rtzlvaag is an American author writing the American story from a Norwegian perspective but the stories are the same no matter the characters' backgrounds.

Characters

Crazy Bridget

An old Irish woman the settlers turn to for help when they are sick. The Norwegians think she is a fraud but concede that she has "a remarkable way with sick folks."

And-Ongen Hansa

See Anna Marie Hansa

Anna Marie Hansa

Anna Marie is Per and Beret's daughter.

Beret Hansa

Beret symbolizes the moral foundation of the pioneer experience, and critics call her the most completely drawn of Rolvaag's characters. She is pregnant when the party sets off from Lofoten and is skeptical of the westward journey from the start. The product of a rigid, moralistic upbringing that considered God as the incarnation of law, Beret is ill-equipped for life as a pioneer. Fear is her motivating emotion. "Oh, Per!" she says as they make their way across the prairie. "Not another human being from here to the end of the world!" Beret is so lonely that when Per builds a sod house and barn under one roof, Beret thinks that at least the cow will be a "comfortable companion" on long winter nights. She is appalled by Per's removal of the Irish settlers' landmarks, even though he has done it to protect his friends' rightful claims, because she recognizes it as the worst sin a person can commit against a fellow human. Thus it adds to her nameless fears of the prairie "a new terror-the terror of consequences!"

Beret also fears the consequences of having her first child Ole out of wedlock, marrying Per Hansa against the wishes of her parents, and delighting in Per's desire for her. "The sweet desires of the flesh," she thinks. "are the nets of Satan." Beret is temporarily at peace after the birth on Christmas Day of Peder Victorious. But Per's choice of the child's second name seems sacrilegious to her. When the other settlers begin discussing name changes, Beret worries that, having "discarded the names of their fathers, soon they would be discarding other sacred things." Beret's isolation is spiritual as well as environmental, and it sets her apart from everyone else, including her husband. The other settlers want to be sympathetic to her, but her deepening derangement and her moralizing exasperates them. Yet, wrote critic George Leroy White, Jr., "She is not a chronic fault-finder She first of all does not love pioneering. She has tom the home-ties from her heart solely because she loved Per more than anything else."

Hans Kristian Hansa

Known as Store-Hans, he is the second son of Per and Beret Hansa. He is frequently enlisted to watch over his mother and sister. He is never so happy as when he is alongside his father, and he shares Per's enthusiasms. Store-Hans is given to frequent tears and nightmares. He is terrified by what is happening to his mother, and at one point he is afraid that she will kill Permand.

Ole Hansa

Ste Olemand Hansa

Olemand Hansa

Ole is Per Hansa's elder son. He considers himself the master of the house in his father's absence. He is impatient to be an adult. and frustrated when his father's trust in him results in his being asked to stay home to care for his mother and sister while the men make trips into town. Like his younger brother Store-Hans. Ole is frightened by his mother's increasing strangeness. but he is compelled to protect her. When. in frustration, Beret takes a willow switch to the boys, they lie to their father about how they got their bruises. Ole is too young to be burdened by the ties from home that still bind his mother. "Did you ever see anything so beautiful!" he whispers at the fall of evening when the family first reaches the Spring Creek settlement.

Peder Victorious Hansa

The youngest son of Per and Beret, Peder's arrival is loaded with portent. First, he is born on Christmas Day. He is also born with a caul, a part of the fetal membrane covering his head, and Norwegians folklore suggests that such children are destined for extraordinary things. At first, Beret considers the choice of his second name-Victorious-to be a sacrilege. "This sin shall not happen! How can a man be *victorious* out here, where the evil one gets us all!" she cries out at his christening. But when the minister blesses the child and prays that he, too, will answer the call of the ministry, Beret's worries are temporarily put to rest. Even Per is aware that his youngest son has a special destiny. As Per sets out on a snowy errand from which he will never return, he thinks, "Oh, Permand, Permand' Something great must come of *you-you* who are so tenderly watched over!"

Per Hansa

Per Hansa is the epitome of the immigrant spirit. Unlike his wife Beret, whose nature is delicate, Per is built to "wrestle with fortune." For him, the westward journey from the island of Lofoten, Norway represents the ultimate opportunity. Per is deeply devoted to

his wife, whom he thinks of as "a woman of tender kindness, of deep fine fancie-one whom *you* could not treat like an ordinary clod." But Beret's "scruples and misgivings" about the journey fail to change his plans. "Is a man to refuse to go where his whole future calls, only because his wife doesn't like it?" Per asks the minister after Beret becomes deranged from life on the prairie.

Per's indomitable spirit and fierce individualism distinguish him from his neighbors. His best friend, Hans Olsa, recalls that Per "never would take help from any man." He takes a major risk in deciding on his own to pull up stakes planted by Irish settlers-something he would never have done at home-to avoid their usurping Hans Olsa's and Syvert Tonseten's claims to their properties. Per is impetuous and impelled by fantasies. He builds a sod hut and barn under one roof, a structure Syvert Tonseten warns him will collapse, and he is so eager to get the jump on the other settlers that he plants his wheat before the ground is dry. Sometimes his determination to survive pioneering borders on the insane, as when he attempts to disperse the invasion of locusts by shooting at them.

But in Per his neighbors see what is possible. He is painfully aware of what is happening to his wife, but he cannot help her. "I have lived with her all these years," he tells the Minister, "yet I must confess that I don't know her." Per is delighted by Beret's initial recovery under the guidance of the Minister, but perplexed by her increasing piety. It is to fulfill a request of Beret's that Per heads out on his fatal mission at the end of the novel.

Permand Hansa

See Peder Victorious Hansa

Store-Hans Hansa

See Hans Kristian Hansa

Minister

The minister first shows up at the Spring Creek settlement in *June,* to the overwhelming joy of the inhabitants. His humanity is immediately evident in his response to Tonseten's confession that, as a layperson, he may have blasphemed by performing a marriage: "This probably is not the worst sin *you* have committed," the minister tells him in response to Per's troubled question whether the name Peder Victorious is a "human" name, the minister says, "It is the handsomest name I can ever remember giving to any child" The minister is instrumental in bringing Beret out of her insanity. Moreover, faced with the reality of life on the prairie, he worries about his own faith and his ability to preach to the settlers meaningfully: "How can they understand [a sermon about] the things that happened to an alien people, living ages ago, in a distant land? The

Israelites were an Oriental race; they didn't know anything about the Dakota Territory, either."

Hans Olsa

Per Hansa' s best friend from their fishing days in the Lofoten Islands. Per depends on him "for everything," and Hans Olsa thinks he will "never tire of gazing into the bearded, roguish face of Per Hansa's." Their dream since formulating their plans for coming to America has been to be "nearest neighbors." Hans Olsa is so big that strangers stop to look, and so strong that "things that he took hold of often got crushed in his grip." Slow to react, he is steadfast in his decisions; "on this account he always found it difficult to turn back, once he had chosen his path."

Hans Olsa does not abuse his physical advantage. When the Irish settlers dispute Hans Olsa's and Syvert Tonseten's claims to their land, Hans Olsa's first impulse is to "convince them that we are here with the full sanction of law and justice," and he is remorseful when one of the settlers manages to goad him into a fight. He is a fatalist. When Per Hansa wants to shoot at the locusts to frighten them, Hans Olsa tells him, "Don't do that, Per Hansa ! If the Lord has sent this affliction on us, then. " Hans Olsa's generosity is as big as the rest of him. As he is dying, Hans Olsa reviews with Per Hansa the debts other settlers still owe him. "It transpired later that in every case he had stated less than what was owing to him."

Sofie Olsa

Hans Olsa's ten-year-old daughter.

Sorine Olsa

Sonne is Hans Olsa's wife. Per Hansa admires her lack of fear, and is repeatedly impressed by the "goodness and intelligence" in her face. Sorine helps Beret through the birth of Peder Victorious, and the child's second name is chosen out of gratitude to her. As Hans Olsa lays dying, Sorine asks Per Hansa whether he would be willing to venture out into the blizzard to find the doctor, explaining, "We all have a feeling that nothing is ever impossible for you."

Henry Solum

One of the two Solum boys. Henry and his brother Sam are the only ones of the group who know both American and Indian languages. At Syvert Tonseten' s suggestion, Henry and Sam start a school for the settlers.

Sam Solum

The second of the two Solum boys.

Torkel Tallaksen

A member of the Sognings and a wealthy braggart. Store-Hans and Tallaksen's son become friends.

Kjersti Tonseten

Kjersti is Syvert Tonseten's' wife. She indulges his enthusiasms, but often compares him unfavorably with Per Hansa. When Per Hansa explains how he destroyed the Irish settlers' stakes in order to protect Hans Olsa's and Syvert's rightful claims to their land, Kjersti is "moved almost to tears over such a man What a difference from that spineless jellyfish of a husband of hers!" Kjersti and Syvert are childless, and Kjersti finds frequent occasion to remind Syvert of that fact.

