

# **Hunger Study Guide**

## **Hunger by Knut Hamsun**

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# Plot Summary

In *Hunger*, the protagonist is a writer living in Christiania in the 1800s. Out of work, he struggles to write articles for the local newspapers to make a little money to feed himself. However, he ends up with no money for rent, and resorts to selling off his meager possessions to the pawn broker one at a time until he has nothing left. After experiencing manic highs and bleak depressions, he finally takes a job on a ship sailing away from Norway, to England, and says goodbye to his native land.

As the story begins, the narrator of *Hunger* is living in an attic room in Christiania. He has not eaten and has no food or money. His rent is due, and he is evicted from his apartment. He meets a woman who he gives a fantasy name, Ylayali, and fantasizes about. The narrator is saved at the end of the first part by a few hours of inspiration that lead him to write a story that is published for ten kroner. However, in exchange, the narrator has given up his home. He has no possessions and nowhere to stay.

A few kroner is a transient thing. The second part finds the narrator starving again and reduced to living in a workshop above a stable, abandoned because the snow comes into the building. The weather has turned cold, and the narrator's writing is going nowhere. After losing his keys, he is forced to spend the night in the jail as homeless, but he is turned out starving because he's lied about his position in life. At each avenue he tries, the narrator fails to earn or borrow money. Finally, a pawnbroker turns down his last possession, the buttons on his coat. During this part, the narrator is saved; not by his own work, but by an unnamed passing friend who realizes what a desperate situation the narrator is in.

In the third part of the novel, the narrator is poor and starving again. He continues to write, but his writings are rejected. He tries to buy a candle on credit, and the store clerk accidentally gives him change for five kroner. The starving man buys food that he can't keep down. In his euphoria, he talks to a woman whom he's seen hanging around his apartment, and he discovers that she is his "Ylayali." He walks her home and makes a date with her. However, soon the narrator is overcome with conscience and gives away his money. He is saved again when his editor gives him ten kroner, but on his date with Ylayali, she rejects him when he tells her the truth about himself.

In the fourth part of the novel, the narrator is living in a lodging house, but he hasn't paid rent for three weeks. He is trying desperately to write something worthwhile. His landlady kicks him out of his room and gives it to a longshoreman, forcing him to stay in a room with the landlady's large family, until she finally gets angry at him and kicks him out. The narrator receives ten kroner anonymously from Ylayali, which he throws in the landlady's face, leaving him still broke. Finally, the narrator signs onto a ship, leaving Christiania forever.



# Part 1, pages 1-19

## Part 1, pages 1-19 Summary

In *Hunger*, the protagonist is a writer living in Christiania in the 1800s. Out of work, he struggles to write articles for the local newspapers to make a little money to feed himself. He ends up with no money for rent, and resorts to selling off his meager possessions to the pawn broker one at a time, until he has nothing left. After experiencing manic highs and bleak depressions, he finally takes a job on a ship sailing away from Norway, to England, and says goodbye to his native land.

As the novel begins, the unnamed first-person narrator is living in an attic room in Christiania. He looks out his window hungrily at advertisements for food during the early morning hours. Most of his possessions have already gone to his "uncle," the pawnbroker. His room is poorly made and furnished, with only one bright spot, a red rocking chair. He looks through his meager possessions and finds that he has no breakfast. His attempts to find a job have been failures, and he only occasionally brings in a few kroner from selling an article to a paper. He spends his time sitting outside writing one article after another.

The narrator is behind in the rent, and he slips out, avoiding the landlady. He walks through the city, feeling euphoric even though he is starving. He sees Hans Pauli, who owes him money and to whom he needs to return a blanket. He also thinks about articles he wants to write. Then, he becomes annoyed by an old man making slow progress in front of him, becoming paranoid that the old man is purposefully staying in front of him to block him. The narrator confronts the old man, who begs for money. Embarrassed that he has none, the narrator runs off to pawn his waistcoat and returns to give a coin to the old man. Realizing the narrator's poverty, the old man tries to give the money back, but the narrator is too proud to take it.

The narrator takes the money he's got left and buys bread and cheese. Exhilarated by the meal, he decides to write a complex article on Philosophical Consciousness. He discovers that he needs to run back to the pawnbroker to reclaim his pencil. On the way, he runs into a woman and on a whim, follows her, teasing her. He makes up the name Ylayali for her in his mind. The woman and her sister think he is drunk. He follows them to 2 St. Olaf's Place, their home. He sees the woman looking at him from the window. The narrator walks away self-consciously, finally arriving at the pawnshop. He is embarrassed to have to come back to retrieve such a valueless item as the pencil, and covers up his poverty by lying to the man and saying it has sentimental value.

## Part 1, pages 1-19 Analysis

*Hunger* is a psychological novel, written first person from the perspective of an unnamed narrator. The narrator's identity is not encompassed in a name. Instead, the



narrator's identity is involved with his hunger, his pride, his ability to reason, and his ability to write. The story begins at what seems like a low point. The narrator has slipped deeper and deeper into poverty. His possessions have slipped away from him one by one, until he has nothing left to sell, no income, and no food. Yet, this is a time that he will look back on later with fond memories, thinking how much worse things have gotten.

Hans Pauli is the first person the narrator runs into who owes him money. As the narrator continues to starve and suffer, people throughout the city owe him money from when he had an income. The narrator never calls on them to try to force them to return his money. This is part of the narrator's shame at his situation and the pride that keeps him from asking for help. The narrator's pride shows also when he feels compelled to give the old man money he doesn't have and even gets angry when the old man tries to refuse the gift. The narrator's lie about his pencil is another sign of his pride. He cannot admit his own poverty, even to the pawnbroker.

Ylayali will become an important character in the story. She is the narrator's image of love and his dream of a better life. Ylayali is only partially the woman he chances to run into on the street. More, she is the narrator's own inventive mind creating a fantasy for himself. That is why the reader only knows her as "Ylayali," the narrator's fantasy name for her, and not by any real name.



## Part 1, pages 19-35

### Part 1, pages 19-35 Summary

The narrator walks through the streets, feeling sorry for himself and blaming God for singling him out for bad luck. His large meal makes him feel sick, and he is easily angered by passersby. As the narrator tries to write, he discovers that he has six barber coupons, so he can keep himself presentable for a while. He is too distracted to write and becomes obsessed by the flies and gnats on his paper. An old man sits down next to him, and the narrator turns from examining his own weakened body to examining his new companion, who is carrying a package wrapped in newspaper. The narrator feels driven to find out what's in it, imagining all kinds of romantic scenarios.

The narrator talks to the old man, trying to find out what's in the package. He winds up making up a story about himself and saying that he lives at 2 St. Olaf's Place, the address to which he followed the women. He makes up a name for his landlord, J. A. Happolati, and the old man thinks he knows the imagined man. This irritates the narrator, who makes up a complex lie about Happolati, inventor of the electric prayer book and prime minister of Persia, and his beautiful daughter Ylayali. The narrator is so wrapped up in his story that he forgets about the parcel, and soon he becomes annoyed with his listener and accuses the old man of thinking he's lying. The narrator's irrational anger drives the old man away. The narrator becomes sleepy and begins to drowse. A policeman wakes him and drives him off.

The day is waning, and the narrator hasn't written anything. The rent is due, but all he can write is 1848 over and over on his paper. Finally, he writes an introduction, but he does not know what it should introduce. He thinks that he'll need to give up his room, since he can't pay the rent. As he walks, he sees the old man he drove away. The newspaper package contained his lunch. As he heads home, he sees a job posted for a bookkeeper at a grocer's. When he reaches his room, he finds a note from his landlady asking him to pay his rent or leave, and he applies to the bookkeeping job. Then he goes to sleep.

