

West of the Moon Study Guide

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Plot Summary

Astri is the older daughter of a family. Her father is the younger twin and works the land owned by his older twin. Astri's mother dies soon after giving birth to Astri's younger sister, Greta. Her father soon leaves for America and is never heard from again. Astri and Greta go to live with her aunt, uncle, and cousins. Astri's aunt is cruel, putting everything she can toward the futures of her daughters at the expense of everything else. One day, a cruel man arrives and pays Astri's aunt two coins and a large piece of meat in exchange for Astri.

The mean man's name is Svaalberd. He is a goatherd and Astri's life in his house is difficult. She tries to find a way to run away. When she makes Svaalberd very angry, he locks her in the storehouse. There, she finds a girl who doesn't speak and spends all her time spinning wonderful yarn. She's a strange girl and Astri never learns the girl's name and calls her Spinning Girl. She later discovers that Spinning Girl is actually Astri's twin sister, abandoned as a toddler because of a disease.

Astri does manage to escape and takes the Spinning Girl with her along with the treasure hoarded by Svaalberd. She has to chop off two of Svaalberd's fingers in order to escape. She knows that Svaalberd will now demand another girl to be his servant and Astri rushes to find Greta before he can take her. She and Spinning Girl arrive in time to run away with Greta just before Astri's aunt hands her over to Svaalberd.

Astri, Spinning Girl, and Greta continue their journey. Astri plans to catch a boat to America though there are obstacles in the way. They need money to buy supplies. Astri and Greta backtrack in the hope of finding Svaalberd's treasure. They find the sack and find that Svaalberd is nearby, dying. After they cover his body and hold a funeral service, Astri and Greta take the bag containing Svaalberd's treasure.

They arrive in a village and discover that the "treasure" is almost worthless. Astri and Greta spend almost all the money on a room for the night and a meal. Astri decides she won't return for Spinning Girl. Instead, Astri and Greta make their way to the ocean where they see the boat headed for America. They lie and steal to get aboard. Once on the ship, Astri is soon so seasick that she can do nothing for days. When she's recovered, a disease runs through the crew. Greta is soon sick and Astri slips into a dream.

In the dream, Astri recalls details about her past. She recalls leaving her sister with a troll. Astri dreams she takes a flask from the troll's castle and begins to climb a mountain. She meets a man who identifies himself as her Lord, another who identifies himself as the Devil, and a third who identifies himself as Death. Astri pleads for Greta's life. Death says that any time he sits at the head of a person, their death is sealed. If he's seated at their feet, the outcome is not certain.

When Astri wakes, Death is dozing at Greta's head. She has Greta turned so that her feet are pointed toward Death. Death is upset that he's been tricked and plans to take



Astri instead. Astri asks permission to recite the Lord's Prayer first, and Death agrees. She falls asleep before completing the prayer and knows that she'll have to be careful not to ever complete the prayer.

As the ship nears America, Astri agrees to become a maid in the home of a young minister and his wife. Greta is taken in by a blacksmith who lost his wife and children during the trip. Astri knows she should be happy for herself and her sister, but she isn't able to find that happiness.

Throughout the story, Astri compares her situation to various fairy tales. She imagines that she is similar to the heroines in the fairy tales. She comes to realize that there are explanations for the various events.



White Bear King Valemon; Work; and The Drop of Tallow

Summary

The first Section is "The Goat Farm." The first chapter is "White Bear King Valemon." The chapter opens with Astri in the home of her Aunt and Uncle with their three daughters, Helga, Katinka, and Flicka. There is an air of expectation and Astri says it feels as if she is already far away.

Astri knows a fairy tale about a white bear that promises to meet every desire of a family in exchange for their youngest daughter. Astri says this is the same as her story. Aunt puts aside her knitting to greet a man who arrives at the house. His name is Mr. Svaalberd. He is a goatherd with a large hump on his back. Aunt points out Astri and promises that she will be a good servant and that she won't give Svaalberd any problems.

Astri has a moment to gather her things and she says good-bye to her younger sister, Greta. She urges Greta not to cry, saying she can't show Svaalberd any weakness. Greta gives Astri their mother's silver brooch, the only possession of value they have. Greta says Aunt will take it for herself if she discovers Greta has it. When Astri returns to the main room, she sees that Svaalberd has left two coins and a large package of meat that are clearly meant as payment for Astri. Uncle says he is sorry for the situation but that "it can't be helped." No one else even says good-bye as Astri leaves with Svaalberd.

Astri says that in the story, the girl climbs onto the back of the huge white bear. The bear asks if the girl is afraid and she assures him she isn't. Astri says that is nothing like her real life. Svaalberd asks if Astri is afraid of the trolls. She says she isn't afraid, but knows it's a lie. It's snowing and Astri soon loses all sense of direction, despite her determination to remember the way back to Greta.

In the story, the little girl is granted anything she wants. Astri's life is filled with work. Svaalberd's house is a dirty shack. Astri takes the knife from the table and slips it under her little bundle of clothes, which she uses for a pillow. She believes she might need the knife as protection from Svaalberd.

"Work" begins with Astri talking about her typical days at Svaalberd's house. He gripes because she sleeps too long. She cleans and takes care of the goats, including milking, feeding, and "avoiding ornery goats." Weeks pass and the farm shows improvements because of Astri's efforts. She wishes her father would return from America but knows it's unlikely.



A goat named Snowflake is constantly escaping from the goat barn and Svaalberd can't figure out how. Astri knows but doesn't tell him. Astri asks where her Aunt's house is but Svaalberd says only that she should know. Astri remembers her father telling stories of a magical castle named Soria Moria, that "lies east of the sun and west of the moon."

One night, Svaalberd warns Astri to be careful outside because of the "huldrefolk," or invisibles. These magical creatures can see humans and a light veil is all that separates them from humans. Astri isn't certain whether Svaalberd is telling the truth or if his story is aimed at keeping her from running away.

In "The Drop of Tallow," Astri admits that the food provided by Svaalberd is better than what she was fed by her Aunt. She says they sometimes had to eat bread made of bark but that her life there was still better than her life with Svaalberd. He has a storehouse and Astri imagines the food kept there but says it's locked and she's never been inside.

Svaalberd sometimes holds a Bible and recites verses, pretending he can read. He often recites chants that are supposed to perform specific feats, such as keeping wasps away or getting a fire burning. She is learning these chants from Svaalberd and knows that adding the Lord's Prayer at the end is always acceptable.

One night, Astri thinks about the story of the white bear. The girl in the story lights a candle and discovers that the bear is really a handsome prince. Astri lights a candle and creeps over to look at Svaalberd, hoping that he is also a prince. She discovers he is still an ugly old goatherd. A drop of tallow falls from the candle onto Svaalberd and wakes him. He asks if Astri is lonely and reaches for her. She hits his hand and goes back to her bed. Svaalberd follows but Astri pulls the knife from its hiding spot and holds it against Svaalberd's neck.