Syvert Tonseten

Another of the Lofoten group of settlers to Spring Creek. Tonseten is notorious among his neighbors for having something to say about everything. Though a hard worker, he lacks Per Hansa's spirit of enterprise. He compensates his feelings of inadequacy by criticizing Per's plans. For example, when Per whitewashes the walls of his sod hut in an effort to cheer Beret up, Tonseten tells him sourly, "It's getting to be so damned swell in here that pretty soon a fellow can't even spit!" Tonseten's own plans for building a decent house never seem to materialize. He does work tirelessly, though, to draw new members to the settlement, a mission that gives him a sense of purpose. It is his idea to start the school, which solves the dual problem of the Solum boys' sinking morale and the need of the settlers to occupy themselves during the long winter days. Tonseten blames Beret for what he calls Per Hansa's "stuck-up airs," and his dislike of her grows worse after she recovers from her nervous breakdown.

Themes

Immigration and the Westward Movement

Critics have praised Rolvaag' s synthesis of the themes of immigration and the westward migration in *Giants in the Earth.* Per Hansa is the perfect embodiment of the immigrant spirit. "Good God!" he pants at the opening of the novel, "This kingdom is going to be mine!" Per sees economic opportunity everywhere, and he fantasizes endlessly about a fancy house and a bounty of farm animals. But the price the immigrant pays is high in terms of lost supports, prejudice, the need to remake social networks and to reformulate cultural values, and intergenerational conflicts. Beret is the supreme example of the immigrant's dilemma. As Per tells the minister, "She has never felt at home here in America There are some people, I know now who never should emigrate, because, you see, they can't take pleasure in that which is to come."

The paucity of culture on the frontier is such that when the Solum boys organize a school to teach the children to read, all the adults attend it as well. The settlers' inability to speak English makes communications difficult for them. For example, in settling a dispute with Irish settlers over land claims, Per must enlist the Solum boys to act as spokesman and interpreter. In the novel, the themes of immigration and westward movement are inseparable. Per's party sets off from Lofoten traveling "farther and farther onward... always west." Their original destination is Fillmore County, Minnesota. But no sooner do they reach America than they are "intoxicated by bewildering visions; they spoke dazedly, as though under the force of spell... Go west! ... Go west, folks! ... The farther west, the better the land!" When Per Hansa is lost in a snowstorm, he fears that the oxen are headed east, and the name of the Rocky Mountains keeps running through his mind. "Rocky-ocky Moun-tains, Rocky-ocky Moun-tains! ... Directly behind those mountains lay the Pacific Ocean... They had no winter on that coast God! no winter!"

Perhaps the most poignant statement of the theme of westward movement comes at the end of the novel. Per Hansa perishes in a snowstorm, and the following spring some boys discover his body seated on the west side of a haystack, his eyes "set toward the west."

Fear and Loneliness

Fear and loneliness are the constant companions of the pioneers. The isolation Rolvaag's characters feel is both a reflection of and a reaction to the environment. They are desolate souls in a desolate place. No one experiences this isolation more keenly than Beret Hansa. From the outset she notices the "deep silence" of the prairie, the "endless blue-green solitude that had neither heart nor soul" She cannot imagine that other people had ever dwelt there or would ever come. "Never could they find home in this vast, wind-swept void." Fear is a byproduct of loneliness, and it takes many forms. It

strikes the men as well as the women, "but the women were the worst off; Kjersti feared the Indians, Sorine the storms; and Beret, poor thing, feared both-feared the very air." Beret feels exposed on the prairie, where there is "nothing to hide behind," and she covers the windows with clothes to shut out the night. In the same way that Beret embodies the theme of loneliness, she incarnates that of fear as well. Critic George Leroy White, Jr., wrote that she "is a victim of the small things of life that prey upon her: the loneliness of their place; the taking of new name; the naming of the boy Peder Victorious; the stake incident; the fear of Indians, and the fear of the stars."

Myth

Rolvaag makes liberal use of mythic themes. This emphasis is immediately apparent from the novel's title. When Beret first sees Hans Olsa's sod house, she compares its center pole with the "giants she had read about as a child." She sees the plain as a monster. The settlers easily incorporate beliefs about trolls from Norse fairy tales into their explanations for various events that take place in the story. When the cows disappear, the little group sent to look for them worry that the cows might have been spirited away by trolls. Per Hansa refers to the decision over Hans Olsa's and Syvert Tonseten's land claims as being in the "grip of the trolls." The trolls are also associated with visible phenomena. The blizzard that the men run into on their way to the Tronder settlement is described as "a giant troll [that] had risen up in the west, ripped open his great sack of woolly fleece, and emptied the whole contents of it above their heads."

Other elements of Norse mythology crop up in the novel. Per Hansa makes repeated references to his "kingdom" and to Beret as the "princess" of Norse fairy tales, "a romance in which he was both prince and king, the sole possessor of countless treasures." He refers to the keruels of wheat he is about to plant as "good fairies that had the power to create a new life over this Endless Wilderness, and transform it into a habitable land for human beings." The plague of locusts descending from the north brings to the minds of the settlers the Norse adage that "all evil dwells below and springs from the north." Mythic themes are reinforced by the title of the final chapter: "The Great Plain Drinks the Blood of Christian Men and Is Satisfied." As scholars Theodore Jorgenson and Nora O. Solum point out, "In the Norwegian fairy tale, the troll drinks the blood of Christian men"

Religion

Another important theme in the novel is religion. Sometimes the themes of myth and religion are intermingled, as in the reference to the trolls drinking the blood of Christian men. There are many biblical references in the novel. For example, Per Hansa compares the prairie to "the pastures of Goshen in the Land of Egypt." And when Per asks Syvert Tonseten whether he has seen signs of life, Tonseten answers, "Neither Israelites nor Canaanites!" The settlers regard the invasion of locusts as one of the plagues mentioned in the bible. The arrival of the minister and the birth of Peder Victorious on Christmas Day are significant events. Before the child is born, Store-Hans

dreams that "he had seen both Joseph and Benjamin playing just beyond the house, and with them had been a tiny little fellow, who wasn't mentioned in the Bible story!" In the same way that Beret feels the loss of culture, she also fears the loss of the Lutheran religion. When the Spring Creek settlers start discussing name changes, Beret wonders whether they will abandon all sacred things. In the depths of her derangement, she imagines that Peder Victorious' name is one that "Satan has tricked Per into giving him."

According to literary critic Harold P. Simonson, "To Beret, the psychological cost in leaving their fathers' homeland is nothing when compared with the spiritual cost in forsaking their fathers' God." The minister's evaluation of Beret's condition is that she needs "above everything else... the gladness of salvation" In fact, at the end of the novel, it is an argument over religion-whether the doctor or the minister should be fetched to attend to the dying Hans Olsa-that drives Per out into the snow to his doom

Style

Setting

Giants in the Earth is set in the so-called east-river region of what is now South Dakota, that is, along the Big Sioux River at the Iowa border, southeast of SIOUX Falls. It is a place of both astounding beauty and stark wilderness. The area is subject to extremes of weather, and these extremes have a profound effect on the characters in the novel. Winters are so cold and the snow so deep that the settlers can safely store the dead in snow banks for burial in the spring. In the summer, storms blow up with "appalling violence." The risks of living on the prairie are many: madness, pestilence, storms, and prairie fire. After weeks and months of winter, "the courage of the men was slowly ebbing away." Their relief at the passing of winter is short-lived; no sooner is the wheat up than a plague of locusts causes massive crop destruction, an event that will be repeated year after year. Eventually, Beret goes insane from the accumulated insults of prairie life. At the time the story takes place, the railroad has not yet come to the settlement, and trips to the nearest town for supplies take several days. In trying to persuade a new group of Norwegians to settle at Spring Creek, Syvert tells them that "the railroad had already reached Worthington-soon it would be at Sioux Falls! Then they would have only a twenty-five-mile journey to town-did they realize that?"

Structure

Giants in the Earth comprises two books, or parts, each of which ends with death or near-death. The novel is unique in its emphasis on psychology and character development, as opposed to plot and incident. Patrick D. Morrow is one of many critics who see the novel as a tragedy. He explains its form as "ten chapters of five well-defined acts, adhering to the tragic rhythm of exposition, conflict, crisis, and catastrophe." Other elements that confirm the work as a tragedy are its emphasis on free will and individual responsibility, a chain of events leading to catastrophe (Per Hansa's death), and its tragic rhythm. But the structure of the novel can also be considered from other points of view. Critic Steve Hahn notes the "tense dichotomy of structure: the physical world of the Great Plains, and a reality which is envisioned in terms of Norwegian religious and cultural structures." Paul A. Olson likens the structure of the book to "early Germanic epics in that the hero begins with a conquest over a series of physical threats and ends with defeat before some spiritual ones." Other scholars see a deliberate association between Book I of the novel, "The Land-Taking," and the traditional account of Norse colonization in Iceland.

Imagery

The imagery of *Giants in the Earth* is rich and varied. Per Hansa was a fisherman before leaving for America, and there are many images of boats and the sea. The fact

that the wagons crossing the plains actually were called prairie schooners adds to the power of this image. As Beret's insanity deepens, Per himself behaves "like a good boat in a heavy sea." And on the afternoon of the locust invasion, his sod hut looks to him "like a quay thrust out into a turbulent current."