### Part 1, pages 19-35 Analysis

The narrator's emotions are driven by his hunger. He yells at God and is angered by strangers because of the physical pain he is going through. Although he has eaten, the narrator is suffering from his long periods without food. Even though he cannot write, the narrator's mind is full of imagination. Once he starts talking to the man sitting next to him, he almost can't control the story he begins to weave. Ylayali is a central character in the story, as the narrator builds up her fantasy persona as a beautiful princess.

Policemen are a motif throughout the novel. Whenever the narrator is outside, sleeping in a corner or on a bench, there seems to be a policeman watching him. The police are



typically friendly toward the narrator, but ultimately they rob him of the ability to be peaceful and sleep in the city streets, when he has no other options.

The narrator's day comes to a close. He has met a fantasy woman, starved, tried to write and failed, felt euphoric and bitterly angry and desperate, lashed out at strangers, and been kicked off a bench by a policeman. He is being kicked out of his room, but he still has hopes of finding a steady paycheck through the bookkeeping job. The problem is that the narrator has sunk so low that his perspective of the world is muddled. He becomes irrationally angry or euphoric. Is he in any condition to be able to get a job and pull himself out of desperate poverty?



## Part 1, pages 35-49

### Part 1, pages 35-49 Summary

The next morning, the narrator wakes early, and suddenly two sentences occur to him. More sentences follow. He begins to write, sentence after sentence, without stopping, until he has fifteen or twenty pages. As he makes a clean copy, he becomes ecstatic. The work is good, and he can expect five, even ten kroner. Exhilarated by his work, he decides that the room isn't good enough for him. He packs his few possessions and writes his landlady a note that he's leaving. He thanks God for the gift of his writing, believing that all his troubles are over.

The narrator is embarrassed at carrying a bundle of all his possessions in an old blanket, and he brings it to a store to have it wrapped into a package. He lies to the clerk, claiming that the blanket contains a valuable object to be mailed. As soon as the editor might be in, the protagonist goes to the newspaper office. Scissors, who works at the office, tells him that the editor isn't in yet. The narrator drops off his story.

The narrator runs into an acquaintance named Queeny, whom he dislikes. The narrator lies to Queeny, telling him that he is working as a bookkeeper, at the job the narrator has just applied to. Queeny seems pleased, telling the narrator not to let his friends sponge his money away and recommending a tailor for the new suit the narrator says he's having made. The narrator is irrationally annoyed and reminds Queeny that he owes him ten kroner. Before Queeny can reply, the narrator becomes embarrassed and slips away.

The narrator passes time sitting on a bench and begins to doubt the worth of his article. He walks out into the country, and on the way back, a passing hay cart driver whips his hat off as a joke, injuring his ear. He finds it's after four and rushes to the newspaper office to catch the editor. The editor is in, but he hasn't read the story. The editor says he'll write to the narrator's address, and the narrator forgets to tell the editor that he has no address anymore.

After leaving the newspaper office, the narrator realizes he'll have nowhere to stay that night. He falls asleep and wakes at 9:00. He needs to find a place to spend the night. The narrator tries to sneak into the firehouse, but he is scared off by the guard. Then, he goes to visit a painter he knows, but the painter has a girl over and turns the narrator away at the door. The protagonist goes out into the woods and sleeps on the ground.

### Part 1, pages 35-49 Analysis

The narrator's attack of inspiration is as sudden as his attacks of anger and irritation. His writing gives him hope and brings on euphoria, but all the narrator's emotions seem like false emotions. He is angry when there is nothing to be angry about, and he is euphoric when there is really no cause for euphoria. His emotions drive his irrational





behavior, driving him deeper into trouble. Just as he irrationally yelled at the man with the newspaper package in the park, he irrationally decides to leave his room on the hopes of his one article.

Part of the reason the narrator leaves his attic room may be his pride. He is too proud to beg for more time or simply avoid moving out. He doesn't want to confront his landlady because he is ashamed of not being able to produce the rent. He is even ashamed at having to carry all his possessions wrapped in an old blanket, and he has the package wrapped (and lies about what it contains both to the store clerk and to Queeny). The narrator's lying is partially his pride, but it is also partially his always-present imagination, the imagination of a writer.

As the editor predictably takes some time to read and consider the narrator's story, the narrator's mood swings from euphoria to desperate depression. The day that started with inspiration ends with faint prospects. The narrator tries to look up an old acquaintance for help, but he doesn't ask for help. Instead, he is easily turned away because the painter has a girl over. The narrator feels he must cover over his true purpose, and so his acquaintances never truly see what a desperate situation he is in.



## Part 1, pages 49-61

### Part 1, pages 49-61 Summary

The narrator wakes the next afternoon, cold, uncomfortable, and starving. He begins to feel strange, and he considers pawning his borrowed blanket. He decides not to and feels proud of himself for his moral courage. He goes to check on the job he applied for and finds that he wrote the wrong date, 1848, on the letter. While the shopkeeper liked the letter, he gave the job to someone else.

Growing angry, the narrator blunders through the crowded streets and gets into an altercation with a passerby. Randomly, he walks into a building and knocks on a door on the third floor. The woman who answers the door assumes that he's begging, and the narrator is offended. He makes up a story that he's inquiring about a job taking a man in a wheelchair for outings, pretending to be a wealthy man looking for a job for someone else.

The narrator's last resort is his barber coupons. He thinks that he can find an acquaintance of his who works at a bank and trade the coupons for a half a krone. On his way, he thinks that the coupons aren't enough and decides to include his tie. Finally, he finds his friend. The narrator gives the man the coupons and tie and asks for a half krone. Startled, the man tells the narrator that he's broke, showing his empty pockets. He spent his money out on the town the previous night. The narrator rushes off, giving the acquaintance his coupons and tie for nothing.

The narrator tries to sleep hidden by the side of a church, but a policeman wakes him and tells him that he can't sleep there. The narrator gives the policeman his old address, and he sneaks back to his old apartment. Once the narrator is in his old room, he sees a letter on the table for him. He brings the letter outside into the lamplight. It's from the newspaper editor, accepting his story for ten kroner.

### Part 1, pages 49-61 Analysis

Underlying the narrator's unemployment is a conflict between his identity as a writer and his ability to be a worker. The narrator writes the date 1848 over and over on a paper as he was trying to write, so presumably it has to do with an article or story he had in mind. Then, he loses a possible job as a bookkeeper by accidentally writing the date 1848 on his letter. In part, both these problems are due to the narrator's hunger and poverty, but in part, his writing is interfering with his ability to get a normal job. Ironically, not having a normal income and a place to stay also interferes with his writing.

Hitting another low point, the narrator rants and behaves irrationally, but he is still full of pride. When a woman assumes he's begging, he cannot stand the insult, even though he is starving and homeless. The narrator retreats into his imagination again, weaving stories instead of facing the truth of his situation. Giving up his barber coupons are the

narrator's "last resort." They represent a last bit of civilized life, the ability to shave. Because of his pride and shame, the narrator ends up giving them up for nothing. The narrator is saved by his writing at the end of Part 1, after an emotional roller coaster of highs and lows.



## Part 2, pages 62-82

### Part 2, pages 62-82 Summary

A few weeks later, the narrator is broke and hungry again. He hasn't eaten for two or three days. He has been staying in an abandoned tinsmith's workshop, and he doesn't want to go back there. He walks the streets, reading through the article he's been writing. Finding a blank sheet of paper in his pocket, the narrator folds it into a cone and throws it into the street. He imagines the paper packet is full of food or money. A policeman walking down the street sees it and picks it up, looking inside. The narrator laughs hysterically at the joke; he's fooled the policeman into thinking there's something inside.

The narrator sits outside, daydreaming about Princess Ylayali. He falls asleep and is woken by a policeman. The narrator begins to walk again, almost forgetting his hat. He is overcome with hunger and angry with the policeman, who called him an idiot. Irrationally, he tells a passing policeman that it's ten o'clock, though the puzzled policeman knows it's two in the morning. The narrator is ready to fight over what he knows is a lie, but the policeman kindly offers to walk him home. The narrator's anger suddenly dissipates. The narrator heads home, but he realizes that he's lost his keys.