Analysis

Svaalberd is a goatherd. This means that he has a goat farm and that he makes his living by raising goats. He probably sells the products from his goats, such as milk, cheese, butter, and meat. While it's a respectable living, it's also dirty and hard work.

Almost immediately, Astri takes the reader into a fairy tale. This first fairy tale is about a giant white bear that promises a family will have anything they want in exchange for giving their youngest daughter to the bear. They agree. Their wishes and the youngest daughter's are met from that day. Astri compares her life to that of a fairy tale. In this case, she imagines that Aunt and Uncle got a great deal in exchange for Astri. In fact, Svaalberd pays two coins and a large piece of goat meat for Astri. That's not a lot and it's certainly not nearly as much as the family in Astri's fairy tale.

Also in the fairy tale, the youngest daughter has anything she wants. Astri's life with Svaalberd isn't like that at all. She works hard and Svaalberd doesn't have a lot of food or money. At their first meal at Svaalberd's home, Astri is disgusted by the filthy conditions. Svaalberd asks if she's accustomed to fancier food and Astri admits to herself that she never had an abundance of good food at her Aunt's home, but she



didn't have to eat bread that had dirty fingerprints on it and the table was always clean for meals. Astri's hatred of Svaalberd and his home are an important part of the story and prompts her decision to run away.

Astri compares her life and her situations to those of fairy tales throughout the story. In most cases, she feels that her situation is worse than the people in the fairy tales, but that other things are better than in fairy tales. For example, she talks about the fact that the family gets anything they want after giving up their youngest daughter. She imagines that her Aunt and Uncle are getting a lot in exchange for Astri. In fact, it's two coins and a piece of meat that will feed the family only a few meals. This becomes a theme in the story as Astri continues to compare real-life events with the events of fairy tales.

Astri recalls her father's stories of Soria Moria. This might indicate that Astri's love of fairy tales originates with her father. Details about her life with her parents are sketchy and the limited perspective means the reader also doesn't know much about that part of Astri's life. In the story, a young girl who lives at Soria Moria wishes for a golden wreath. Astri says she wouldn't have wasted a wish on something as ridiculous as a golden wreath. She says she would wish for her entire family to be together again. This is an important look into Astri's character though her later actions indicate that she is more devoted to Greta than to her family as a whole.

Discussion Question 1

Compare Astri's life to the little girl's life in the story of the white bear. Keep the comparison list and add to it as the story goes on.

Discussion Question 2

Why does Astri light a candle one night to look at the goatherd by candlelight?

Discussion Question 3

What are some of the differences Astri probably faces between life in her Aunt's home and life with Svaalberd?

Vocabulary

penetrated, gloom, lingers, twitch, cud, dawdle, wisp, hovel, fodder, prickle, prodigious, conjure, commences, thrashing, drones



Straw Into Gold; Winter; The Ash Lad

Summary

Svaalberd steps back, away from Astri and the knife. He says that he will marry her in the spring and that they will then share a bed. Astri says one of them will “go to hell first.” Svaalberd grabs her arm and Astri drops the knife. He says he won't allow her to sleep in the house after making her threats. He drags her to the storehouse, unlocks the door, and shoves her inside.

Once in the storehouse, Astri hears a hum. She goes up the storehouse stairs and finds a lot of food. She also discovers a young girl who is spinning. Astri asks for the girl's name, but the girl doesn't answer. She has an odd appearance and Astri can't tell if the girl is young or old. Astri compliments her on her fine spinning and the girl smiles, but still says nothing. Astri tells her stories about Soria Moria while the girl continues to spin.

In the story of the white bear, the prince says the girl has doomed him by discovering he is actually a prince. He says he was supposed to hide his identity from the girl for a year, but that he will now be forced to marry a troll with a long nose.

In “Winter,” Astri wakes to snow. Svaalberd wakes her, saying there's work to be done. Astri discovers that Svaalberd is leading Snowflake the goat into the house. He says she is about to give birth and that he wants to be certain the kid doesn't freeze. Svaalberd asks Astri if the Spinning Girl said anything to her. She says he should know if the girl talks and Svaalberd says she has never said a word. He says he found her as a very young child, crawling around in the woods. He believes Spinning Girl's parents left her in the woods because they thought she was a “changeling.” He says she is too slow to be of any real use as a servant but that she spins very well.

Svaalberd talks about some superstitious explanations for things, including the Spinning Girl's silence. Astri says the parson says they are not to put faith in the superstitions and should rely on science including doctors. Svaalberd says there are no doctors “in these parts.” Just then, Snowflake's second kid is born. Svaalberd takes one look and tells Astri to put it outside in the snow, so that it will die there. She says it isn't dead yet and points out that Snowflake is taking care of it, but Svaalberd says the young goat will “never grow up right” because of a defective leg. Astri refuses to take it outside and hates Svaalberd for his hard-hearted attitude.

In “The Ash Lad,” more time passes. Astri keeps an eye on the Spinning Girl for awhile but can find no real sign that she's part of the hulderfolk. The Spinning Girl picks all the twigs and dirt out of Astri's hair and braids it into fancy designs. Astri is impatient because it's winter and she knows she can't run away while there's snow on the ground.

One day, Astri is milking when Svaalberd chastises her for not covering the pails of milk. She points out that she isn't finished and that everything else around the farm is filthy,



including Svaalberd. He brutally slaps her and then pours his chamber pot over her. She's covered in filth and blood when she sees a boy, later identified as Bjorn. He asks for the "master" of the house and Astri tries to answer but her words are garbled because of Svaalberd's slap.

Svaalberd tells Bjorn that Astri is simple-minded and that she might be a changeling. Astri tries to talk but even she can't understand her words. Bjorn says he's headed for the docks where he'll meet his family and board a ship for America. Astri watches as he walks west and knows that's the direction she'll have to go if she wants to reach America.

Analysis

After Astri meets the Spinning Girl, she goes on with her story about the white bear and the young girl. Astri says the bear, who is really a prince under a spell, was supposed to hide his identity from the girl for a year, and that her discovery means the prince will have to marry a troll. Astri compares her life to the story, but says Svaalberd is not a prince. She says that she and the Spinning Girl are princesses but Astri thinks to herself that the Spinning Girl looks nothing like a princess. She then admits that she probably doesn't look like a princess either. This comparison continues throughout the book and is a major theme of the story.

After Astri has told stories for awhile, she admits to herself that she's run out of "golden thread" for her stories and that "a thin thread of truth" is all that remains. It's poetic for Astri to compare her telling of stories to spinning a yarn, which is an old-fashioned saying. She seems to be saying that her stories have a fanciful element, or "golden thread," that doesn't really exist in real life.

The identity of the Spinning Girl isn't revealed until much later in the book. She doesn't speak and she has a strange appearance. She is actually Astri's twin sister. She had some sort of illness as a child and her mother, believing the trolls had switched one of their children for her own, abandons her. This is part of the superstitious culture of the day and an indication that Astri's parents aren't any more enlightened or educated than typical peasants of the time and place. Svaalberd says Spinning Girl has never said anything to him. He believes it's because her mother got too near an elder tree. He believes Spinning Girl has powers that could stop the goats from giving milk and that she could kill him if she got some of his whiskers. These are yet more superstitions that are a theme within the book.