Nature and the elements are often given nightmare-like qualities. In her distress, Beret fixes on a "cloud that had taken on the shape of a face,. awful of mien and giant-like in proportions," At first, Per sees the locust invasion as the work of a giant's hand "shaking an immense tablecloth of iridescent colours," The night that follows Per's discovery of Beret and the smallest children hiding in the big chest. "the Great Prairie stretched herself voluptuously; giant-like." Images of light are used to varying effect. For example, the day after the birth of Peder Victorious, "The sun shone brightly through the window, spreading a golden lustre over the white walls," But after months of winter, the daylight inside the Hansas' hut casts a "pale, sickly gleam."

Historical Context

The Postwar Boom

The much ballyhooed prosperity of the 1920s, the so-called Jazz Age, was largely confined to the upper-middle class. Although quick fortunes were made in the stock market and in real-estate speculation, most Americans did not see their economic situation improve in the postwar years In *Giants in the Earth,* Rolvaag describes the formation of farm settlements on the southeastern Dakota prairies in the late 1870s, and over the next half a century, many of these farms would do well. The First World War permanently reversed the fortunes of farmers, and during the 1920s, 4 million farmers left their farms. Nonetheless, these were important years for business, which a succession of American presidents from Warren G. Harding to

Herbert Hoover believed would banish poverty in the United States. Sinclair Lewis incarnated this belief in business as the ultimate panacea in the main character of his novel *Babbitt* (1922).

Postwar Isolationism and Social Change

When post-First World War peace did not bring long-hoped-for prosperity, Americans reacted by avoiding foreign entanglements. They rejected the League of Nations, and viewed the Russian Revolution with suspicion. Idealism in general was not highly valued. Although the United States received about 60% of the world's immigrants from 1820 to 1930, a quota law passed in 1924 reduced the total number of immigrants and established fixed numbers for each nation, and had the practical effect of barring most Asians.

But the 1920s turned out to be an era of important social changes. Women in particular achieved significant gains, including increased access to education. Sexual mores were less restrained. In 1928 women were granted equal voting rights. The disciplines of medicine, architecture, science, and social reform all produced achievements of enduring worth. In business, entrepreneurs such as Walter P. Chrysler, Alfred P. Sloan, William C. Durant, and Henry Ford profited from the favorable political climate to make big business bigger. For a small segment of the population, these were years of optimism, symbolized by Charles Lindbergh's flight across the Atlantic in *The Spirit of St. Louis* and Ford's Model-T automotive technology, which made cars affordable for many people. Throughout the decade, the United States remained a segregated country, although there were some exceptions. For example, during this time Jews organized the movie industry, and black jazz, made popular by Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington, had a permanent influence on world culture. Sports remained closed, however, and except for some of the writers of the Harlem Renaissance and a handful of Jewish publishers, the publishing industry remained white and Protestant.

Growing Urbanization

In *Giants in the Earth,* the settlers dream of the coming of the railroad to lessen the length of trips to town for supplies. The development of communications in the 1920s was an even more dramatic leap forward. By the end of the decade, 18 5 million telephones and 10.2 million radios were in service in the United States. A network of paved roads connected towns with major cities. By 1929, 20 million cars were on these roads. These changes helped to break down regional divisions in the country, but a by-product of the link with the cities was the death of the small towns. In the time Rolvaag's novel is set, there is no school at Spring Creek, and two of the younger settlers are pressed into service to teach the others. In contrast, between 1919 and 1928 access to education increased across the United States. College enrollment tripled, and women made up a third of the student population. Collegiate lifestyle made itself felt throughout the culture. Overall, the decade was one of real achievement in many areas, especially the arts and media. The speculative excesses of the 1920s were later blamed for the Depression, and in the decade that followed, the carefree lifestyle and values symbolic of the Jazz Age were considered frivolous.

Critical Overview

Early reviews of *Giants in the Earth* were highly favorable. Writing in the *Chicago Dally News,* Carl Sandburg called the story "so terrible and panoramic, piling up its facts with incessantly subtle intimations, that it belongs among the books to be kept and cherished." Walter Vogdes wrote in *The Nation* that "We may wish desperately that Rolvaag could have ended his tale in triumph and satisfaction But no, Rolvaag had to stand close to the facts and the truth." In his introduction to the novel, Lincoln Colcord, Rolvaag's co-translator, called the work unique for being "so palpably European in its art and atmosphere, so distinctly American in everything it deals with."

Other contemporary evaluations were equally positive. Historian Henry Commager called the novel "a milestone on American literature" and "the most penetrating and mature depictment of the westward movement in our literature." Scandinavian studies scholar Julius E. Olson was impressed that the book (which was first published in Norwegian) had "passed muster With Norwegian critics and Norwegian readers in the homeland." Clifton P. Fadiman had praise for Rolvaag's ethnic sensitivity, "as delicate as a seismograph."

Giants in the Earth has maintained its value over time. Critics often note the influence of Lutheranism and the writings of Henrik Ibsen and Kierkegaard on Rolvaag's characterization. According to Harold P. Simonson, "In spite of Beret's indomitable effort to preserve her Norwegian ways, her greater strivings concern a transcendent faith." Theodore Jorgenson and Nora O. Solum pointed out that "the robust conscience [such as Per Hansa's] is an element of character that Ibsen used time and again The Vikings are said to be blessed with it They never seemed to regret their deeds, were never inclined to be morbid."

Other frequently cited literary influences are Old Norse sagas, Norwegian fairy tales, and Nordland dialect and folk memories. Particularly the Askeladd-a Norse tale in which the hero triumphs over adversity and wins the hand of a princess-is invoked in discussing the novel. Joseph E. Baker compared Rolvaag's respect for man to Homer's, and he calls the novel "a modern epic of Western man." Einer Haugen agreed. "By themselves, the events are simple and everyday, such as might have occurred to anyone. But the framework into which he has placed them deserves to be called epic" George Leroy White, Jr., praised Rolvaag's description of nature and his "Scandinavian" ability to evoke atmosphere. "It becomes oppressive; you feel that you must put the book down, you are so tired." Baker considered the passage where the minister brings Beret out of "utter darkness" to be "the greatest yet written in American fiction."

A universally acknowledged strength is Rolvaag's psychological realism, that is, his unromantic portrayal of the internal state of his characters. Though other writers such as Hamlin Garland, Edward W. Howe, and Willa Cather also dealt with psychological aspects of the westward movement, none had done it on the same scale as Rolvaag. "For the first time," wrote Commager, "a novelist has measured the westward movement with a psychological yardstick and found it wanting."

There is little disagreement that the work is tragic on several levels. According to Commager, "The westward movement... becomes the tragedy of earth's humbling of man." But this would not have been news to Rolvaag. He knew that "Immigration is always tragic," wrote Julius E. Olson "It is the price the pioneer pays for the future welfare of his children." Kristoffer Paulson recognized a tragic pattern typical of Rolvaag's novels, "inevitably ending in catastrophe," and he ranked the book among other great American tragedies such as *A Farewell to Arms, The Sound and the Fury,* and *The Red Badge of Courage.*

Critics dispute whether Per or Beret is the true hero of the story. Harold P. Simonson saw Per Hansa as "heroic in his choosing... fallen in his choice. This is the paradox informing great tragedy. Choice and the dreadful possibility of damnation are inseparable." But for Paul A. Olson, it is Beret's heroism that "is the tragic heroism of Lear, or Kierkegaard's Abraham or Job."

Critics do not stress the work's weaknesses. Charles Boewe found *Giants* in *the Earth* the most "aesthetically satisfying" of the books in Rolvaag' s trilogy, "but at the same time the poorest history," because it is based on secondhand knowledge

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Darren Felty is a Visiting Instructor at the College of Charleston. In the following essay, he explores O. E. Rolvaag's characterization of the Dakota plains settlers and the internal and external conflicts that ultimately determine their fate.

After publishing the English version of *Giants in the Earth* in 1927, O. E. Rolvaag was praised by many critics for helping to redefine the novel of the American frontier Originally written in Norwegian and translated by Rolvaag and Lincoln Colcord, the novel dramatizes the vast opportunity the Western plains offered to those daring enough to settle it, but, unlike former plains novels, it does not over romanticize this settlement. Instead, Rolvaag details the harshness of life on the frontier and the destructive effects it had on both the weak and the hearty. Revolving around the conflict between Per Hansa and his wife Beret, who hold widely divergent views on American farm life, the novel contrasts the power of Per Hansa's vital ambition with Beret's fatalistic conviction that frontier pursuits will destroy her family's civility and jeopardize their religious salvation. An omnipresent factor in both their lives, however, is the prairie itself, which Rolvaag alternately personifies as indifferent to human beings and as intensely bent on preventing farmers' encroachments. Rolvaag's characterizations of the plains help the reader comprehend the forces arrayed against immigrant settlers. Even more important, though, Rolvaag's portrayals of Per Hansa and Beret reveal the emotional and psychological consequences of settlement, wherein one's material gains are always offset by tragedy and loss.