On the way to look for the lost keys, the narrator stops a policeman and asks him if he can open the locked door for him. The policeman explains that the police keys are kept at the detective bureau and suggests that the narrator find a hotel room. The narrator explains that he's broke, excusing his lack of money by telling the policeman, falsely, that he's been out at a club and spent all his money. The policeman advises the narrator to register with the police as homeless.

The narrator registers under a false name, Andreas Tangen, and says that he's a journalist with the Morning Times. The police bring the narrator up to a cell for the night. The narrator tosses and turns, unable to sleep. His thoughts are haunted by strange ideas and paranoid fantasies. He makes up a new word, Kuboaa, but he cannot think of any definition that's worthy of it. It must mean something spiritual. He argues with himself as a devilish part of his brain suggests mundane meanings like "yarn." He spends a delirious, sleepless night, until finally morning comes.

### Part 2, pages 62-82 Analysis

The opening of Part 2 reveals the fallacy of the narrator's belief in his writing as his salvation. The money he got for his article soon dissipates, and the narrator finds himself in a worse situation. Hungry and sick, he is living in a rundown abandoned building. The narrator again runs into policeman after policeman. He is irrationally pleased at "tricking" a policeman with his empty paper package; he is rousted by a policeman while sleeping. The policeman who wakes him pulls him out of the fantasy



realm of Ylayali into a world of tortuous hunger. The narrator is angry because the policeman calls him an idiot for almost forgetting his hat, but the narrator's anger is more truly directed at his own situation.

After the narrator realizes he is locked out of his awful apartment, he gives in to the ever-present policemen, registering himself as homeless. However, the narrator's pride, shame, and imagination reveal themselves again. Like Ylayali, the narrator is never known by his real name. The only name the reader has for him is an imaginary one, Andreas Tangen, successful journalist. This is the narrator's fantasy existence, to be a successful writer. He is reaching for something amazing and beautiful that he can't quite imagine or put into words, but he is afraid that it does not exist. That is the significance of the made-up word Kuboaa, which he wants to mean something spiritual or wonderful but is afraid may mean only "yarn."



## Part 2, pages 82-113

### Part 2, pages 82-113 Summary

The narrator goes down with all the other people registered as homeless to report to the Officer of the Day. One by one, the men are called up, and the police give each one a ticket for a meal. When the Officer of the Day calls the narrator, he repeats the same lie he gave last night, knowing that it means he won't get a ticket for a meal. After three days without food, the narrator still has nothing to eat.

On the way back to the tinsmith's shop, the narrator picks up some slivers of wood to chew on to assuage his hunger. The boy who works in the stable downstairs lets him in. The narrator is just considering asking the boy for money, when the boy asks if he can borrow five kroner for rent.

As the narrator waits until he can bring his latest article to his editor, he tries to think of some way to get money. Looking at his blanket, he thinks of Hans Pauli. First, he stops at the newspaper, but the editor isn't in yet. Ever since the editor bought his article for ten kroner, the narrator has swamped him with unusable material, and the reception from Scissors is cold. The narrator heads off to try to find Hans Pauli. When he gets to Hans Pauli's apartment, though, the man has moved. The narrator goes down to Hans Pauli's forwarding address and gets the new address where his friend is living.

Bringing a couple of letters for Hans Pauli, the narrator heads to his apartment and finds that he's gone home for vacation. He leaves the letters with the landlady, goes outside, and curses God. He walks down the street, arguing with himself and chewing on wood chips. He walks to the pier, and annoyed by the smell of cakes from a cake seller, begins raving that there are too many cake sellers in the city, scaring away a stranger. The narrator sits down on a bench and becomes overcome by the music from an organ grinder, but he has no money to give the street performer. He promises to bring the organ grinder's daughter five kroner, and when she doesn't believe him, he tries to give her his waistcoat, forgetting that he's already pawned it. People begin laughing at him, and a policeman breaks up the scene.

The narrator goes back to the newspaper office, but it's closed. He thinks that perhaps he can sell his coat buttons. As the narrator is standing outside the newspaper office, Scissors comes out. The narrator lies to him, saying he has information from the governor's mansion, to get in to see the editor. The editor promises to read his article, complaining that the narrator's work is too excitable and over-emotional. The narrator wants to ask for a krone in advance but can't bring himself to do it. He sits on a bench for a half hour before he's driven off by a policeman.

Finally, the narrator decides to go to the pastor for help. On the way there, he tells himself that he must not be too proud to ask for help. He finds that the pastor is out and his wife is sick in bed. He has arrived an hour too late. Chewing on wood chips isn't



helping his hunger anymore, and he's ill from eating an orange peel he found on the ground. Desperate, he decides to pawn the green blanket, but the pawnbroker will take neither the blanket nor his steel-rimmed glasses.

After wandering in the street again, the narrator decides to pawn his buttons. He passes a tantalizing bakery and a whore who is horrified at his drawn face. He walks the streets, raving, afraid of being locked up. He goes into a music store he used to shop at to beg for money and is refused. Then, he goes into a yarn store and asks a stranger to steal from the till to help him. After another refusal, when he's giving up hope of living, he remembers the buttons again, but the pawnbroker will not take them. On the way out, he runs into an unnamed acquaintance coming to pawn a watch. Seeing the dire straits the narrator is in, his friend gets him five kroner.

## Part 2, pages 82-113 Analysis

The narrator's suffering is a direct result of his pride. He does not get a meal, like the other homeless men who spend the night at the jail. In fact, registering as homeless is always an option for the narrator, but he can't bring himself to admit how dire his situation is and accept that he is one of the impoverished homeless of the city. Instead, he starves, chewing on slivers of wood in lieu of a meal.

The narrator's desperation seems to have affected the quality of his writing, too. He tries to write, but his articles are always rejected. Inspiration seems truly fickle. He chases another ten-kroner article blindly, just as he chases after a possible krone from Hans Pauli, running all over the city and finally finding nothing. The potential krone is an illusion, a dream that the narrator chases, like Ylayali and like his writing career. Even his ability to give some money to the organ-grinder's daughter is an illusion, a dream he chases after. His pride and inability to even ask for an advance from the editor is part of his desire to believe in this dream world. He pretends to have enough money, decent clothes, and a livable life. He doesn't want to accept the reality of the world, where he is poor and starving and hopeless.

After chasing down yet another blind alley, in search of the pastor, the narrator falls into a deep despair. He gives up on morality, on trying to hold himself to an ideal, and decides to pawn the blanket that was loaned to him. Even that yields nothing. The narrator gives up his code of ethics, like his barber coupons, getting nothing for them. At his lowest point, he is saved by an unknown friend, but the narrator tries to reject help the whole time, clinging to his friend. The friend who gives the narrator five kroner of the money from his pawned watch is unnamed. The narrator is too wrapped up in his own troubles, it seems, to give an identity to the friend who saves him from starving.



## Part 3, pages 114-145

### Part 3, pages 114-145 Summary

After a week of regular food, the narrator is writing again, but he has not sold an article. He considers joining the crew of a ship if he can't make any money. He is beginning to lose his hair and feeling ill. He has begun calling his editor "the Chief," and he goes along to the Chief with a new article. The article is too highbrow, and the Chief asks the narrator to revise it. He offers the narrator an advance, but the narrator refuses.

The narrator has noticed a woman in a heavy veil hanging around his apartment, but without money, he's afraid to approach her. He decides he needs a candle to work at night to finish his essay, so he can make some money. He can't find anyone to borrow money from, and he begins laughing at himself for his conscious, thinking that he would steal from anyone now. He starts criticizing the people passing him by. Then, he stops a woman and asks her if she's had any problems walking about late at night. The woman infers that he is trying to pick her up and begins bringing him home with her, but the narrator confesses that he has no money. Then she changes her mind and asks him home with her anyway, but he won't accept. When she is offended, the narrator pretends he is a pastor and chastises her for her behavior.