The scene with Snowflake's twin kids has more depth than the reader might first realize. Svaalberd is running a farm and, as such, he has to manage his resources well. There is no room for sentimentality with regard to the animals. When he sees that Snowflake's second kid has a deformed leg, he knows the little goat can't possibly grow into a healthy, productive member of the farm. He makes the decision to let it die because it's the best decision for the farm. However, Astri sees the decision only as cruel. She doesn't understand or even try to reason out Svaalberd's reason for the action. This is



an important part of Astri's character. Her life with Svaalberd is not wonderful, but she constantly sees the negatives of her situation, partly because she is constantly comparing her life to the fairy tales.

Astri's first meeting with the boy is mainly a chance encounter. He is trying to reach the dock where he's to meet up with his family before catching a ship for America. When he arrives, Astri is covered in filth and she can't speak because of the slap from Svaalberd. Svaalberd says that she's simple-minded, that she covers herself in dung, and that she's never learned to speak. The boy's name is Bjorn and Astri will later encounter him aboard a ship. He doesn't recognize her immediately upon their second meeting but eventually comes to realize who she is. This chance meeting creates a dream for Astri. Until now, she hasn't really had a plan other than to escape her miserable life with Svaalberd. Even though her father has gone to America, she hasn't voiced the idea that she should go there as well until she sees Bjorn.

Discussion Question 1

What happens to Snowflake's kids? What is the effect of this situation on Astri?

Discussion Question 2

How does Astri come to decide she should go to America?

Discussion Question 3

Describe Astri's first meeting with Bjorn.

Vocabulary

reproach, clatters, yanks, cardamom, gape, wench, strew, nary, persist, changeling, forage, boughs, mote, garble, berth



To the Seter; Treasure; The Ring of Keys; Red as Blood, White as Snow

Summary

“To the Seter” opens with Svaalberd announcing that it's time for them to travel to the seter. The seter is a farm in the mountains where Astri will tend the goats and make cheese. Svaalberd says he'll show Astri the way.

As they walk, Svaalberd talks about all the things Astri will have to do once she reaches the seter. Astri continues to think about running away. She wants to reach the dock and head for America but knows there are obstacles, including money, finding Greta, then finding the ship.

Svaalberd announces that he is taking Astri to the church first, where they will be married before Astri begins her work at the seter. They come to a river and Svaalberd offers to carry her across. She is repulsed by the idea and refuses. She asks him to walk across first, promising to follow if the water doesn't get too deep. Astri holds his jacket and he wades in.

As he crosses, Astri thinks of a fairy tale told by her uncle. A girl of the hulderfolk entices a young man to marry her. He manages to escape the marriage but winds up with her “treasure of troll gold” and some magical abilities. Astri remembers Svaalberd leaving the coins on Aunt's table and that he keeps most of his possessions under lock and key, though there is seldom anyone around. Astri suddenly realizes there is a huge ring of keys in Svaalberd's jacket pocket. He is far away, on the other side of the river, and she runs toward the goat farm.

In “Treasure,” Astri arrives and rushes straight to the storehouse. She grabs some food and her small bundle of possessions. She tells the Spinning Girl she should leave. Astri goes to the house and begins searching for the key to the locked chest Svaalberd keeps. She finds many coins inside. She wonders if it's right to steal but reasons that Svaalberd already stole the money from trolls, so takes it all. She doesn't take Svaalberd's Bible. She also doesn't take the Black Book, which contains charms and spells.

Svaalberd arrives at the farm and Astri runs for the barn. She plans to escape from the barn through the hole that Snowflake has always used. She finds Spinning Girl in the barn. Svaalberd's dog, Rolf, barks at Astri. She gives him some sausages and he goes away.

In “The Ring of Keys,” Astri quietly pushes the Spinning Girl through the hole in the barn. She is about to follow when Svaalberd grabs her leg and pulls her back through. He drags her inside and dumps out the sack. Her mother's brooch are among the items



that fall on the table. When Svaalberd reaches for it, Astri hits his hand with a knife, cutting off two of his fingers. Astri gets all the items back into her bag as Svaalberd chants to stop the blood flowing from his hand. The blood continues to spill out and Astri grabs the Black Book from the chest, putting it in the sack. Svaalberd begins to chant a curse on Astri and she runs.

Astri knows Svaalberd will rush straight to Aunt's house and demand another girl for a servant. She knows Aunt will give him Greta. She doesn't know the way to her Aunt's farm and decides she'll have to wait and follow Svaalberd. When he leaves his house, he's limping and it appears that he's having problems. She then sees Spinning Girl standing at the edge of the woods with Svaalberd's keys.

In "Red as Blood, White as Snow," Astri begins telling Spinning Girl a story as a way of explaining their current situation. Svaalberd is leaving blood and Astri follows the trail. She suddenly comes to a spot where her mother is buried. She recognizes the little house where she lived with her parents before her mother's death. Astri has a brief memory of women gathered in the house and the constant crying of a child while an old woman heats something over the fire. She brings an end to the memory to focus on finding Greta. Spinning Girl sits down to wait.

Astri's Papa and Uncle are twin brothers, but Uncle is older, meaning he inherited the family property. Papa had remained as a worker on the farm until the death of Astri's mother. Aunt began spending a lot of money on things for her daughters' dowries, meaning there wasn't enough money to support both families.

Astri sneaks down the hill to Aunt's house where she sees an incredible feast has been prepared. Astri compares this to the girl taken by the white bear. That girl discovers that her family is living in luxury with everything they want. Astri then sees a group of people headed for the farm and she realizes that one of her cousins has married. Svaalberd goes into the outhouse and Astri locks him inside. Astri sneaks over to the tables and Svaalberd manages to escape the outhouse. He tells Aunt that Astri has run away and that he wants another girl. Aunt gives reasons each of her own daughters can't go with Svaalberd but offers Greta. The guests have quickly consumed a lot of beer and a fight breaks out. Astri grabs Greta and they prepare to run, but Astri says they are taking some of the food with them.

Analysis

Astri says that Svaalberd said the Spinning Girl is a changeling. She points out that Svaalberd told the traveler, Bjorn, that Astri is a changeling. Svaalberd says that it's one of them, but that it's difficult to say which is the true changeling. He says Spinning Girl looks like a changeling but Astri acts like one. It seems that Svaalberd is somewhat afraid of Astri, especially when she stands up for herself. This comment appears to lump Astri and the Spinning Girl into one category in Svaalberd's mind. Astri doesn't yet know that Spinning Girl is her sister but it seems possible that Svaalberd does know about the connection, though he never mentions it to Astri.