Rolvaag's early descriptions of the plain establish both its centrality to his work and the degree to which it dwarfs human endeavors. He opens the novel, "Bright, clear sky over a plain so wide that the rim of the heavens cut down on it around the entire horizon Bright, clear sky, to-day, tomorrow, and for all time to come A gust of wind, sweeping across the plain, threw into life waves of yellow and blue and green. Now and then a dead black wave would race over the scene ... a cloud's gliding shadow... now and then " As in the rest of the book, the immensity of the frontier pervades these descriptions, as do impressions of eternity, beauty, and foreboding. Rolvaag explicitly contrasts the sense of vastness with Per Hansa's small family crossing the grassy fields. Immediately, the reader grasps one of the central questions of the novel and of plains experience: how can people survive in an environment that perpetually highlights their own insignificance and vulnerability? Rolvaag answers this question through the lives of his central characters, revealing that, in numerous cases, settlers do not survive, and those who do often suffer profound emotional and psychological afflictions because of their surroundings.

Rolvaag further emphasizes the intimidating difficulties of plains life by coupling characterizations of a vast, indifferent prairie with personified representations of an actively hostile natural world. Rolvaag presents the plain as alive, conscious, and frequently malevolent. For instance, in the beginning of Book II he describes the plain as "Monster-like Man she scorned; his works she would not brook. She would know, when the time came, how to guard herself and her own against him!" In such passages,

Rolvaag's prairie jealously protects itself against settlers' attempts to tame it and exploit its fertility. The small humans who occupy the land have ambition and industry on their side, but the prairie can muster blizzards, violent storms, rampaging fires, and locust plagues. Thus, the plain wins even against the stout Hans 0lsa and Per Hansa in the final chapter, chillingly entitled "The Great Plain Drinks the Blood of Christian Men and is Satisfied," According to Theodore Jorgenson and Nora O. Solum, Rolvaag derives this title from the Norwegian fairy tale in which the troll, satisfied by nothing else, drinks man's blood, and the characterization of the land as a troll runs through much of the book. These references to bloodthirsty retribution evoke an image of a beast both zealous and merciless as it attacks its foe and satiates itself upon his destruction. For Rolvaag, such is the life for many frontier dwellers.

In Per Hansa, Rolvaag best embodies his views of the failed conquest of the early plains settlers. Per Hansa tames a small patch of land and even begins to gain some measure of material prosperity, but his grand visions are never realized because of both external and internal antagonistic forces. First, of course, he must confront his immediate environment. Though he recognizes the brutalities of the prairie, Per Hansa feels his own strength too profoundly to fear this adversary. For him, the vast stretches of the plains evoke not loneliness or oppressiveness but a fit arena for his ambitions. Here, indeed, is a worthy opponent for him, a creature of great beauty, fecundity, and cruelty. Full of his own vibrancy, he often sings the praises of the land and revels in the work required to tame it. He dreams of building a kingdom and being the lord of his own destiny, and it is the life-giving soil that will enable him to fashion his dream into reality. Much of the book glories in Per Hansa's ingenuity, energy, and optimism. He is like the Norwegian mythological Askeladd, the hero who rises from meager beginnings to defeat, through goodness, perseverance, and strength, the forces arrayed against him, in this case the land as a vicious troll. But Rolvaag is far too realistic about human limitations to push this mythological allusion past the point of believability. If Per Hansa is a triumphant hero, it is only in isolated moments, and his ability to overcome seemingly any obstacle ultimately leads to his death while trying to navigate a blizzard. He cannot overcome the forces of nature, however much he conceives them as a conquerable enemy.

Perhaps more significant than his confrontations with the plains, however, are his conflicts with his own ambition and pride, both of which blind him to his wife's character. He is not an overbearing man, yet because he glories in the life he has chosen, he cannot believe that Beret will remain burdened by it. He puzzles over her depressions but asserts that a change in weather or their immediate living conditions will revive her spirit. That Beret is by nature unfit for such a life does not occur to him until she moves rapidly toward psychological ruin. Though he finally blames himself for Beret's condition, he still does not abandon the tenets of his dream of frontier conquest, nor does he embrace a religious faith of humility. For him, human vitality and ambition are not sins. To reject these elements in the human character would be to reject two of his most fundamental attributes. In fact, he plants these characteristics in his youngest son by naming him Peder Victorious. True to form, though, he does not consider the effect of such a name on his wife. She is deeply offended and terrified by it, because she maintains that no one can be victorious on the prairie and any belief otherwise proves

one is in Satan's grip. He later realizes his mistake, but, even so, when the kindly minister criticizes him for his complaints by saying, " 'You are not willing to beat your cross with humility!'" Per Hansa replies defiantly, "'No, I am not We find other things to do out here than to carry crosses!'" Despite his guilt and self recriminations, he does not alter his way of viewing the world or his place in it in order to understand his wife better. He is a man who directly confronts physical challenges, but the subtleties of the emotional realm remain beyond his reach, much to the detriment of himself and his family.

Beret, too, suffers from an inability to alter her perception of the world, leading to her own debilitating unhappiness. Like her husband, Beret sees plains life as an opportunity. But for her it is an opportunity for people to sink to the level of animals, violating all that is sacred. She cannot see the prairie as beautiful or fecund; it is only terrible, the devil's instrument to lure people into baseness. She views the entire Western Movement as a destructive unleashing of human appetite: "Now she saw it clearly: here on the trackless plains, the thousand-year-old hunger of the poor after human happiness had been unloosed I" While to Per Hansa and the other settlers such an event is cause for celebration, for Beret it is cause for distress. Throughout the book, Beret is the epitome of a traditionalist, believing completely in the religious tenets of her upbringing and the superiority of Norwegian life. Giving in to human passions and rejecting one's familial obligations in order to chase after elusive treasure, as she has done With Per Hansa, invite God's wrath. Indeed, she views their lives on the plains as a punishment for her own sins of sexual passion, filial betrayal, and excessive pride, and the intensity of her convictions prevents her from critically confronting her own responses and feelings of impending doom. As a result, she cannot truly see the good in others or in herself.

The plain, Per Hansa's reputation for amazing exploits, and his and Beret's irreconcilable perceptions all help lead to the final tragedy in the book: Per Hansa's death. He sees the proposed journey to find the minister as the height of folly because no man could survive in such a blizzard. In addition, he does not think Hans Olsa, a good man, needs a minister. Beret, on the other hand, believes that the dangers to Hans Olsa's soul far outweigh the dangers to her husband's life in her mind, one cannot stand idly by and watch a man be condemned to damnation. To do so would be committing a grievous sin that could bring damnation upon oneself. Added to the pressures from his wife, Per Hansa must contend with Hans Olsa and Sorine's fearful pleadings and belief in his near invincibility. When Per Hansa acquiesces, he is not convinced about the rightness of his errand, unlike his other dangerous ventures. Instead, he is angry at Beret and resigned to do his best, though he seems to know he is walking to his death. His last thoughts, fittingly, are of his home and family as he bids himself to "Move on I-Move on!", driving himself forward, as he always does. In the end, Per Hansa is killed by a combination of his anger, pride, and sympathy; his wife's singular convictions; his friends' fears and unqualified belief in him; and the vicious might of the plain. Yet, despite his defeat, he dies still adhering to his visions, as the reader sees in his Westward death gaze.

While the novel contains a number of tones, it ultimately strikes more of a naturalistic than a romantic chord. If one sees the book as romantic, then the "Giants" in the title reflect the heroic stature of the Dakota settlers, thereby glorifying Western expansion. Yet the romantic tones in the book derive mainly from Per Hansa's praises and condemnations of the plains, as well as his sense of his own vibrant individuality. This sensibility comes through in Rolvaag's prose, but he counters it with darker, more enduring perceptions of frontier life. Individuals in the book are always at the mercy of their environment. Thus, Rolvaag implies, the "Giants" of the title refer to the natural forces (or trolls) working to prevent the success of the settlers' endeavors. Rolvaag's strongest message may be, though, that the characters suffer because of their own flawed characters. Per Hansa, for instance, is so caught by his visions that he allows his wife to suffer greatly. Even after recognizing his failings, he does not forsake his ambitions, showing the implacable grip of one's nature and dreams. Therefore, as critic Paul Reigstad asserts, the "Giants" could include the traits of the settlers themselves that, whether caused by inclination or upbringing, blind them to others' needs and to their own destructive shortcomings Through this approach to his subject, Rolvaag identifies the settling of the plains as a widespread hunger for autonomy, adventure, and material prosperity whose silent costs often outweighed its loudly celebrated gains.

Source: Darren Felly, in an essay for *Novels for Students,* Gale, 1999.

Critical Essay #2

In the following excerpt, Morrow discusses Rolvaag's use of and departure from tragic conventions in Giants in the Earth, *a novel the critic ranks along with the great American tragedies* A Farewell to Arms, The Sound and the Fury, *and* The Red Badge of Courage.

It's nothing but a common, ordinary romantic he that we are 'captains of our own souls" Nothing but one of those damned poetic phrases Just look back over your own life and see how much you have captained!