The narrator goes outside the tinsmith's to try to work under the street lamp, but he cannot get the end of his essay right. A policeman distracts him by stopping nearby. After standing outside for an hour, the narrator goes inside to his dark and cold apartment. In the morning, he does some writing, but he cannot get to the end of his essay. He runs out of steam. He is sick and empty, and he cannot think. The narrator falls back into bed. He's losing more hair. Lying in bed, he has become delirious. He's tempted by his finger, and he bites it. The pain clears his head and his hunger becomes less painful.

The narrator thinks that perhaps he can get a candle on credit at the store and finish his essay that night. When he walks into the store, the clerk is helping another customer. The clerk recognizes him and gets his usual loaf of bread, but the narrator tells him that what he's come for is a candle. The narrator waits while the clerk finishes helping the other customer, and then the clerk gets the candle. As the narrator is trying to formulate the words to ask for credit, the clerk becomes confused, remembering the five kroner bill the previous customer gave him. He thinks the narrator already paid and counts out the change from a five-kroner bill.

Overjoyed, the narrator goes and gets a roast beef lunch, but it makes him vomit. He gets some boiled milk and is able to hold it down. On his way home, he sees the woman in black outside the tinsmith's again. He speaks to her and even asks her out for wine. She turns him down but asks him to walk her home. When she says that she lives in St. Olaf's Place, he realizes it is "Ylayali." Her sister, she tells him, has gone to Hamburg, and she lives with her mother.





The narrator mentions the zoo but then is afraid to take the woman because he doesn't want her to see his impoverished state in the lights. He asks her name or to see her face, and she confirms that she's the woman he followed before. He claims that he was drunk then. As they reach the woman's apartment, she prolongs the walk by walking back with him a ways. The narrator tries to trick her into lifting her veil but fails. They finally walk back to the woman's apartment, and she makes a date to meet him again Tuesday at eight o'clock. Before he leaves, she throws up her veil and kisses him.

### **Part 3, pages 114-145 Analysis**

Inspiration has left the narrator, and he is now out of money as well. He is becoming sicker and sicker because of his chronic hunger. He can't seem to hold onto an idea, and he can't even buy a candle to write by. The encounter with the prostitute highlights the narrator's confusion. He wants human companionship and lashes out at the world because he can't have it. He won't accept charity, even sex from a prostitute, which will cost her nothing. He retreats into fantasy again, taking on the persona of a pastor to run away from his own instincts and desires.

The policeman hovers like a vulture as the narrator tries to write under a streetlamp, reminding the narrator of his fate if he is homeless. His "home" is not much better than the jail, though, and he spends another delusional night. The loss of his hair is symptomatic of his body and mind falling apart. He is so sick and hungry that he tries to eat his finger, before he is once more jolted back to reality.

The narrator can hardly be blamed for walking off with the change for five kroner after the clerk's mistake at the store. He is starving and even perhaps on the verge of death. The five kroner offers him, not only survival, but more. He tries to taste pleasure in the form of the roast beef, but he is too ruined to have it. Perhaps he is too ruined, in mind, body, and soul, to have any of his desires. Still, it seems like his fantasy woman Ylayali may be a reachable reality, and the narrator reaches out for her.



## Part 3, pages 145-168

### Part 3, pages 145-168 Summary

The next morning, the narrator is euphoric from his meeting with Ylayali. He buys milk and is able to eat roast beef. As he is thinking of buying a waistcoat, he runs into a friend who saw him with Ylayali the previous night. He lies, saying that he's engaged to Ylayali, and his friend buys him a beer. The friend owes him money, but the narrator knows he'll never pay it back.

The beer goes to the narrator's head, and he begins to have paranoid thoughts. What if he gets in trouble for taking the money? Besides, taking the money was immoral. The narrator goes to an old cake-seller's stall and gives her the money he has left. Then he runs off without a word, feeling proud and righteous. He begins feeling manic. He hails a cab and drives to a random address, where he goes inside and asks for a fictional man, Joachim Kierulf—just a name he's made up. Then, he tells the cabbie the man isn't there and gives another random address. The cabby even thinks he knows Kierulf, a red-headed man with a knobby stick. At the next address, the narrator walks in the front and out the back, into Vognmands Street, bilking the cabbie. He sees a sign on the other side of the building: "Food and Lodging for Travelers."

The narrator falls into a depression, thinking over the horrible state of his starved body. He walks past his old attic room, thinking how much better off he was then. He goes to the grocery store and confesses what happened to the clerk, berating the man for his carelessness. Then, he goes back to his room and collapses in depression again. He wakes up the next morning with a fever, but gets out of bed in the afternoon, starving. As he is walking the streets, a bread cart runs over his foot. He doesn't ask the driver for bread. Instead, he goes to a butcher stall and asks for a bone for a dog. The narrator gnaws at the raw bone, even though he vomits up what he eats.

The narrator goes to the pier and asks about the ship he thought of signing on to, The Nun. He finds that it's sailed. He asks random questions of the man he's stopped, not letting him answer, borrows some tobacco, and as he's leaving, turns to say, "Welt binder." The man is the same old cripple he tried to give money to when he sold his waistcoat, the man who said he was a welt binder, a shoe maker. The narrator runs into the Chief and admits that he has no money and hasn't eaten, and the Chief gives him ten kroner, saying that he can always write articles to pay it back. The narrator is so shocked he forgets to thank the Chief. Later, he finds himself in front of the address the cabbie brought him to earlier, 11 Tomte Street, which advertises lodgings. He rents a room.



## Part 3, pages 145-168 Analysis

The narrator runs into another friend who owes him money. Instead of pressing him for money, the narrator chases the wild fantasy of Ylayali. He imagines that they're engaged. His euphoria, however, soon turns into depression. A barrage of emotions overtakes him. He's come by his money dishonestly. His native shame and pride make him feel guilty and afraid. He is irrationally fearful that he will somehow be caught, but he also chastises himself for what his hunger has made him. He wants to be an ideal of himself—not only a successful writer, but also a moral person. The ideal, however, is only a fantasy, just as his ideal of Ylayali is a fantasy. The narrator reacts with typical unthinking arbitrary action, giving away his money to the cake seller who earlier irrationally annoyed him with the smell of cakes he could not have.

Immediately after irrationally chasing after his own moral image of himself, the narrator (again irrationally) commits an irrational crime, tricking a cabbie into driving him to two addresses. The narrator retreats into another fantasy, pretending to be chasing after someone who doesn't exist. Kierulf is a creation of the narrator's mind, another fantasy that can never be attained.

The narrator has no real reason to return to the store and berate the clerk. He is really berating himself, projecting his own wrong-doing in taking the money onto the clerk, who only made an honest mistake. The narrator is really upset with himself and his own unethical actions. However, when he doesn't have money and is starving, he loses his ability for higher functioning. He becomes an animal, lacking in morality. This is symbolized by the narrator gnawing on the bone from the butcher, which can't even give him sustenance.

The old cripple that the narrator gives money to at the beginning of the novel is what the narrator is afraid he'll become, a distorted old man with nothing but what he carries. The narrator has become both sick and distorted when he runs into the welt binder again. He is only saved by the intervention of the Chief, and the first place he goes to is part of his fantasy. He heads for the lodging house whose address he came up with off the top of his head, as part of a complex lie for the cabbie. He takes the money and strives to use it to live in his own fantasy.



## Part 3, pages 168-184

### Part 3, pages 168-184 Summary

On Tuesday, the narrator meets Ylayali outside her apartment. She tells him that her mother is out and that it's the servant girl's night off. The narrator takes her hint and suggests that they go upstairs. The narrator is nervous, and the girl acts coy but flirtatious. She notices his sore foot, but he says it is nothing. The two finally exchange names. She tells him that he looked in an awful state the last time they met, and he confesses that he's poor. She says that she's poor, too.