As they are walking, Astri begins to sing a song about a troll. Svaalberd stops her because he says trolls live in the area. This is another example of the importance of superstitions in the story. Svaalberd suggests she sing a hymn instead. He sings and Astri is amazed that he can sing so well. She compliments him and Svaalberd moves toward her, as if to kiss her. The reader has to keep in mind that Astri has talked about this mean, old, ugly man, but there is no description given of Svaalberd other than those given by Astri. It could be that he's not that old or ugly, but has taken on that image to Astri. When Svaalberd is walking across the river, Astri admits that his back – with the exception of the hump on his shoulder – is very much like that of a young man. This is an example of the limited perspective and its impact on the story.

Astri goes through a series of thoughts as she tries to decide whether to take the Black Book from Svaalberd's chest. She doesn't take it the first time, fearing that just touching it would burn her fingers. However, she reasons that the book was probably Svaalberd's wife's book and that she can have all that magic for herself, just by taking the book. With the idea that she's already chopped off Svaalberd's fingers, she decides that taking the book wouldn't be a bigger offense, and she grabs it.

There's an interesting aspect to the scene immediately following Astri's decision to chop off Svaalberd's fingers. Astri says the “wooden box is opened,” but doesn't say how it comes to be open. It's impossible for Svaalberd to open it and it seems that Astri is trying to convince herself that she didn't open it either. It could also be that the box opened magically, as Astri seems to indicate. Then all the possessions that had been in Astri's sack seem to “leap up and toss itself back” into the sack. This seems another case of Astri's attempts to justify her actions by claiming that she didn't really do it.

As Astri is leaving the farm after chopping off Svaalberd's fingers, she realizes that she can't possibly go back in time, though she momentarily wishes she could. She would have spent the summer alone at the seter. She would not have dealt with Svaalberd on a daily basis and she might have actually enjoyed her summer there. This is an important look into Astri's character. She tends to do things impulsively and she hates the idea of staying with Svaalberd so much that she can't see anything positive about it. It's only after she's running away that she considers that the summer alone at the seter might have been pleasant.

There is a hint that something was wrong in the lives of Astri and her parents. Astri arrives at a spot she recognizes as being her mother's burial place. The grave is marked with a particular rock and she says she never understood why her mother wasn't buried in the church yard. There is no further explanation offered.

Astri again compares her life to that of one of her fairy tales when she discovers the feast that's ready for her cousin's wedding. In the fairy tale, the girl's family is promised by the white bear that their every wish will be granted. When the girl returns home, she finds that they are living happily without her and that they have plenty of food and all the possessions they could want, all because of the deal they made with the white bear. Astri doesn't directly say that Svaalberd is paying for all the food and possessions being shown off by Aunt at the wedding, but she seems to believe that's the case. It's more



likely that Aunt has saved to make the wedding feast possible though there's another option as well. Astri later learns that her Papa has sent packages from America and that the Postmaster believes these envelopes contained money. Aunt may have used the money intended for Astri and Greta to pay for the wedding.

Discussion Question 1

What prompts Astri's decision to run away when they are crossing the river?

Discussion Question 2

Describe the scene in which Astri chops off Svaalberd's fingers.

Discussion Question 3

Describe Astri's impression of Svaalberd. How does her limited perspective impact the reader's impression of Svaalberd?

Vocabulary

stride, stunted, temperament, prattles, fervently, vigil, melodious, jesting, flex, hoard, tranquility, gingerly, restitution, lolled, predicament, squandered



The Golden Wreath; The Birch Tree; The Magic Ball of Yarn

Summary

In "The Golden Wreath," Astri says she and Greta have to push Spinning Girl to keep walking along. They are being chased but Spinning Girl can't go fast so they often have to stop and hide. They move westward and stop to rest by a lake where Spinning Girl makes "wreaths of primroses and bluebells." Astri tells Greta some of what she knows about Spinning Girl. Astri assures Greta that she has figured out all the details of how to get to America. She secretly wonders how she's going to take care of the three of them. They sit down to a picnic consisting of the food they took from the wedding feast.

In "The Birch Tree," Astri wakes in the gloomy forest. Astri looks at her reflection in the lake and sees a striking resemblance to Spinning Girl. Astri climbs into the cold stream and washes, using soap she took from Aunt's house. Astri believes she sees a bear but then realizes it's actually Svaalberd. He has Greta "thrown over his shoulder." Svaalberd says he'll release Greta if Astri gives him the sack containing his money. Suddenly, Spinning Girl jangles his keys and Svaalberd releases Greta but then can't catch either Spinning Girl or Greta. Spinning Girl laughs and Astri realizes she believes it's all a game. Astri is amazed by the sound and it gives her time to think of a new plan. She climbs a tree and attracts Svaalberd's attention, yelling for Greta and Spinning Girl to run away.

Svaalberd begins to climb the tree and Astri knows she has to distract him long enough for the two girls to escape. Near the top, the tree begins to bend and soon Astri is near enough to the ground that she can drop. She leaves the bag in the tree and when she hops off, the contents scatter. Svaalberd rushes to the ground and begins to gather up the coins. Astri runs after Spinning Girl and Greta.

In "The Magic Ball of Yarn," Astri catches up with the girls and tells them how the girl of a fairy tale travels in search of the white bear. She has a pair of magic scissors that snip in the air, creating pieces of fancy cloth. They can see Svaalberd following though he's a long way behind. Astri says they need a magic ball of yarn. She says the yarn, when tossed in front of a person, will show the way to any destination.

Just then, they arrive at a seter hut and Astri says the milkmaid there might have a magic ball of yarn. The milkmaid says she doesn't have a magic ball of yarn but says she will give Astri a hairbrush. Astri has forgotten that her hair is now clean. Greta says Astri's hair is so pretty it looks as if gold might fall out of it. The milkmaid gives the girls directions to reach the sea but warns that there are dangers, including some people who sell and take slaves. As they walk away, Astri suggests the milkmaid doesn't know what she's talking about, but points out that her directions are "as good as a magic ball of yarn."



Analysis

There is a brief conversation about Astri's hair. Astri says Svaalberd hasn't let her wash it since she's been working for him but Greta points out that Aunt never let Astri wash it either. Neither Astri nor Greta are certain of the color. This is another case of Astri's limited perspective. She focuses on the treatment by Svaalberd but doesn't mention that Aunt treated her the same. It's not until Greta makes a comment about it that Astri admits to that fact. It seems this is setting up a situation for Astri's hair to be golden or some other fairy tale ending, but that's not what happens when Astri finally washes and brushes her hair.

Astri and Greta make a game of their situation when they stop for their meal. Spinning Girl weaves bracelets and crowns, and the girls pretend they are actually made of beautiful, precious stones. They point out other wondrous aspects of the forest and make it appear as a wonderland of sorts. The next morning, Astri wakes to find that it's just a "gloomy forest." This is another example of the importance of perspective.