This statement by Ole Rolvaag, less about fate than the human error of false pride, points us in a rewarding direction for an interpretation of *Giants in the Earth.* Concerned with *hamartia,* irreconcilable values, and dramatically rising to state man's universal predicament, Rolvaag's masterpiece is fundamentally a tragedy. Henry Steele Commager [in "The Literature of the Pioneer West," *Minnesota History,* VIII (December, 1927)] and Vernon Loms Parrington [in *Main Currents in American Thought,* III (New York, 1930)] suggested this possibility in 1927, shortly after the book's publication. But neither Commager nor Parrington shed much light on Rolvaag's methods for establishing *Giants* as a tragedy. Since those early days, the considerable scholarship on this important writer has pretty much moved to do battle on other fronts. Yet, by understanding *Giants* as a tragedy, I believe we can resolve much critical debate over the novel, especially about Beret and Per Hansa, perceive the book's real form, motivations, and complex thematic unity; and finally, appreciate Rolvaag's intention and considerable accomplishments as an artist.

Rolvaag develops *Giants in the Earth* as a tragedy by several methods, to be noted now and developed throughout this paper. In terms of genre, tragedy becomes established with a process of definition by negation. Rolvaag includes many aspects and conventions of both saga and epic, but then undercuts both by parodying them, and by having the tragic aspects increasingly dominate as his novel progresses In terms of form, *Giants* has ten chapters of five well-defined acts, adhering to the tragic rhythm of exposition, conflict, crisis, and catastrophe. Unities of time and place appear with the predictable seasons, tragic winter being dominant, and almost all action takes place within the Norwegian prairie settlements. Imitations of Ibsen's dramas and Shakespearian tragedy abound, hardly surprising since from early youth Ole Rolvaag had been an avid reader of great literature. (He went on, of course, to become a literature professor at St Olaf College from 1906 to 1931.) Finally, for the key issue of tragic recognition, Rolvaag fashions out of his Norwegian milieu and literary consciousness, a particularly American awareness.. ..

It seems widely agreed that tragedy emphasizes free will and individual responsibility, rather than inevitability and an external determinism, so happy in the saga or epic, but so dismal in naturalism. A tragic work typically presents a chain of events leading to catastrophe, often depicting a fall from high or successful station because of the hero's pride or *hybris,* an apt description of Per Hansa's life Journey and fate. Some kind of

chorus or community voice may function as spokesman for society's viewpoint and values. In *Giants in the Earth* the chorus not only advises but judges. As a community, they support Per; but later, as a congregation, they start to rally behind Beret.

Giants also has a tragic rhythm-nothing so episodic as scenes constructed and then struck, but a thematic movement of wax and wane. The exposition, the establishment of this Norwegian colony on the far edge of the prairie, is long, almost three and a half chapters. About midway in Chapter IV, "What the Waving Grass Revealed," Beret's disaffiliation and conflict with Per begins to become the book's dominant issue. Beret's Withdrawal and conflict become deeper, even shocking, until a crisis is reached in Chapter VIII, "The Power of Evil in High Places." After a chapter of reprieve or counter-action, the catastrophe is consummated in the final chapter With its outrageous title. Before we can understand the recognition phase, the final tragic aspect in this book, we must see the terms of this tragedy.

Professor Harold Simonson [in "The Tenacity of History: Rolvaag's *Giants in the Earth,"* paper presented at the Twelfth Annual Meeting, Western Literature Association, October 7, 1977, Sioux Falls, South Dakota] has suggested that *Giants in the Earth* presents two intersecting but irreconcilable dimensions, Time (Beret) and Space (Per). Simonson is concerned with the opposition between traditional Lutheran faith and the frontier ethic in *Giants,* but if expanded, this notion can also clarify the tragic character conflict in this novel. Forceful, physically powerful and handsome, skillful and even lucky, Per Hansa is a great natural leader. He loves the frontier because it is so expansive, a fitting, infinite surface on which to move his will, enact his own destiny and that of his people. Per attempts to change the prairie, or conquer time, by establishing a kind of immortality with his pioneer kingdom. Per's will and ego fill all space. Morally, he is a pragmatic teleologist who first ignores then hates the past. In the tradition of American Romanticism, he sees himself motivated by a dream of absolute good and right. Per fears rejection by those whom he leads far more than he fears impending failure because of the overwhelmingly hostile Dakota environment with its blizzards, floods, wind, clay soil, and grasshopper plagues. Per Hansa has confused his dream With reality.

As Per acts in terms of his vision, Beret acts in terms of consequences. Beret is the party of time; she wants to find her place in history, not escape it. Beret is defined and informed by what has already been created, and thus she is drawn to the old Norwegian culture, the Lutheran religion, and such other institutions as education, motherhood, and being a wife. Within an established community, institutions have been developed to deal with time, ritualizing the cycle of birth, growth, and death. But the prairie is infinity, as Rolvaag relentlessly reminds us throughout *Giants,* the zone where space cancels time, making the individual reach an absolutely Kierkegaardian state of being forever alone.

Bright, clear sky over a plain so wide that the nm of the heavens cut down on it around the entire horizon . Bright, clear sky, to-day, to-morrow, and for all time to come. .. "Tish-ah I" said the grass.. "Tish-ah, tish-ah!" ... Never had it said anything else-never would it say anything else.

From this beginning, then, Beret is literally and figuratively "spaced-out."

Nevertheless, as critic Barbara Meldrum has established [in "Fate, Sex, and Naturalism in Rolvaag's Trilogy" in *Ole Rolvaag: Artist and Cultural Leader,* ed. Gerald Thorson (Northfield, Minn., 1975), 41-49.] Beret can control her disorientation and depression until she comes to feel that Per Hansa has rejected her. Like Hester in *The Scarlet Letter,* Beret is no witch, but a passionate woman. She does feel guilt for her productive passion with Per, but her love for him continues to increase. Out on the prairie, she loses all sense of purpose with the realization that it is his dream, not Beret, which Per loves more than life. Beret comes to see Per as a person without fear, totally, blindly committed to his vision through his all-consuming pride Per is thus daemonic, and the consequences for following this evil course shall most certainly be destruction. Beret must bear this burden alone. She has reached a Cassandra-like impasse-doomed to knowledge, but never to be believed because he who hears her cries heeds only his own voice.

In terms of Per's dream and the ideal goals of the community, Beret does indeed lose her sanity. But in Beret's terms, her bizarre behavior-having tea With her absent mother, sleeping in her hope chest, ceasing her household chores, and attacking Per for godless megalomania-ritualizes punishment for worshipping Per, the false god, her punishment for sins against time. Beret is not, as Lloyd Hustvedt [in discussion following this paper, "The Johnson Rolvaag Correspondence," at the above noted Western Literature Association meeting] once half-seriously proffered, "a party pooper out on the prairie." Nor is she a pietistic, guilt-ridden fanatic bent on precipitating Per Hansa's early death. Nor is she the opposing view, Kierkegaard's "Knight of Faith" following God's divine imperative. However critically misunderstood, Beret remains a very human character, very hurt, and very much alone, pursuing a direction out of her moral and emotional wilderness by the only way she trusts....

That *Giants in the Earth* is a tragedy of two characters frozen in their irreconcilable dimensions may now seem evident, but where is that tragic recognition scene that changes and enlightens the protagonist? Since, as Maynard Mack [in "The Jacobean Shakespeare: Some Observations on the Construction of the Tragedies," in *Stratford Upon Avon Studies,* I (London, 1960)] reminds us, "tragic drama is in one way or other, a record of man's affair with transcendence," where might this transcendence be found? Nowhere in the novel. Playing his trump card of dramatic irony, of making his characters realize less about themselves than the audience understands, Rolvaag throws not only the burden of interpretation but the responsibility of awareness squarely on his readers. Far from undercutting tragic conventions, by this strategy Rolvaag expands *Giants* into relevance, into our own dimension and consciousness.

Four key scenes in *Giants,* all revealing to the audience rather than to the characters, establish our participatory role in this tragic novel. The first is that opening scene of the prairie as mystical infinity, a landscape more formidable and incomprehensible than any of the characters. The second scene is the visitation of the grief-stricken and insane Kari, her husband Jakob, and their children.

This episode forms a kind of play-within-a-play, a dumb show or mirroring device for the relationship between Per and Beret. Karl's hysteria is Beret's largely self-contained depression put into action, and Jakob surely must be enacting a Per Hansa fantasy by roping Karl down in the wagon and saying: "Physically she seems as well as ever... She certainly hasn't overworked since we've been travelling." The third scene is the christening of Peder Victorious, where the Per-Beret schism becomes public, but here too, actions are taken and positions are stated without any understanding by the characters. This pattern continues into the last scene. Per departs for his death with an almost spitefully disconnected calm, while Beret broods, paralyzed by guilt and doubt, wondering how history and the community will judge her.