Ylayali accuses the narrator of being too timid and goads him into being more aggressive, while she evades his grasp. Finally, he kisses her, and he begins unbuttoning her shirt. When he's clumsy, she helps him unbutton them. She notices that the narrator's hair is falling out. She thinks that it's because he drinks too much and demands that he tell her about his life.

The narrator tells Ylayali the truth about his impoverished life, and she is immediately distressed and pulls away from him. He thinks that she is teasing him again and continues to pursue her, but she is upset and thinks perhaps he is insane. She tells him that he can kiss her breast if he leaves her alone, and suddenly, the narrator realizes that she is serious, even afraid of him. She says that the servant will be home soon, and he goes to leave, making some small talk. He realizes that she's trying to get rid of him so that she can go get her mother without him offering to walk her, and he begins to scold and berate her. As he's leaving, she finally throws her arms around him and whispers what he thinks is, "I love you anyway!"

### Part 3, pages 168-184 Analysis

Ylayali is also part of the narrator's fantasy world, and he goes after her, too. Ylayali, however, has built up her own fantasy about the narrator. He seems to her a high-spirited, drunken rogue. When Ylayali finds out the truth of the narrator's life and condition, she is immediately put off. He belies her fantasy with reality. Ylayali is the only person to whom the narrator tells the unvarnished truth. He has built up her fantasy to the point where he trusts her completely, almost as if he cannot lie to her. To everyone else, lies trip off his tongue. However, he tells her the truth and drives her away. Lies, fantasies, and ideals cannot live in the same world with the horrible, unvarnished truth.



## Part 4, pages 185-199

### Part 4, pages 185-199 Summary

Winter comes, and the narrator is still living in the lodging house, even though he is broke and three weeks behind in the rent. He is writing again, but his work has been no good. He is working on an allegory about a fire in a bookstore, and he gets a little food from his landlady each day. His landlady comes upstairs with a grocery bill and asks him to look at it for her, to find an error. He reviews it, and while he's looking, his brain seems to stop working. As the landlady leaves, she tells him that he needs to start paying her for his room. He promises to pay when he's finished his article. He just needs some inspiration.

The narrator looks out the window, trying to decide how broken his mind is and watching an evicted family move out and children playing. He sees the landlady's son and another boy begin to fight. The landlady breaks it up, scolding her son. The narrator feels as if he can take in every detail, and he tries to tell himself that he's not insane. The narrator gets back to work, and just as he begins writing the critical part of his story, the landlady bursts in and tells him she's rented out his room and that he'll have to sleep downstairs with the family. A longshoreman comes up the stairs and immediately takes possession of the room, while the narrator is forced to go down into the family room, where the husband, wife, four children, and the wife's father live.

The narrator goes into the family room, where the landlady's idle husband is playing cards with a sailor. The room is crowded, and the family ignores him for the most part. The landlady says he can sleep wherever he wants, in the room or out in the hall. The narrator pretends it's no big deal. He's afraid to leave and become homeless again.

### Part 4, pages 185-199 Analysis

After the loss of Ylayali, the narrator's fantasy existence at the lodging house also begins to degrade. He tries to write, but the real world imposes itself on the ideal fantasy world of his writing, interrupting and destroying it. The reality of grocery bills and unpaid rent interposes itself between the narrator and his intellectual allegory about the minds of mankind. In his writing, the narrator is striving for something lofty, but his life is anything but lofty.

The scene outside the narrator's window is a scene of everyday hardship, the reality he's trying to escape. A family is being evicted with their meager possessions. Young boys are fighting in the street. The shrewish landlady is scolding and berating. When the narrator is kicked out of his room, he is thrown even further into the mundane and dirty world of everyday society. The world is one that's full of mistreatment, meanness, and hardship.



## Part 4, pages 199-213

### Part 4, pages 199-213 Summary

A few days later, the narrator is still sleeping in the family room, since the hall is unheated. The longshoreman has arranged to stay for a month. The narrator goes out to the hall to try and write and decides to write a one-act play set in the Middle Ages, centered around a prostitute who flaunts God and sins in the Church. In the circumstances, he is having difficulty with his writing and goes out for a walk. He runs into Queeny and tells him he left the bookkeeping position because he wrote down a wrong number. Queeny assumes that he was embezzling money, and the narrator is offended. As they're talking, a woman walks by wearing a red dress. She's with a man. Suddenly, the narrator recognizes her: Ylayali.

The man is nicknamed The Duke, and he's reputed to be a womanizer. The narrator is overcome with jealousy and bad thoughts condemning Ylayali. He plans on making a success of his play and showing everyone how they've underestimated him. He tells Queeny that he writes for a living and that his master play will soon come out in the theaters. That night, he asks for a lamp to write by, and the landlady refuses, even though the narrator knows the kitchen lamp is not being used.

The narrator tries to work anyway, but he's too distracted. The landlady's daughters tease and torture the cat, and the landlord plays cards with some men. The narrator broods over how the kitchen girl makes fun of him, even stealing and reading aloud rejected pages from his play for everyone to laugh at. The two daughters begin to torture their grandfather, and when the narrator tries to interfere, their father stops him. The old man, he says, is paralyzed, and the father doesn't mind how the daughters treat their grandfather. Finally, the grandfather spits at the girl, and the landlord yells at him. When the narrator objects, the landlord yells at him, too. Finally, the landlady yells at them all, implying that she wants the narrator out of the house.

The narrator remains quiet, hoping that the landlady won't kick him out outright. She finally does, but the landlord intervenes, saying that she can't kick him out in the middle of the night. She lets him stay and even offers him two pieces of bread and butter, but the narrator doesn't take them. He sleeps in the hall, promising to leave the next day.

### Part 4, pages 199-213 Analysis

The narrator's writing unconsciously reflects his surroundings. As the writer absorbs the details of what's around him, it seeps into his work. Instead of a heady allegory about the destruction of the minds of men, he is pulled into the story of a blasphemous prostitute rebelling against the strictures of religion. In his surroundings, there is nothing spiritual, only things that are coarse. There is no Kuboaa here, only yarn—or rather,



worse than the mundane "yarn," the narrator finds the opposite of the spiritual heights he sees in the word "Kubooa." He finds depravity and horror.

The narrator's Ylayali is lost to him, as he sees her walking down the street with a wealthy womanizer. His ideal is a mere impoverished woman, looking to get by with the only asset she has, her body. He fantasizes to Queeny about his grand play about to be produced, but in reality, he has no lamp or candle to write by. He is even the brunt of the jokes of the servant girl who works in the kitchen. Just as the narrator has ranted, raved, and berated strangers because of his own impoverished condition, the servant girl and landlady take out their difficulties on the narrator. Even the young children torturing the cat and the helpless old paralyzed grandfather are reflections of the narrator's own anger, which he has turned outward from himself onto others.



## Part 4, pages 213-232

### Part 4, pages 213-232 Summary

The next morning, the narrator wakes early and sneaks out of the house. He walks through the city streets. He hasn't eaten in a day, and all he's had for weeks is bread and butter. He falls asleep on a bench, and when he wakes, the city is awake. It's a beautiful day. He walks to the pier and feels cheerful, watching the men working on the boats. He tries to write, but he can't get the tone right. He finally decides that he must return to the rooming house.

The narrator sneaks in the hall door and finds the landlord crouching at the door to the family room, peeking in through the keyhole and laughing. He calls the narrator over to share in the joke. The landlady is inside, having sex with the longshoreman underneath a lithograph of Christ, and her paralyzed father is forced to watch. The landlord thinks it's hilarious. The narrator is horrified, but he doesn't know why he should care. He calms himself by thinking that perhaps the grandfather is dead, instead of suffering tortures. He looks outside only to see an old man spit out of a second-story window onto a child. He begins to lose faith in his play.