The encounter with the milkmaid is very brief but there's an important piece of information here. She warns the girls that traveling to America can be dangerous. She says some people are kidnapped and sold as slaves and that some people in America keep slaves. Astri has had a very slanted view of what America is like. She is expecting a land where it's easy to make a good life and that everything there is wonderful. At one point, she is in a very idyllic spot and says she believes this is what America will be like. It's part of Astri's character to be constantly seeking something better. When the milkmaid warns about the dangers, Astri doesn't want to listen. After they are gone from the seter, she says the girl probably doesn't know what she's talking about, indicating her unwillingness to hear a warning.

Discussion Question 1

What do you believe Astri expects to find in America?

Discussion Question 2

Describe how Astri, Greta, and Spinning Girl escape when Svaalberd catches up with them in the forest.

Discussion Question 3

What is the purpose of a magic ball of yarn, and what does Astri get that she says is almost the same thing?

Vocabulary

coax, cajole, gloomy, thrice, lurches, shimmying, venture, prospect, fjord, pondering



The Bridge; Seven-League Boots; The Seven Headed Troll

Summary

Each time Astri looks back, she sees that Svaalberd is still following, but is a long way behind. Astri says they need a pair of seven-league boots that will take them seven leagues in a single step. They arrive at a bridge and fear a noise they hear is a troll living under the bridge. Astri says Greta and Spinning Girl should go first, but should say that any trolls should wait for their big sister. They do. When Astri crosses, she says any trolls under the bridge should wait for the goatman who is following, because he will make an even larger meal. A voice calls out that he plans to eat Astri but then a boy appears with his fishing pole and some fish. He laughs at having fooled the girls into thinking he was a troll.

The farm boy takes Astri, Greta, and Spinning girl home with him. The farm wife is kind to the girls and Astri tells their story. After Spinning Girl and Greta go to bed, the farm wife uses Astri's brush to brush her hair. She tells Astri about all the things they'll need if they plan to go to America. Astri sits very still, wondering if this is how it would feel to have a mother. The farm wife suggests the girls stay with her, saying she will provide for them and that they could have a good life with her.

In "Seven-League Boots," Astri is amazed to discover that Spinning Girl has spun yarn with strands of Astri's hair, making it look as if gold is woven into the yarn. Astri is faced with the problem of buying all the things they'll need for their trip now that they don't have Svaalberd's treasure. She briefly considers staying at the farm. She talks to the farm boy and says she would go in search of the treasure if she had a pair of seven-league boots. The boy offers one of their horses and suggests Astri could leave treasure with him if there's too much for her to carry to America. Astri agrees.

Astri leaves Spinning Girl at the farm, saying she and Greta have an "errand" to run. She impulsively gives Spinning Girl her mother's brooch and Spinning Girl gives Astri a key on a necklace. Astri says she feels that the Spinning Girl has given "the greater gift."

In "The Seven-Headed Troll," Astri and Greta ride along on a horse named Dapple. Greta asks if it's wrong to take Svaalberd's treasure. Astri says he stole it from the trolls, meaning it's not even Svaalberd's treasure, and that it's alright to steal from the trolls. Greta suggests they should return to Aunt's house and wait a little longer to hear from their Papa. Astri says it's too late.

As they ride, Astri tells about the time Papa took her with him to cut wood in the forest. He left her in a sunny spot but then a huge troll picked her up and ran away with her. Astri says the troll had six or seven heads. She says Papa came for her, chopping off all the heads and killing the troll.



As they ride on, Astri sees her sack in the road. Greta wants to run to it but Astri fears a trap. She and Greta put a twig from a rowan tree into the bodice of their dresses for protection.

Analysis

When the farm wife discovers Astri plans to go to America, she begins listing off all the things she's seen people take with them. She talks about the large amount of food they need for the journey and what they'll need to get a new start. She then compares the attitude of people who travel to America to that of a goat kept in a pen. She says the goat always sees some grass that seems greener just outside its own pen, and that the goat always wants to reach that grass. She is indicating that people are expecting a better life in America and that they might find a good life without leaving Norway.

The farm wife brushes Astri's hair. It's a simple gesture but it means a great deal to Astri. The reader should remember that Astri's mother died when Astri was very young, meaning Astri doesn't really know what it feels like to have a mother's care. She says that her head aches all the way from her scalp "to where I guess my heart is." It seems that Astri might want to remain here where the farm wife promises that she'll take good care of the girls and she even considers what their jobs might be. She knows the Spinning Girl's talent would be put to good use and that Greta always makes the people around her happy, but she then thinks about her role on the farm. She says she doesn't "seem to be good at anything at all, unless it's making trouble." This is an important look at Astri's character and her lack of self-esteem.

Astri tells the farm boy about the treasure but without any details. She says she wants to go get it but doesn't know how she can cover enough ground to get there and back. The boy suggests they take a horse, saying it will be okay for her to take it as long as she returns it. The boy then says that Astri could leave some of the treasure with him, if it's too heavy for her to carry. Ironically, Astri sees the boy as greedy but doesn't see anything wrong with her own attitudes or actions.

Discussion Question 1

Describe Astri's time with the farm wife. Why is Astri so deeply affected by the farm wife's attention?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Astri say the farm boy is greedy?



Discussion Question 3

Does it seem Astri will be able to make her dream of going to America come true? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

morsels, proclaim, clucks, portion, wager, skittish, placid, essential, brandish, nickers, peer, bodice



The Spot of Tallow; A Feast; We Come to a Church; Trifles

Summary

“The Spot of Tallow” opens with Astri and Greta realizing that Svaalberd is sitting against a stump at the side of the trail. His mouth seems to be frozen closed and he can only grunt at the girls. Astri wants to leave him but Greta says they have to help him. Astri refuses to let Greta go alone for help or to remain alone with Svaalberd. They agree to wait, hoping someone will come along.

Astri recalls the story of the white bear. The girl in that story waits beside the bear for days, crying at his bedside while he “slept the sleep of the enchanted.” Astri says she is too twitchy to wait like that. Astri says she wasn't able to save Snowflake's kid or her own mother, and that she can't save Svaalberd. As Astri watches his eyes, she realizes that he isn't evil and he isn't a goat. Svaalberd is “just a man, and he is suffering.” She realizes that she doesn't want him to die, even though she doesn't like him. Astri pulls out the Black Book and tells Greta there are many spells in this book, but a person has to be able to read in order to use it. Svaalberd's body goes into a spasm and he dies.

Greta insists they hold a funeral for Svaalberd but they know they can't possibly dig a grave. They cover his body with moss and Greta prays. Astri says Greta should be a parson and says she believes there are female parsons in America. Greta says Astri should say something about Svaalberd and she realizes she knows almost nothing about him.

“A Feast” opens with Astri and Greta continuing their journey in the rain. They come to a village and Astri suggests they use some of their money for a night in an inn and a good meal. While they eat, Greta suggests Svaalberd might have died of lockjaw caused by the wound when Astri cut off his fingers. Astri feels guilty for her role in his death.

The following morning, Astri pays for their room and food, and discovers she has only a few coins left. She tells the lady at the inn that she and Greta are headed for America. The woman asks if they have their baptism certificates. Astri says they have everything they need but the woman gives Astri back two of the coins, saying she should use them wisely.