Dramatically, then, Rolvaag opposes !us audience's recognition against his characters' actions. But beyond dramaturgy, Rolvaag limits his characters' awareness by significantly limiting their language. Typically a tragic hero defines himself by overstatement, Using hyperbole and metaphor to establish a momentum towards change and understanding. But Beret moves in circles inside the soddie, while Per Hansa moves in circles outside the house. Never soliloquizing, Beret conducts a long series of spinning monologues, usually in the form of unanswered questions in the conditional voice. Per Hansa, as suspicious of words as he is of emotions, wanders a path around the community, seeking tasks and deeds that will establish his goodness. Per and Beret are not fools blindly driven by some all-powerful malignant force. Perhaps the novel's greatest tragedy is that it centers on two very human characters who cannot understand their own tragedy. We can.

In the establishment of *Giants in the Earth* as a tragedy, Rolvaag owes a particular debt to two sources, Ibsen and Shakespeare. From Ibsen, whom Rolvaag intensely studied and taught for many years, he adopts a tone of pervasive overcast along with the thematic emphasis of self-deception as a psychological prison. Thus, Per Hansa is a synthesis of Brand and Peer Gynt, Brand predominating. Surely Beret's character has been filtered through the apprehension of Nora and Hedda Gabler. Ibsen's celebrated and tragically overwhelming momentum of cause and effect gives the pattern for the plot of *Giants.* As Rolvaag once concluded in a potent lecture on Ibsen: "... the free exercise of will in the dramas results in disaster. Life is tragic."

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* provides an analogue if not a source for the characterization and context in *Giants.* Both Lady Macbeth and Beret act with a sane and visionary madness, reflecting on all that has happened before and its consequences. Like Macbeth, Per Hansa just gives up. Certainly the eerie atmosphere of *Macbeth* exists out on the prairie, but, like the knocking at the gate in *Macbeth, Giants* also has its moments of saving humor. Maynard Mack notes an aspect of Shakespeare's later tragedies particularly appropriate to the tragic movement of *Giants in the Earth:*

Whatever the themes of individual plays. the one pervasive Jacobean theme tends to be the undertaking and working out of acts of will, and especially (in that strongly Calvinistic age) of acts of self-will.

Tragedy provides neither eternal answers nor temporal game plans, but heightens our awareness, our realization of the human condition. This is Rolvaag's mission with *Giants in the Earth.*

Giants in the Earth, then, is not a saga or epic about Norwegian settlements and triumphs in the Land of Goshen. This tragic novel is an amalgamation of Norwegian culture and concerns turned to a pioneer experience, set on the most extreme American frontier. As John R. Milton [in "The Dakota Image," *The South Dakota Review,* 8 (Autumn, 1970)] has noted, *Giants* is the premier account of "how people remember the Dakotas or learn about them." As such, especially with Rolvaag forcing the tragic realization upon his audience, *Giants* is squarely in the tradition of American tragic realism, in the company of such works as *The Red Badge of Courage, A Farewell to Arms, The Sound and the Fury,* and even *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest.* In the manner of Ibsen and Shakespeare, Rolvaag's masterpiece transcends time and space to make a dramatic and universal statement about the meaning of life.

Source: Patrick D Morrow, "Rolvaag's Giants in the Earth as Tragedy," in *North Dakota Quarterly,* Vol 28, No.4, Autumn, 1980, pp. 83-90.

Critical Essay #3

In the following review, Baker notes, particularly in the character of Per Hansa, an affirmation of the Western ideas of humans possessing free will as opposed to the Eastern, deterministic outlook held by American romantic writers such as Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Rolvaag's *Giants in the Earth* is a vision of human life rich in its implications. Here the pioneer struggle with the untamed universe may serve as a symbol for the condition of man himself against inhuman Destiny. The hero, Per Hansa, is a typical man of the West, both in the regional sense that he represents our pioneer background and in the universal human sense that he embodies the independent spirit, the rationalism, and what has often been condemned as the utilitarianism of Western civilization-European mankind's determination to cherish human values against the brute force of Fate. Under the influence of German philosophy and Romantic pantheism, many modern writers have bent the knee to the gods of nature and worshiped a fatal Destiny. On the other side, we turn to French literature and its greatest thinker, Pascal, for the classic statement of the Western attitude: "Man is but a reed, the feeblest thing in Nature; but he is a thinking reed.. If the universe were to crush him, man would still be more noble than that which killed him, because he *knows* that he dies."

This conception is developed most fully in the great tragic dramas of European literatures, but we find a similar respect for man at the very dawn of our civilization in the first Western author, Homer. His men are "like gods"; indeed, sometimes they are better and wiser than the supernatural forces and divine giants they come in contact with. Before the Heroic Age, mankind was sunk in an Age of Terror, given over to the superstition that the world is ruled by forces which can be dealt with only by magical rites-a view that still survives in Per Hansa's wife Beret. But with Homer, man emerges into the epic stage of human consciousness, with its great admiration for men of ability. Rolvaag's *Giants in the Earth* is a modern epic of Western man.

In this novel, as in Homer, or, for that matter, in *Beowulf,* there is the heartiest gusto and admiration for human achievement-sophisticates would say a naive delight in the 'simplest things' "Wonder of wonders!" What had Per Hansa brought back with him? "It was a bird cage, made of thin slats; and inside lay a rooster and two hens!" Nobody but Homer and Rolvaag can get us so excited over merely economic prosperity, man's achievement in acquiring fine things for his own use. One of the high dramatic points in the novel is the discovery that, after all, the wheat has come up! Tills sort of thing means life or death; and the preservation of human life, or the evaluation of things according to the pleasure they can give to individual men, is the very opposite of submission to material forces.

Hans Olsa was cutting hay; his new machine hummed lustily over the prairie, shearing the grass so evenly and so close to the ground that his heart leaped with joy to behold the sight What a difference, this, from pounding away With an old scythe, on steep, stony hillsides! All the men had gathered round to see him start.

That sounds like a passage from the *Odyssey.* And the central figure in the novel is an epic hero. Like Odysseus, Per Hansa is "never at a loss." Hans Olsa says to him, "No matter how hard you're put to it, you always give a good account of yourself!" This might be used to translate one of Athena's remarks to Odysseus. Or one may think of Virgil. Here are some of the phrases that make the novel seem epic: "[They talked] of land and crops, and of the new kingdom which they were about to found. Now they had gone back to the very beginning of things." This comes in the earliest pages of the book; while the last chapter states their attitude thus: "There was no such thing as the impossible any more. The human race has not known such faith and such self-confidence since history began"-one ought to say, since the Homeric Greeks. But in the translation of this novel from Norwegian into English, made by a New Englander, there has been added, out of respect for our Atlantic seaboard, "so had been the Spirit Since the day the first settlers landed on the eastern shores." Thus the novel, especially in the English translation, brings out what America meant to mankind. "He felt profoundly that the greatest moment of his life had come. Now he was about to sow wheat on his own ground!" This is exactly what Jefferson wanted America to be. And as the Middle West became the most complete type of democratic civilization that the world has ever known, our leaders have fought many battles, in politics and war, to enable the ordinary hard-working farmer to sow his wheat on his own ground.

America at its most American, this is embodied in Per Hansa, who "never liked to follow an old path while there was still unexplored land left around him." That is the spirit of the West against the East, of America against Europe, of Europe against Asia. It is not that the amenities of life are undervalued; even Per Hansa is working to achieve a civilized life. But the amenities are less exciting than the achieving. Much of the dramatic tension between the characters turns upon this choice. It is the pioneer faith that "a good barn may perhaps pay for a decent house, but no one has ever heard of a fine dwelling that paid for a decent barn." But the opposite view is expressed by one of the men: "One doesn't need to live in a gopher hole, in order to get ahead." There speaks the conservative culture of a more Eastern or more European mind. The conquest of material nature has been superciliously criticized by comfortable New Englanders from Emerson to Irving Babbitt (both guilty of an undue respect for oriental passivity) as a case of forgetting the distinction between the "law for man and law for thing," meaning by the "law for thing" not material force but human mastery. It "builds town and fleet," says Emerson; by it the forest is felled, the orchard planted, the prairie tilled, the steamer built. But it seems to me that human triumph over matter is a genuine practical humanism, and that this is the true spirit of the West; that in Bacon's phrase, knowledge may well be used for "the relief of man's estate." Emerson was closer to the spirit of the pioneers when he said, in "The Young American":

Any relation to the land, the habit of tilling it, or mining it, or even hunting on it, generates the feeling of patriotism. He who keeps shop on it, or he who merely uses it as a support to his desk. . or. . manufactory, values it less.. We in the Atlantic states, by position, have been commercial, and have... Imbibed easily an European culture. Luckily for us, the nervous, rocky West is intruding a new and continental element into the national mind, and we shall yet have an American genius.

And he calls it a "false state of things" that "our people have their intellectual culture from one country and their duties from another." But happily "America is beginning to assert herself to the senses and to the imagination of her children." If this be true-and I must confess that it seems rather extreme doctrine even to a middle western regionalist like myself-then Rolvaag, born in Europe, is more American than some of our authors of old New England stock. All Emerson's "Representative Men" were Europeans. It was not until the Middle West came into literature that we get an epic and broadly democratic spirit in works never to be mistaken for the products of modern Europe. Emerson recognized this in Lincoln; at last he admired a representative man who came from the West. And middle-western leadership in American literature, begun with Lincoln's prose, established beyond a doubt by Mark Twain, was confirmed in our day by Rolvaag....