The narrator sneaks upstairs to his old room, since the sailor isn't occupying it. He begins to write until the landlady and the longshoreman come upstairs and interrupt him. The landlady yells at him and orders him out of the house, following him down the stairs. A messenger comes to the door, bringing the narrator an envelope. Inside is a ten-kroner note with no explanation. The messenger says that a woman gave it to him. The narrator crumples up the money and throws it at the landlady.

After walking away, the narrator begins to collapse. He begins to regret being ungrateful to the landlady, and he realizes that Ylayali must have sent him the money. He feels humiliated. He has no way to return Ylayali's money. He tries to hurriedly finish his play, pretending to himself that what he's writing is good. Finally, in frustration, he tears up the manuscript. He tells himself that it would only serve to hurt Ylayali if he sent the money back, anyway.

As the narrator walks the streets, he sees the old cake seller he gave his five kroner to. He walks up to her and asks for his cakes, telling her that he really gave her the money as an advance on cakes. Finally, grudgingly, she gives him some cakes. He eats all but one of the cake, saving the last one for the boy he saw being spit on. He cannot find the boy, though, and he leaves the cake at the door of the building.

The narrator goes to the pier and finds the captain of the Copégoro, a ship that's getting ready to sail. The narrator asks for a job on the ship. The captain at first says the narrator is too old and too inexperienced, but the narrator says he's willing to work hard and do anything that's necessary. The captain agrees to take him on, saying that he can





always leave him off the ship when they reach England. The narrator finally says goodbye to Christiania.

## Part 4, pages 213-232 Analysis

The fact that the narrator can't write his medieval play out in the open air of the pier shows how his work reflects his surroundings. When he sneaks back into the landlady's house, he sees just how closely his play parallels the surroundings he's been living in. The prostitute in his play defiles the church by having sex in front of the altar, rebelling against higher morality and all the ideals that the narrator has been striving for throughout the novel. He catches his landlady in the act of doing the same thing. She has illicit sex with the longshoreman underneath the lithograph of Christ, defiling not only the religious symbol but the idea of love and marriage and family. She tortures her own father by forcing him to watch when he is paralyzed and cannot save himself. Her own husband laughs at the sick joke.

The narrator flees to his room, but he cannot achieve that lofty, secluded place anymore. He is driven out. The money he gets, he squanders in a fit of moral rectitude, followed immediately by a fall into his basest instincts, when he negates his earlier good act that supposedly absolved him from stealing by stealing the cakes from the cake seller. Having lost his vision of the ideal, the narrator finally leaves his city, taking a boat for unknown and perhaps better surroundings, where the ideal could possibly be real again.



# Characters

## Unnamed Protagonist

The novel is narrated by an unnamed protagonist. He is a spectacled young man, a writer who cannot find a job. He starts out the novel hungry, and he starves throughout it, kept alive by intermittent, transient bounty that he soon squanders. The narrator swings between highs and lows, alternating between euphoria and depression. Ylayali says that she thinks he is insane, and the modern reader may wonder if he suffers from manic depression and not merely the effects of hunger.

The narrator wants to achieve something great and profound in his writing. He seeks to escape from reality into fantasy by making up wild tales about princesses, castles, and even his own luck in finding a job and a woman. Still, he also wants a higher morality and sense of spirituality. He makes up a word in his delirium and thinks it must mean something highly spiritual. It represents the unattainable ideal that he's constantly searching for. He imposes an ideal on Ylayali, seeing her as his fictitious character, the beautiful and perfect Ylayali instead of merely a woman. He also imposes an ideal on himself, giving himself the name Tangen and station of successful journalist, instead of admitting his true identity as a nameless impoverished, unsuccessful writer.

The narrator tries to hold himself to a moral standard as well as an ideal of success, but the reality of his starvation imposes itself on him. He takes five kroners in change that doesn't belong to him, and then he gives it all away in a fit of moral repulsion. He swears he will not pawn the borrowed blanket that he has (even though the lender owes him money), but in a fit of despair, he tries to pawn it anyway. The only thing that stops him is the complete lack of value in the battered blanket. The battle to uphold ideals and morality is a losing one, in the face of hunger.

## Ylayali

The protagonist makes up the name Ylayali for a woman he runs into on the street and follows to her home. Ylayali immediately takes on life in the protagonist's mind. He casts her as a princess and imbues her with all the elements of womanly perfection and wealth. The narrator does not try to find the real woman again. Instead, he clings to his fantasy of perfection and idealism, Ylayali.

The woman herself believes that the narrator is a drunk, teasing and flirting with her. She also creates a fantasy version of the narrator, imagining him to be an exciting rogue. She pursues him by standing outside the place where he lives, heavily veiled so that he cannot see her face. The narrator only approaches her when he suddenly has some money, and Ylayali drives their relationship forward. Even after the two exchange names, the reader never knows what Ylayali and the narrator's real names are. The reality remains subordinate to the fantasy.



Ylayali is coy and sexual. She brings the narrator up to her apartment when her mother and servant girl are away, and she teases him, enjoying the chase. However, the narrator, who constantly lies to everyone about his situation, tells Ylayali the truth when she asks about his life. When faced with reality, Ylayali rejects the narrator. She still harbors feelings for him. Although she finds someone with money to keep her company, Ylayali sends the narrator ten kroner by messenger.

## **Old Cripple Man with a Bundle**

The protagonist is annoyed by an old man making slow progress with a bundle in front of him, and he confronts the man. The old man asks for money, which prompts the narrator to run off and pawn his waistcoat. The old man, realizing that the protagonist is truly poor, doesn't want to take the money, which angers the protagonist.

## **Hans Pauli Pettersen**

Hans Pauli is a friend who owes the narrator money and never pays it back. The narrator has borrowed a blanket from Hans, which he also never returns. At one point, the narrator gives into his worse nature and tries to pawn Hans's blanket, but the pawn shop won't take the worthless blanket.

## **Scissors**

Scissors works at the newspaper. His nickname is Scissors because his job is to cut out news clippings from the other newspapers.

## **Queeny**

Queeny is an acquaintance of the narrator. The narrator lies to Queeny, telling him that he's gotten a job at a bookkeeper at a grocer's. Later, the narrator says that he's been fired for making a mistake in a figure, and Queeny assumes the narrator was stealing money.

## **The Chief**

The narrator calls the newspaper editor he tries to sell his articles to "the Chief."

## **C. Zacharias Bartel**

When the narrator has nowhere to stay, he tries to visit C. Zacharias Bartel, a painter he once rescued from a brawl. However, the painter has a woman over and turns the narrator away at the door.



## **Mr. Christie**

The narrator applies to a bookkeeping job with Mr. Christie, a grocer, but the narrator writes the wrong date on the letter, a year he had previously written over and over on his paper as he attempted to write an article. Mr. Christie gives the job to someone else, saying that he can't have a bookkeeper who makes mistakes with numbers.

## **Pastor Levison**

The narrator tries to go to the pastor for help when he's broke and hungry, but he finds that the pastor is out.

## **Unnamed Friend**

At the end of Part 2, the narrator runs into an unnamed friend who is going to pawn a watch. The friend gives the starving narrator five kroner of the money he gets from the watch.

## **Jens Olai**

Jens is the stable boy who lives in the stable adjacent to the vacant tinsmith's shop where the narrator stays when he has no money for rent.

## **Marie**

Marie is a prostitute who thinks the narrator is trying to pick her up. When he confesses that he has no money, she offers to sleep with him anyway, but he refuses. The narrator pretends he is a pastor and chastises her for being a prostitute.

## **The Grocery Store Clerk**

The grocery store clerk makes a mistake and accidentally gives the narrator change for five kroner, when the narrator has not given him any money and has come to ask for a candle on credit.

## **The Landlady at the Lodging House**

The shrewish landlady at the lodging house gets upset with the narrator for not paying his rent. She rents out his room to a sailor and makes him sleep downstairs in the living room with her obnoxious family, until finally she kicks him out.