In “We Come to a Church,” Astri and Greta resume their journey. They are hungry and wet, and Astri explains that there is an abundance of fruit, waiting to be picked, in America. She also explains that the weather is much better in America. Astri says the grass in America is so rich that the cows give cream instead of milk. She says she doesn't really want to lie to Greta but that the stories are taking their minds off their situation.



Greta asks if they are going to go back to the farm to get Spinning Girl. Astri says she has come to realize that Svaalberd's treasure was really just his "hard-earned money." They have spent all of it but they can sell the horse for some of the items they'll need for the trip to America. If they return to the farm for Spinning Girl, they will have to give back the horse. Astri also worries that she'll be held responsible for Svaalberd's death. She says they are not going back to the farm for Spinning Girl. Astri says Spinning Girl will be an asset to the farm, much more valuable than the horse, and that she'll be happy there. Greta doesn't answer.

They arrive at a church and Greta asks to go in, saying she needs to ask for forgiveness. Astri says she'll wait outside. While she's waiting, she realizes that records are kept in churches and decides to go inside. She finds some papers but can't read, so she can't find any record that belongs to her. A parson arrives and Astri says she's come to get her baptism record. She is vague, saying she knows the parson must remember her family. The parson guesses that she must be Margit Anna Alafsdatter and Astri agrees that's her name. The parson begins to ask questions but Astri and Greta jump on the horse and rush away from the church.

In "Trifles," Astri and Greta arrive at the waterfront. Astri is overwhelmed, wondering what they should do next. She has found a list of items needed for the trip, including pork, bread, butter, and herring. Greta reveals to Astri that she stole a book from Aunt. The book was sent by their Papa but Aunt kept it from Greta. Astri knows that they will keep the book but decides they have to sell everything else to try to get enough items to board the ship bound for America.

Astri sits down with the hairbrush and begins brushing her hair. A young girl walks by, later identified as Grace. Astri asks Grace to pick up several coins she's placed on the ground. She tells Grace that the brush is magic, and that she brushes coins out of her hair using the magic brush. Grace wants the brush and Astri eventually agrees to trade it for a cask of herring and some other items, including a cooking pot. Greta returns and announces she traded her yarn for a trunk containing a skeepskin and a wheel of cheese. She convinced the housewife that the golden strands in the yarn were gold, though they were actually strands of Astri's hair.

Astri and Greta then begin stealing things, including some bread from a baker who has an abundance and a farmer who had a lot of potatoes. They still don't have enough money for Greta's ticket but she manages to hide in a trunk before it's loaded onto the ship.

Analysis

Greta's perspective is beginning to change and that's a result of the Coming-of-Age theme, seen in this story. She says she knows almost nothing about Svaalberd and wonders if he's always had the hunched back. She admits that having that deformity as a child would have made his life difficult. It seems that Astri is beginning to realize that her assessment of Svaalberd might have been overly harsh, another sign of her



emerging maturity. This change in Astri is short lived, though, and she will soon make many other selfish decisions without caring how it will affect others.

Astri tells Greta stories about how things will be in America. She talks about the abundance of food, ready for the taking. She talks about the wonderful weather, saying it's the exact opposite of the gloomy, rainy conditions typical of Norway. She says that women in America can do and be whatever they want. She then admits to herself that she may be exaggerating the truth, at least a little, and that America may not be exactly as she has described. She believes, however, that America will be whatever she and Greta make of it. This is an important look into Astri's character. She believes that her life will be wonderful and that she merely has to take advantage of opportunities that will be waiting in America.

The scene in which Astri tricks Grace into a trade for her “magic hairbrush” is somewhat humorous. Astri scatters a few of the coins she has left from Svaalberd's “treasure” around her, then convinces Grace that the coins fell from her hair because of the magic hairbrush. The coins are not worth much and Astri would not have been able to buy many supplies with that little bit of money. However, she trades the brush for several important items. Grace is later angry with Astri for the trick but they girls eventually work out their differences.

Greta and Astri steal many of the items they need to get aboard the ship bound for America. They spend a few days on the dock before the ship sets sail. During that time, they steal tinned porridge, butter, bread, potatoes, and other items. Astri justifies all the thefts. She says there is one passenger who is overweight and doesn't need to keep eating the fatty butter. They steal butter from that passenger. Another is jittery and Astri blames that condition on eating too much tinned porridge.

The title of the final chapter of this section is “Trifles.” This word was used earlier in the book to explain to Astri that small things can sometimes make a big difference. Astri and Greta use their few possessions and the little bit of money they have to get aboard the ship bound for America. It's up to the reader to decide if their actions are justified.

Discussion Question 1

Name some of the things Astri and Greta steal for their trip to America. Remember to include the horse and baptism record.

Discussion Question 2

Are the actions of Astri and Greta justified as they cheat and steal in order to get on the ship for America?



Discussion Question 3

How does Astri justify her decision to leave Spinning Girl behind?

Vocabulary

eternity, quaking, hideous, spasm, cassock, trills, maiming, conundrum, naught, ought, rends, regal, gaggles, astounded



The Winds; The Halling Dance; The Pest

Summary

The journey begins and Astri is horribly seasick. One day the parson's wife approaches Astri. She says she has something she wants to talk about when Astri is feeling better. Astri feels certain the woman knows Greta is a stowaway and that Astri caused Svaalberd's death. Astri continues to be sick. One day, Grace announces that she has yet to get a single coin from her hair, though she's using the magic hairbrush. Astri says it sometimes takes a while to work. Grace asks if Greta belongs to Astri. Astri points out a family with several children and says Greta must belong with them. Grace goes straight to the mother of that family and learns that Greta isn't one of their children.

Greta is loved among the other passengers. She's good with the younger children and everyone likes her. Astri watches as the parson's wife loses herself in the books she reads, and Astri wants to learn to read.

In "The Halling Dance," a group of men and boys gather for a dance popular in their home region. There is a hat high on a pole and the men take turns trying to kick the hat off the pole. No one can until Bjorn dances over and kicks it off, directly into the sea. Bjorn then approaches Astri. He says he still believes he's seen her somewhere before. Astri rudely leaves him, and Greta suggests she could be nicer to people. Grace stops Astri, saying she still hasn't gotten any coins from the magic hairbrush. Astri offers the herring cask back, though it's now empty. Grace refuses. Grace continues to question Greta's family and says she believes Greta and Astri are related.

The parson's wife approaches Astri again. Astri is apprehensive but the parson's wife offers Astri a job as her maid, once they reach America. Astri promises to think about it. She is worried about what to do with Greta if she accepts but knows she needs money if they are to find their Papa.

In "The Pest," the weather has turned bad, prompting the crew to close windows and hatches. The large room where many of the passengers sleep has become a breeding ground for a disease. It's called The Pest or Blue Death. Passengers come down with fever and diarrhea, then die. Greta helps nurse many of the sick but Astri finds she is incapable of offering comfort. She remembers that the white bear in the story asks the girl if she's afraid. The girl says she isn't but Astri admits that she is very much afraid.