In "The Method of Nature" Emerson says, "When man curses, nature still testifies to truth and love. We may therefore safely study the mind in nature, because we cannot steadily gaze on it in mind"; and he proposes that "we should piously celebrate this hour: [August 11, 1841] by exploring the *method of nature."* We may take this to represent the attitude toward Nature that we find in the Romantic period of American literature: that is to say, the New England masters and their followers continuing up through Whitman. But romanticism came late to America. Already in England Tennyson was recognizing that the method of nature is red with blood in tooth and claw. It was this later view that came to prevail in literature toward the end of the nineteenth century, even in America, doubtless because of the increased knowledge of nature. I refer not only to the progress of science, but to the fact that later authors had struggled with Nature, more than the Romantics, whose Nature had been tamed by centuries of conquest. Thoreau said. "I love the wild not less than the good," but his Walden was within suburban distance of the cultural center and the financial center of the New World. Rolvaag had known Nature as the sea from which, as a Norwegian fisherman, he must wring his living. In 1893 a storm at sea drowned many of his companions; and this, he says, caused him "to question the romantic notion of nature's purposeful benevolence." So in this novel there are giants in the earth. On the prairie, "Man's strength availed but little out here."

That night the Great Prairie stretched herself voluptuously, giant-like and full of cunning, she laughed softly into the reddish moon. "Now we will see what human might may avail against us I. Now we'll see!" And now had begun a seemingly endless struggle between man's fortitude in adversity, on the One hand, and power of evil in high places.

"The Power of Evil in High Places" is the title of the chapter, which includes a plague of locusts and also the terrible insanity of Per Hansa's wife. That is what we really find to be the method of Nature. For by this term Rolvaag, of course, does not merely mean scenery. He means the whole created universe that man is up against and the blind inhuman force or might that moves it. Sometimes he calls it Destiny, as in speaking of the murderous storm of 1893: "That storm changed my nature. As the seas broke over us and I believed that death was inescapable, I felt a resentment against Destiny." Twenty-seven years later another even more bitter tragedy occurred to impress Rolvaag with the murderousness of Nature: His five-year-old son Gunnar was drowned, under

terrible circumstances. He writes that this tragedy changed his view of life. Previously he "had looked upon God as a logical mind in whom the least happening" was planned and willed. Now he saw that much is "due to chance and to law-bound nature." In this novel, written later, it should be noticed that Per Hansa's wife Beret, especially when she is insane, continues Rolvaag's older view, blaming God for all miseries as if he had planned all She broods that "beyond a doubt, it was Destiny that had brought her thither. Destiny, the inexorable law of life, which the Lord God from eternity had laid down for every human being, according to the path He knew would be taken Destiny had so arranged everything." Another poor miserable woman in this novel, her husband receiving his death blow from a cruel Nature, has this same dark pagan view: "Now the worst had happened and there was nothing to do about it, for Fate is inexorable." This is a continuation of the deadliest oriental fatalism, always current in misconceptions of Christianity, though actually it is Just this which it has been the function of Christian philosophy and Western humanism to cast out, to exorcise in rationalizing man's relation to the universe. Emerson put his finger on the difference between West and East when he wrote in his *Journals* in 1847:

The Americans are free-willers, fussy, self-asserting, buzzing all round creation. But the Asiatic believe it is Writ on the iron leaf, and will not turn on their heel to save them from famine, plague, or the sword. That is great, gives a great air to the people....Orientalism is Fatalism, resignation, accidentalism is freedom and will.

So, Beret does not believe they should try to conquer the prairie; she feels that it is sinful to undergo the conditions of pioneer life; she is "ashamed" that they have to put up with poor food. "Couldn't he understand that if the Lord God had intended these infinities to be peopled, He would not have left them desolate down through the ages?"

But her husband, Per Hansa, is a man of the West; he glories in the fact that he is an American free-willer, self-asserting. He rebels against Destiny and tries to master Nature. Carlyle says that the struggle between human free will and material necessity "is the sole Poetry possible," and certainly this makes the poetic content of Rolvaag's masterpiece. During the plague of locusts one of the other characters gives vent to an expression of Asiatic abnegation:

"Now the Lord is taking back what he has given...I might have guessed that I would never be permitted to harvest such wheat" ... "Stop your silly gabble!" snarled Per Hansa "Do you really suppose He needs to take the bread out of your mouth?" There was a certain consolation in Per Hansa's outbursts of angry rationalism. [But when Per tries to scare the locusts away, Hans Olsa says, "Don't do that, Per Hansa! If the Lord has sent this affliction on us"].

It should be noticed that Per Hansa, though a rationalist, is also a Christian; so the author designates him in the title of the last chapter, "The Great Plain Drinks the Blood of Christian Men." Per is defending a higher conception of God. When Hans Olsa, dying, quotes "It is terrible to fall into the hands of the living God," Per says, "Hush, now, man' Don't talk blasphemy!" Rolvaag is aware of the divine gentleness of Christianity; the words of the minister "flowed on ... softly and sweetly, like the warm rain of a

Summer evening" in a tender scene which suggests "Suffer little children to come unto me." This is in a chapter entitled "The Glory of the Lord"-for it is a clergyman who ministers, to the "mind disease" of Beret and brings her out of her "utter darkness" in a passage that may be considered the greatest yet written in American fiction. What is implied in this novel becomes explicit in the sequel, *Peder Victorious,* where the first chapter is concerned with the religious musing of Per's fatherless son Peder. At one point he feels a difference between a Western as opposed to an Eastern or Old World conception of God and concludes that "no one could make him believe that a really American God would go about killing people with snowstorms and the like." But more significant is the account, in this sequel, of what the minister Said to Beret after she had driven her husband out into the fatal snowstorm to satisfy her superstitious reverence for rites:

You have permitted a great sin to blind your sight; you have forgotten that it is God who muses all life to flower and who has put both good and evil into the hearts of men. I don't think I have known two better men than your husband and the friend he gave his life for your worst sin lies in your discontent with your fellow men.

Surely, whatever Rolvaag's religious affiliations may have been, this is the expression of a Christian humanism. From this point of view it is far from true to say that American literature has sunk down in two or three generations from the high wisdom of Emerson to the degradation of the "naturalistic" novel. *Giants in the Earth* is a step in the right direction, abandoning the romantic idolatry that worshiped a Destiny in Nature and believed "the central intention of Nature to be harmony and joy." "Let us build altars to the Beautiful Necessity"-as Emerson puts it in his "Fate". "Why should we be afraid of Nature, which is no other than 'philosophy and theology embodied?'" This sentiment can be found repeated in many forms throughout the rhapsodies of the "prophets" of our "Golden Day." I, for one, am rather tired of the glorification of these false prophets, and I am glad that American literature has outgrown their enthusiasms, so lacking in a sense for the genuine dignity of man. Wisdom was not monopolized by the stretch of earth's surface from a little north of Boston to a little south of Brooklyn Ferry. Another passage from "The Young American" could bring home to us the repulsive inhumanity of Emerson's conception of God. Enumerating the suffering and miseries of man's lot, how individuals are crushed and "find it so hard to live," Emerson blandly tells us this is the

sublime and friendly Destiny by which the human race is guided, the individual[s] never spared... Genius or Destiny... is not discovered in their calculated and voluntary activity, but in what befalls, with or without their design. That Genius has infused itself into nature. For Nature is the noblest engineer.

In opposition to this deadly submission to cruel natural force, I contend that Western civilization was built by innumerable details of calculated and voluntary activity, that the Christian God is a God concerned not with race but with individuals according to their moral worth, and that in the tragic event which befalls Per Hansa in this novel, without his design, we do *not* witness a God infused into Nature.

Source: Joseph E. Baker, "Western Man Against Nature Giants in the Earth," in *College English,* Vol 4, October, 1942-May, 1943, pp. 19-26.

Topics for Further Study

Research the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 and explain how the provisions of the act might have affected the land claims of the settlers at Spring Creek.

Explore modern methods of farming and crop protection and explain how the characters in *Giants in the Earth* could have been helped by them.

Investigate current U.S. immigration patterns and policies, and compare the various experiences and concerns of today's immigrants with those of the characters in the novel.

Research the architecture and structure of a sod house and bam like the one Per Hansa built for his family, and make some hypotheses about its advantages and disadvantages.

Compare and Contrast

1870s: Prior to the 1880s, the majority of immigrants to the United States came from the British Isles and northwestern Europe.

1927: A quota law passed in 1924, fixing the number of immigrants from each nation of origin, favored Europeans and effectively barred most Asians.

Today: Since 1965 national quotas have been replaced with hemispheric limitations, and provisions exist for acceptance of political refugees. The United States grapples with the Issue of illegal immigration, particularly from Latin America, and its social, economic, and political effects.

1870s: The Indian Removal Act of 1830 and western migration of whites following the discovery of gold in California in 1848 signaled the beginning of a grisly struggle for territory between the European Immigrants and Native Americans.