## **The Longshoreman**

The narrator's landlady kicks him out of his room at her lodging house to give the room to a longshoreman who she then has an affair with.

## **The Landlord at the Lodging House**

The landlord at the lodging house is an idle man who plays cards all day while his wife works. He doesn't care if his children tease and torture their grandfather, who is paralyzed and cannot defend himself. He also doesn't seem to care that his pregnant wife is sleeping with a lodger, and he finds it humorous that his wife carries on her affair in the full view of her paralyzed father, forcing him to watch.

## **The Landlady's Father**

The landlady's father is a helpless, paralyzed old man, tortured by his family.

## **The Cake Seller**

The cake seller is an impoverished woman who sells cakes near the pier. The narrator is at first annoyed by the smell of her cakes, because he is hungry and can't have any. Then, when he is wracked with guilt about his ill-gotten money, he gives the cake seller the money and feels righteous about it. Later, when he is starving, the narrator comes to the cake seller and demands cakes in exchange for his former gift, negating his good deed.

## **The Captain of the Copégoro**

The captain of the Copégoro gives the narrator a job and a way out of the city of Christiania.



# Objects/Places

## The Attic Room

At the beginning of the novel, the narrator lives in an attic room where he is behind on the rent.

## Waistcoat

The narrator pawns his waistcoat, one of his last possessions, at the beginning of the novel.

## Pencil

The narrator accidentally leaves his pencil in his waistcoat when he pawns it. Without the cheap pencil, he cannot write, and if he cannot write, he cannot make any money. The narrator must go back to the pawnshop to recover the pencil, and he is ashamed that he needs to go back for such an inexpensive item. He lies to the pawnbroker, saying that the pencil has sentimental value.

## 2 St. Olaf's Place

The narrator follows the woman he thinks of as Ylayali to 2 St. Olaf's Place, where she lives. Later, he walks her to her apartment, and on their second "date," she invites him in.

## Barber Coupons

The narrator finds that he has six barber coupons and thinks that he can keep himself shaved for a while. When he becomes desperate, the narrator tries to trade his coupons to an acquaintance for a half krone, but the acquaintance has no money. The narrator gives away the coupons for nothing.

## Green Blanket

One of the protagonist's few possessions is a green blanket, borrowed from Hans Pauli. He wraps all his possessions in the green blanket when he leaves his attic room. The protagonist eventually tries to sell the blanket to a pawnbroker, but he discovers that it's worthless.



## **The Abandoned Tinsmith's Workshop**

The narrator stays in an abandoned tinsmith's workshop when he has no money for rent. He can stay there for free, since in the winter, the snow comes into the shop.

## **The Lodging House at 11 Tomte Street**

The narrator first finds the lodging house by accident, by telling a cabbie to drive to a random address. The narrator walks in one side of the house and out the back, seeing a sign that says "Food and Lodging for Travelers." When the narrator has some money, he gets a room in the house, and then when he runs out of money, he hangs around even after he is kicked out of his room.

## **Buttons**

At one of the narrator's lowest points, he tries to pawn his coat buttons, but the pawnbroker will not take them.

## **Bone**

When the narrator is starving, he asks a butcher for a bone for his dog, and then he gnaws on the raw bone. The raw meat makes him vomit.

## **The Lithograph of Christ**

In the family's room at the lodging house, a lithograph of Christ with grass-green hair hangs on the wall. The landlady has sex with her longshoreman lodger underneath the lithograph, echoing the prostitute in the narrator's play who has sex in front of the altar of a church.



# Themes

## Pride and Shame

The narrator's pride prevents him from asking for help. He can't ask the editor for an advance. He can't tell his friends what dire straits he's truly in. He can't tell the truth of his situation to the police when he stays overnight in the jail as homeless. He constantly lies and makes up stories to try to appear in a better situation than he's in, even to the pawnbroker to whom he sells his last article of any value.

The narrator's pride is intertwined with a feeling of shame. He is ashamed of his own situation and feels that he should be above it. Part of this feeling of shame comes from the narrator's belief in his own ability. He has writing ability. The editor who buys his first article recognizes the narrator's talent. Even the grocer who reads his letter applying for the bookkeeping position recognizes that the narrator can write. However, a mind that grasps details, understands higher thoughts, and can write doesn't save the narrator from his base, degraded situation. This leads to the narrator's shame; he feels that he should be above his plight.

Ultimately, the narrator cares more for pride, or perhaps fears more his shame, than he cares for the money that will help him survive. He does not keep after his friends, asking them to return the money he's lent them in the past. He'd rather give money to beggars than beg for money himself. His pride is, in many ways, his downfall.

## Morality and Survival

The narrator fights to maintain his morality and ethical code. He wants to be a good person. More than once, he says "that's the kind of person I am." He tells the grocery store clerk that he's given away his ill-gotten money because he is a moral, upstanding person. However, his morality is at the mercy of his hunger. The narrator is fighting to be moral, but he is also fighting for survival. When he is on the verge of death, he cannot afford morality.

The narrator's "moral" choices, such as not pawning the borrowed blanket until it becomes so worn-down as to be useless and not keeping the five kroner the store clerk accidentally gave him, ultimately contribute to the narrator's inability to function in society. He can't maintain himself, and he can't write. He perhaps does more harm by endangering his own health than he does good by his "moral" actions. Often, these actions don't seem designed to do good as much as they seem designed to avoid shame and admitting the narrator's dire situation.

Because of hunger and desperation, the narrator undoes many of his moral actions. He steals cakes from the woman he helps with his money, and he wears out the borrowed blanket until it is worthless. He hasn't helped his friend by destroying the blanket through wear. He hasn't helped himself, because he waited too long to pawn the





blanket. The narrator's morality seems worthless in the face of true poverty and hopelessness.

## The Real versus the Ideal

The narrator strives for the ideal, but reality continues to interfere. He has an ideal for himself, to become a successful writer of great things. He strives to write works of meaning: a treatise on philosophical consciousness, an allegory about the destruction of the minds of man, a medieval play about morality. His work exists in the realm of the ideal and spiritual, but that realm remains elusive, like the meaning of the word the narrator invents in his delirium.

The narrator's desire for morality is a way to idealize himself, just as much as his alternate persona as Andreas Tangen, successful journalist. He also idealizes the woman he seeks, Ylayali, giving her a lyrical name and imbuing her, in his mind, with all the best qualities of womanhood. She is perfect to him, because she is an ideal, not a reality. The narrator's morality, his success, and his love are all fantasies. They are will-o-wisps that he cannot grasp onto, except perhaps for a second.

Whenever the narrator confronts his own reality, he is plunged into depression. He does not want to see the depravity of the world around him, the way that he mistreats others, and the way that others mistreat each other. The narrator's hunger and need for food and shelter are real. They stop him from living in the world of the ideal and denying his selfish, animal nature. When the narrator maintains his ideal, he risks his life and health. However, when he faces reality, he risks losing his ideal, and his mind and soul.



# Style

## Point of View

Hunger is written from a first person perspective, from the point of view of its unnamed narrator. The story is more concerned with what goes on in the narrator's mind than with the world around him. In a way, the first person perspective, so closely tied to the narrator's thoughts and psychology that it often ignores people and events outside the narrator's narrow vision, represents the narrator's fascination with the ideal. He lives in his own fantasy world; he lives inside his head.

The novel doesn't give the main character a name, except a fictional fantasy name, and it doesn't give the main love interest a name, either (except another fictional fantasy name). Some of the characters remain unnamed and anonymous, including the friend who rescues the narrator after he has truly pawned his last item of any worth, having failed to pawn his borrowed blanket, glasses, and coat buttons. The characters are presented from the point of view of the narrator, and information is given when it is important to the narrator at a particular point in time. The name of his friend escapes notice in the desperation and shame of the narrator. The narrator's own name seems unimportant, and his love's real name pales in importance to her lyrical fantasy name.