Analysis

The Parson's wife suggests that she and Astri have something in common. She has apparently been watching Astri. The wife says she often feels as if she can't feel the happiness and joy of those around her, even when she has every reason to do so. Astri feels the same. She talks about her inability to join in when Greta is playing with the other children. Astri is a little older than Greta, so the age might play a role in this, but it



seems there is something deeper. It's later revealed that Astri played a part in her mother's death and she may feel that she is not worthy of happiness.

The author reveals at the end of the story that her grandmother's journal prompted this story. The author's grandmother wrote about her trip to America aboard a boat, and of meeting a young woman traveling alone aboard that boat. That comment set the author thinking about how and why a woman would have been traveling alone. She came up with the idea for Astri's story based on that idea.

As Astri talks with the Parson's wife, she seems to begin to realize that she isn't going to step off the boat and into her father's arms. Astri hasn't made any plans past getting on the ship bound for America. She now admits that she has to come up with some way to earn money and that she has to figure out where she and Greta will stay while she works. This is all part of Astri's emerging maturity and is one example of the coming-of-age theme.

Discussion Question 1

Describe the Parson's wife's suggestion to Astri and Astri's reaction to it.

Discussion Question 2

How does Greta spend her time during the journey, and how does that compare with how Astri spends her time? Why are the girls so different?

Discussion Question 3

Why is Grace upset with Astri? Does she have a right to be?

Vocabulary

thither, recede, flounces, buffeting, inhabits, intones, asunder, utterance, pennants, saunters, traipsing, feign, stench



The Postmaster; The Black Book; Soria Moria

Summary

In "The Postmaster," Astri is talking to the man who was postmaster for her area. He asks Astri's name and reveals that he had delivered mail to Aunt from Astri's Papa in America. He says he never read any of the letters but that the envelopes were "fat" and that he assumed there was money inside. The Postmaster says he wrote down the names of the places Papa mailed letters from, just in case he had the chance to go there. He writes them down for Astri and she rushes to tell Greta.

In "The Black Book," Astri discovers that Greta is ill. She immediately recognizes the symptoms of the Blue Death and knows that Greta might not survive. Astri prays for Greta's recovery. Astri also argues that she should be sick instead of Greta. She then takes out the Black Book, saying she doesn't care what happens to her own soul, if she can only save Greta. She opens the book but can't make any sense of the letters on the page.

She goes to the deck where many passengers are gathered. She asks who can read and several people raise their hands. She then produces the book and asks who will read from this book. Most people are afraid. The Blacksmith has lost his entire family. He is angry that Astri didn't produce the book to help him save his family. Bjorn steps forward, offering to read for her, and Astri realizes that he does care for her. Astri knows he will help her but fears what will happen to him if he does. Then an old woman steps forward. She is Mor Kloster and Astri says she hasn't noticed her aboard the ship before this moment. Mor Kloster agrees to help Astri but asks for a promise in return. Astri guesses that it will be money but the old woman says that isn't what she wants. Astri asks if the woman wants her firstborn child and Mor Kloster says she'll accept that as payment.

When Astri returns to Greta, she finds Greta is no better. Greta says she's going to be with their mother. Astri pleads with her to stay. Greta says they'll all die someday. Astri agrees but says she won't be going to heaven. She says she'll be going to America instead. Greta asks where Astri will go when she dies. Astri says she'll go to Soria Moria and Greta agrees to meet Astri there.

In "Soria Moria," Astri tells Greta they have to go "east of the sun and west of the moon" to reach the castle of Soria Moria. She says it won't be a problem for them to find it.

Astri speaks to Mor Kloster. She asks if they've met before. Mor Kloster says she visited Astri's house when Astri was very young. Astri again remembers the scene in which a child is crying and an old woman is heating something at the fire. Mor Kloster says she was there when Astri and her twin were young. She says both Astri and her twin were



healthy at first but that the twin became ill. Astri remembers Mor Kloster suggesting that the hulderfolk had seen the twins and swapped one of their own for one of the twins. Astri remembers the scene but can't remember if she was the healthy twin or the sick one. Mor Kloster says Papa had taken the healthy baby with him to work in the woods and Astri recalls going with her father. Astri also remembers that Aunt had suggested that the sick twin was one of the hulderfolk and that "something should be done about it." Astri knows that her mother had done something.

Analysis

The brief scene involving the Postmaster indicates that Astri's father may have sent money for Astri and Greta's upkeep or for them to travel to America. Astri can imagine her Aunt saying that she'll just borrow the money to pay for the feast for their daughter. Astri imagines Aunt saying that the feast will earn them favor with many people and that it will pay off for them in the long run. She doesn't seem angry with her Aunt over this deception. It's not clear whether Astri is merely becoming more mature and is learning that real life doesn't mimic fairy tales, or if she's simply too caught up in her current situation to care.

When Astri brings out the Black Book, most of the passengers recognize it for what it is. The superstition around this book is important, providing insight into the people of this time and place. Several people want to get rid of the book immediately and believe that using it will curse them all. Some people are angry at Astri for not producing the book sooner, believing it might have saved their loved ones from the Blue Death. There are comments about the powers of the book as they argue about what should be done. Astri herself had considered throwing the book away at one point, but she knows that the book would just return to her through its powerful magic. It seems that Astri is using this superstition to justify keeping the book.

Mor Kloster is providing information about Astri's childhood and her background. This is information that Astri might otherwise have never recovered. She still doesn't remember everything of importance about her early childhood, but she's beginning to bring up some long-buried memories.

The author offers some explanations at the end of the book, including the reason Astri became healthier while her twin became sicker. The twin may have been suffering from rickets, a disease that affects the growth of the child's limbs and leaves the child looking somewhat deformed. Astri's Papa takes Astri, as the healthier of the twins, to the woods with him while he works. Astri recalls sitting in the sunshine, which would have helped ensure that she never contracted rickets. Mor Kloster has another explanation. She explains that Astri's mother had taken many precautions to ensure that the twins were healthy, including putting a knife in a specific place. But she needed to put silver on the babies and she had only one brooch. She put that brooch on Astri and Mor Kloster believes that protected Astri from the disease that strikes her twin. Mor Kloster realizes that Astri's mother has only one brooch and has no way to protect her other child. This



is another example of the superstitions that ruled during this time period and the way healers explain away anything they can't otherwise explain.

The chapter titled "Soria Moria" ends with a cliffhanger. Astri realizes that her mother had "done something" about her sick sister, but the reader doesn't yet know what that is. The details are revealed in a coming chapter. The author leaves the reader hanging at the end of several of the chapters and this is an important part of the book's structure.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Mor Kloster believe Astri's twin becomes ill while Astri thrives?

Discussion Question 2

What happens to prompt Astri's memories of her childhood and what are some of the things she remembers?

Discussion Question 3

What is the reaction when Astri produces the Black Book?