1927: By 1887 most Native Americans had been forced onto reservations, where life was marked by poverty, poor education, and unemployment that would persist throughout the century.

Today: Restoration of original treaty lands and land won in legal battles has increased Native American property within U.S. boundaries to 53 million acres, much of which is valuable either for its natural beauty or for its mineral reserves. Native American communities struggle to find the best way to tap the economic and political potential of these lands.

1870s: The railroads grew rapidly after 1830, and on May 10, 1869, the eastern and western tracks of the first transcontinental railroad in the United States met at Promontory Point, Utah.

1927: By 1916 the railroads were handling 77% of all intercity freight traffic, but after 1920, they faced increasing competition from automobiles, buses, long-distance trucking, oil pipelines, and airplanes.

Today: The amount of freight moved by the railroads had declined to 33% in 1990 but has since remained stable; passenger traffic, however, never recovered, except for a brief period during the Second World War, and although intercity trains continue to operate, generally revenues do not cover costs.

1870s: Between 1878 and 1886, South Dakota experienced a land boom, initially stimulated by the discovery of gold in the Black Hills but subsequently fueled by cattle ranching and railroad building.

1927: A combination of droughts and the Great Depression caused widespread destruction to the area in the late 1920s, and over the following decade the population of the State of South Dakota declined by 50,000.

Today: After the Second World War, improvements in farming methods increased agricultural and livestock production in South Dakota but also resulted in the consolidation of small farms into large uuits and the displacement of many small farmers. Since 1981, however, a shift to service, finance, and trade industries has been accompanied by significant economic growth.

What Do I Read Next?

Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee, is Dee Brown's critically acclaimed 1970 account of the methodical annihilation of Native Americans by whites during the nineteenth century.

In Willa Cather's *My Antonia* (1918), a family of Bohemian immigrants confronts the hardships of pioneer life, including poverty and suicide, on the Nebraska plains.

The Last of the Mohicans (1826) is James Fennimore Cooper's classic tale of nobility and frontier adventure during the French and Indian War.

In *A Doll's House* (1879), one of the realistic plays for which Henrik Ibsen is best known, Nora Helmer courageously cuts herself loose from her degrading marriage of eight years to seek an independent life.

Mark Twain humorously recalls his escapades during a stagecoach journey through the American Midwest in *Roughing It* (1872).

Kristin Lavransdatter (1920-22) is Nobel Prizewinner Sigrid Unset's trilogy of love and religion set in medieval Norway.

Further Study

American Prefaces, Vol 1, No.7, April, 1936, pp. 98-112.

An issue devoted to Rolvaag that includes a commemorative poem written by Paul Engle, an excerpt of Rolvaag's unfinished autobiography, and recollections by his daughter.

Joseph E. Baker, "Western Man Against Nature: 'Giants in the Earth' ," in *College English* Vol. 4, No 1, October, 1942, pp. 19-26.

Baker views Per Hansa as a typically rational, independent Western man concerned with achievement, contrasting him With a more Eastern, submissive, and romantic figure one would find in the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Charles Boewe, "Rolvaag's America. An Immigrant Novelist's Views," in *Western Humanities Review,* Vol 11, No 1, Winter, 1957, pp. 3-12.

Boewe discusses Rolvaag's focus on the Norwegian-American Immigrant experience and his philosophy of culture.

Lincoln Colcord, "Rolvaag the Fisherman Shook His Fist at Fate," in *The American Magazine,* Vol 105, No.3, March, 1928, pp. 36-7, 188-9, 192.

Conversations between Rolvaag and his translator, Colcord, about emigrating to America and the writing of *Giants in the Earth.*

Henry Commager, "The Literature of the Pioneer West," in *Minnesota History,* Vol 8, No.4, December, 1927, pp. 319-28.

Commager connects Rolvaag's exploration of the suffering and futility of plains settlement with similar strains in historical studies He discusses Rolvaag's contrast between the romantic ideal of the West and the harsh reality of pioneer life.

Sylvia Grider, "Madness and Personification in Giants in the Earth," in *Women, Women Writers, and the West,* edited by L L. Lee and Merrill Lewis, Whitson, 1979, pp. 111-17.

A study of Beret Hansa's struggles with the forces of nature on the prairie, her mental breakdown, and her recovery.

Steve Hahn, "Vision and Reality in 'Giants in the Earth' ," in *South Dakota Review,* Vol 17, No 1, Spring, 1979, pp. 85-100.

Hahn explores the Impact of Norwegian heritage On Rolvaag's characters and their search for selfhood. He contends that Norse, folk, and especially Christian traditions dominate the narrative.

Theodore Jorgenson and Nora O. Solum, in *Ole Edvart Rolvaag' A Biography,* Harper, 1939.

In the first extensive English biography of Rolvaag, Jorgenson and Solum analyze the influence of Henrik Ibsen and Norwegian saga and folk tale culture on Rolvaag's prairie novels.

Barbara Howard Meldrum, "Agrarian versus Frontiersman in Midwestern Fiction," in *Vision and Refuge Essays on the Literature of the Great Plains,* edited by Virginia Faulkner and Frederick C Luebke, University of Nebraska Press, 1982, pp. 44-63.

In one section of her essay, Meldrum explores Per Hansa's dual nature as a frontiersman and an agrarian. She also discusses Beret's role as a truth-teller in the book.

Patrick D Morrow, "Rolvaag's 'Giants in the Earth' as Tragedy," in *North Dakota Quarterly,* Vol 48, No.4, Autumn, 1980, pp. 83-90.

Though he recognizes Rolvaag's use of saga and epic, Morrow contends that tragic conventions define the progress of Rolvaag's narrative and characters, placing the novel firmly in the tradition of American tragic realism.

Paul A. Olson, "The Epic and Great Plains Literature' Rolvaag, Cather, and Neidhardt," in *Prame Schooner,* Vol 55, No. 182, Spring-Summer, 1981, pp 263-85.

Olson asserts that Beret is Rolvaag's true hero because of her God-centered heroic Vision, while Per Hansa is a failed epic hero because of his discon nection to his community and God.

Paul Reigstad, "Mythical Aspects of *Giants in the Earth," in Vision and Refuge. Essays on the Literature of the Great Plains,* edited by Virginia Faulkner and Frederick C. Luebke, University of Nebraska Press, 1982, pp. 64-70.

Reigstad briefly examines Per Hansa's connections with Faust, the multiple connotations of the book's title, and Rolvaag's use of trolls in the novel.

Paul Reigstad, in *Rolvaag' His Life and Art,* University of Nebraska Press, 1972.

Reigstad explores the development of Rolvaag's art and, in the chapter on *Giants in the Earth,* cites Rolvaag's letters to recount the composition history of the novel.

Harold P Simonson, "Rolvaag and Kierkegaard," in *Scandinavian Studies,* Vol. 49, No 1, Winter, 1977, pp. 67-80.

Simonson examines Kierkegaard's influence on Rolvaag's prairie novels and their characters' religious sensibilities. From this perspective, Beret becomes the true hero of the novels.

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Clifton P Fadiman, "Diminished Giants," in *Forum,* Vol 81, No.3, March, 1929, pp. xx, xxii.

Steve Hahn, "Vision and Reality in 'Giants in the Earth' ," in *The South Dakota Review,* Vol. 17, No 1, Spring, 1979, pp.85-100.

Einar Haugen, in *Ole Edvart Rolvaag,* Twayne, 1983, pp. 80-1.

Theodore Jorgenson and Nora O. Solum, *Ole Edvart Rolvaag' A Biography,* Harper and Brothers, 1939, pp 344-46.

Patrick D. Morrow, "Rolvaag's 'Giants in the Earth' as Tragedy," in *North Dakota Quarterly,* Vol 48, No.4, Autumn, 1980, pp. 83-90.

Julius E Olsen, "Rolvaag's Novels of Norwegian Pioneer Life in the Dakotas," in *Scandinavian Studies and Notes,* Vol. 9, No 3, August, 1926, pp. 45-55.

Paul A. Olson, "The Epic and Great Plains Literature. Rolvaag, Cather, and Neidhardt," in *Prairie Schooner,* Vol. 55, No. 182, Spring-Summer, 1981, pp. 263-85.

Kristoffer Paulson, "What Was Lost. Ole Rolvaag's 'The Boat of Longing'," in *MELUS,* Vol. 7, No 1, Spring, 1980, pp. 51-60.

Carl Sandburg, "Review of *Giants in the Earth,* by Ole Rolvaag," in *The Chicago Daily News,* February 11, 1928, p. 9.

Harold P. Simonson, "Rolvaag and Kierkegaard," in *Scandinavian Studies,* Vol 49, No.1, Winter, 1977, pp. 67-80.

Walter Vogdes, "Hamsun's Rival," in *The Nation,* Vol. 125, No 3236, July 13, 1927, pp. 41-2.

George Leroy White, Jr., "The Scandinavian Settlement in American Fiction," in *Scandinavian Themes in American Fiction,* University of Pennsylvania Press, 1937, pp. 69-108.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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