The reader rides along with the narrator as he experiences worse and worse starvation and poverty. The point of view from inside the narrator's head allows the reader to experience the narrator's alternating euphoria and depression. The experience of hunger is an internal one, and the novel is an internal, psychological novel, concerned with the life of the mind and its experience of the body instead of the world outside the mind.

## Setting

The novel is set in the late-1800s in Christiania, Norway, the city that has since been renamed Oslo. It takes place over the course of a year, and the narrator's prospects go down as the seasons change, from a mild summer when it's comfortable to be outside to a torturous winter with freezing weather, when the protagonist is confined to an abandoned shop that's not protected from the snow. The main character spends hours and days walking the streets of Christiania, when he has nowhere to be and nothing to do with himself.

However, the main setting of the novel is inside the main character's mind. He creates whimsical fictional worlds for himself, including his fantasy princess love, Ylayali. He imagines her as the wealthy, beautiful, and perfect princess of his dreams, and he kisses her in a ruby room. Less fantastically, he imagines that he still has prospects and can become a successful writer. He imagines that his fortunes have turned each time he



comes into a few kroner. He imagines that in the future he will be able to repay his debts. He imagines that he is an honorable, moral man.

The novel's realistic setting of poverty and distress in the harsh winter of Christiania in the 1800s conflicts with its idealistic fantasy setting within the main character's mind. This conflict is developed within the protagonist's mind, too. He alternates between raving and ranting at the world and being lifted up in an exultant euphoria. The main character's dual aspects are the animal and the spiritual, the real and the ideal, the outside world and the world of the mind.

## Language and Meaning

The main character is a writer, and so his business is language. At one point, after he strikes out in a rant at God, the writer realizes that all of his bluster is rhetoric. He is a man of words, but what is behind his words? He scolds the clerk at the grocery for giving him money by mistake, but the narrator himself has knowingly spent and given away the money that rightfully belongs to the grocery store. The narrator came to the store initially because he thought he could get a candle on credit, on the basis of his "good name." He believes himself to be honorable, but he cannot be honorable.

Words are the foundations of lies and deception throughout the story. Characters promise to pay each other back. The narrator both promises money to those he's in debt to and is in turn promised money by those he's lent to. He deceives the cab driver by making up a person he's looking for, and he lies needlessly to an old man who sits down next to him on a park bench. He creates an illusion that he has money and covers his shame by lying to clerks, policemen, friends, and nearly everyone he meets.

Words, however, are also an inroad to an ideal world for the narrator. He strives to find something beautiful and above the sordid everyday world in his writing. He imagines in his delirium a new word, and he wants it to mean something high and spiritual. This reflects his desire to find the spiritual and the ideal in words. The narrator never finds this illusive, ideal world.

## Structure

Hunger is written in four parts. Each part is one episode of suffering in the main character's life, when he's run out of money and has nothing. During the first part, the narrator first meets Ylayali, but he also loses his housing and his last possessions of any worth. He is saved at the end of the section by the story he's written in a fit of inspiration, leaving him with hope.

The hope is destroyed at the beginning of the second part. The narrator's writing goes nowhere after his success with the story at the end of the first part, and he is living for free in a run-down shop. He has nothing, and he is sick. The narrator only survives by virtue of handouts, unable to make any more money from his work.



During the third part of the novel, the narrator's relationship with Ylayali is fulfilled. He first gains her and then loses her by telling her the truth about himself. He also faces his conscience, as he gains money illicitly and then gives it away, leaving himself impoverished and dependent on loans from others. In the fourth part of the novel, the narrator tries to regain his sense of self by living in a lodging house, but without money, his situation quickly degrades until he is faced with the true horrors of impoverished society and man's inhumanity toward man. The narrator's only escape is by taking a job on a ship and sailing away from Christiania.



## Quotes

"If only one had something to eat, just a little, on such a clear day!" —Part 1, page 7

"God had poked His finger down into m nerves and gently, almost without thinking, bought a little confusion among those threads. And God had pulled His finger back, and behold—there were filaments and fine root-like threads on His finger from the threads of my nerves." —Part 1, page 22

"It was like a vein opening, one word followed the other, arranged themselves in the right order, created situations; scene piled upon scene, actions and conversations welled up in my brain, and a strange sense of pleasure took hold of me. I wrote as if possessed, and filled one page after the other without a moment's pause." —Part 1, page 36

"Now a brutal rage blazed up in me. I took my parcel from the entry, ground my teeth, ran into peaceful pedestrians on the sidewalk and did not ask pardon." —Part 1, page 53

"If a man only had a bite to eat! Bread—one of those marvelous loaves of rye bread that a man could chew on as he walked. I walked along, deciding on exactly the kind of rye bread that would be best now. I was unbelievably hungry, longed to be dead and gone, became sentimental and cried." —Part 2, page 71

"No, the word was actually intended to mean something spiritual, a feeling, a state of mind—if I could only understand it? And I thought and thought to find something spiritual. It occurred to me that someone was talking, butting into my chat, and I answered angrily: 'I beg your pardon? For an idiot, you are all alone in the field! Yarn? Go to hell!' Why should I be obligated to let it mean yarn when I had a special aversion to its meaning yarn?" —Part 2, page 79

"How well I knew that large basement shop, my refuge in the dark evenings, my vampire friend! One by one, all my possessions had vanished down there, the little things I had brought from home, my last book. On the auction days I enjoyed going there to watch, and I rejoiced every time my books seemed to have found a good home." —Part 2, page 110

"Wasn't this great, what the hell was going on, why was there never any end to my troubles! Taking long strides, my coat collar turned brutally up to my chin, my fists clenched in my pants pockets, I walked along, cursing my unlucky stars. Not a really carefree hour for seven, eight months, not even sufficient food for a week before poverty brought me to my knees again. And into the bargain I had to go and be honorable right in the middle of my misery—what a laugh, honorable all the way through!" —Part 3, page 123



"Nothing to do, I was dying with open eyes, helpless, staring up at the ceiling. Finally I put my forefinger in my mouth and started sucking on it. Something started to flicker in my brain, an idea that had gotten free in there, a lunatic notion. Suppose I took a bite? Without a moment's hesitation I shut my eyes and clamped down hard with my teeth."  
—Part 3, page 130

"I took the opportunity and I told her everything, telling nothing but the truth. I didn't make anything worse than it was, I wasn't trying to make her pity me—I even told her about my stealing five kroner one night." —Part 3, page 177

"As soon as I was alone, I leaped up and started tearing my hair in despair. No, nothing would do any good for me, there was no salvation! My brain was bankrupt! Had I become completely a moron now since I couldn't even figure out the price of a piece of caraway cheese? But, on the other hand, could I ask myself questions like this if I were entirely witless?" —Part 4, page 192

"I still remained silent. Yes, 'The Duke' would obviously make the grade with her! So be it! What did that have to do with me? I said goodbye to her and all her charms: goodbye! I attempted to console myself by imagining the worst possible things about her, I took a positive pleasure in dragging her through the mud." —Part 4, page 204

"That is what I would call the proper way to behave! Say nothing, not even write on the envelope, just quietly crumple it up into a big ball and throw it right between your enemy's eyes! There is an example of someone acting with dignity! That's exactly what they deserve, these animals!" —Part 4, page 221



## Topics for Discussion

Why doesn't the author reveal the real names of Ylayali and the narrator?

What prevents the narrator from selling any of his articles or stories after the first one?

Why doesn't the narrator pursue Ylayali after he first meets her? Why doesn't he pursue her after their "date," though he thinks that she said she still loves him?

What could the narrator have done during the story to get himself back on his feet?

Why doesn't the narrator pursue his friends who owe him money when he's desperately in need of a few kroner?

Why does the narrator get angry with strangers? What sets off his temper?

In what ways is the narrator moral? In what ways is he immoral?

Does the narrator truly try to find work, or is he just lying to himself that he's doing all he can?

Is the narrator's irrational behavior due only to his hunger and poverty? What other elements might contribute to it?