Vocabulary

ricochets, perspiration, elixir, crone, lintel, shrouded, dingy, glowering



Astri's Dream; Grace; East of the Sun, West of the Moon

Summary

In "Astri's Dream," Astri realizes that she has already lost one sister and that she'll do anything to keep from losing Greta. Astri describes a "revolving swirl of colors" and faces, and is apparently losing consciousness. She then begins to dream. She sees herself walking in the forest in Norway. She arrives at a castle and goes inside. She soon arrives at a locked door. Astri uses the key given to her by Spinning Girl to unlock the door. She sees a girl in the room and thinks she's seeing another version of herself before realizing it's Spinning Girl. Spinning Girl doesn't talk, but Astri can hear her thoughts.

Spinning Girl warns Astri that she needs to leave before the three-headed troll returns home. Astri says she'll fight the troll but that she needs a drink first. Spinning Girl says she'll give Astri a drink from a flask hanging on the wall, but says Astri has to promise to leave. Astri objects, saying she wants to save Spinning Girl. Spinning Girl says she can take care of herself.

Spinning Girl then tells Astri that she has to climb a nearby mountain to reach the castle that's "east of the sun and west of the moon." Astri takes the flask and leaves.

Halfway up the mountain, Astri finds a man who asks for a drink from the flask. The man says he is Astri's "Father from heaven." Astri says fathers abuse, neglect, and abandon their families. She says he might be different but that she won't drink with him anyway. She continues to climb and finds another man, this one claiming to be the devil. Astri says she's already had "enough dealings with you," and continues to climb.

She soon arrives at another ledge and finds a man with a slouch hat. The man says he is Death. Astri says she'll share a drink with Death because she has some questions. She asks what he's going to do about Greta. Death says there is "no sense" to Greta's situation and suggests Astri climb back down and ask her heavenly father. Astri says she knows he would only say that Greta is going to a better place. She then says she doesn't want Greta to leave her.

Astri suggests that Death take her instead of Greta. Death says he's trying to take Astri, but then says she can't trade places with Greta. He also says Astri can't bribe, pray, or love Greta's way out of death. He says a person who is destined to die will die, no matter what. He then says he'll give Astri a gift. He says she will now be able to see Death at a dying person's bedside. If Death is at the person's head, nothing will save the person. If Death is at the person's feet, the person might be saved. With that, Astri rushes on up the mountain and a wind picks her up at the top. The wind carries her quickly, through fall, winter, and spring. The wind asks if Astri can see anything. She



says she sees the moon. The moon then says Astri should “look at me.” Astri opens her eyes.

Astri opens her eyes in the real world and sees Mor Kloster looking back. Mor Kloster says Greta seems to be somewhere between life and death. Astri looks toward her sister and sees Death sitting at Greta's head. Death is dozing and Astri has some women help turn Greta so that Death is at her feet. Death wakes and sees that he's been tricked. He says he'll take Astri instead. Astri says she's ready to go, even though she doesn't want to. She asks Death to wait until she can recite the Lord's Prayer. Death grants the request and Astri begins to recite, but she falls asleep.

In “Grace,” Astri wakes to find Greta is recovering. Astri tells Mor Kloster that she now remembers her twin. She asks how her mother could have abandoned her baby. Mor Kloster says Astri's mother had hoped the trolls would take that child and leave Astri's real sister in its place. She says when Astri's mother returned, the girl was gone and the trolls hadn't left the real baby.

Their conversation is interrupted by a member of the crew who says he is searching for a stowaway who is “aboard illegally.” Grace approaches the crew member and says she was the one who said there was a stowaway. She is hesitating and before she can finish her statement, the Blacksmith steps forward and claims that Greta is his daughter. He approaches Greta's bed and says there will be room in his home “and in my heart” for Greta, if she'll agree. Astri wants to speak up but knows she can't take care of Greta. After everyone has gone about their business, Greta says they won't be parted forever.

Later, Astri says she should be happy about their current situation. Things have worked out well. Astri will be working for the Paron's wife and will be near enough to visit Greta sometimes.

Bjorn says Mor Kloster is looking for Astri. She arrives at a bedside where a woman is in labor. Mor Kloster says she needs someone with small hands to help with the delivery. She points out her own hands, which are swollen and “knotted.” Astri sees Death seated at the woman's feet and wants to run, but Mor Kloster won't let her.

As Astri prepares to help with the birth, she has another memory. Her own mother was in labor and Astri has watched her suffering. Her mother said Astri has to go get Mor Kloster. She said Astri knows the way. Astri agreed, though she was afraid and didn't want to go. She began the journey but then slowed down.

Astri comes back to the present to see that the baby's bottom has emerged but Mor Kloster says Astri has to help maneuver the baby's arms so the birth can be completed. Astri does as Mor Kloster says, then her thoughts return to her memories.

Astri recalls that she went down the path for awhile and thought about Mor Kloster. She didn't want to go get the old woman and sits down in a patch of heather. She was still there when Mor Kloster found her. Astri relayed the message from her mother and Mor Kloster heads back to Astri's house. Astri remembers now that her mama died a short time later.



Astri helps finish the birth aboard the ship, then she's holding the newborn baby. Mor Kloster asks Astri to hand over the child. Astri does and Mor Kloster points out that Astri has now handed over her first born, as they agreed in their bargain over the Black Book. Several of the women comment about this turn of events. One suggests they recite the Lord's Prayer. Astri begins but then remembers that Death had planned to claim her as soon as she finished reciting the Lord's Prayer. She prays with her heart but doesn't say the words.

Mor Kloster hands Astri the Black Book. She says there is some good information in the book but that there is also some trash, and that Astri will have to use her brains to figure out which is which. She predicts Astri will learn to read and will make something of herself. Bjorn is nearby and offers to help her learn to read. Astri scowls and Bjorn suddenly realizes why she seems familiar. When he laughs, Astri is about to get angry but remembers Greta saying that she should show more of the goodness that's inside her. Astri believes there might be goodness after all.

In "East of the Sun, West of the Moon," Astri tells the end of the story about the girl and the white bear. The bear turns into a prince, escapes from the troll, and the girl and prince have all the gold and silver they can carry. They moved far from the castle that lay east of the sun and west of the moon. Astri says that story has an end but that a new chapter of her own life is just beginning.

Bjorn is teaching her to read. It's slow but she continues. One day, when they are working together, the ship is surrounded by fog and there is a near-miss with a big steam ship. When the sun breaks up the fog, the passengers get their first look at America. Astri can't see that far and has come to believe the Parson's wife who says Astri might need glasses. Grace joins Astri away from the rail. Grace says she doesn't want to see America and that she never wanted to leave her home. She then says that she never got any coins from the "magic hairbrush" but now realizes that it has served an important purpose in her journey. She says she was so angry over having to leave her home and friends that she might have thrown herself into the sea. She hasn't done that because she's been so preoccupied with trying to get the hairbrush to work. Astri suggests Grace will make new friends and asks if she might become one of Grace's friends.

Astri says she has come to learn a lot about herself but she still doesn't know everything about her past. She says she also doesn't know what's going to happen to her in the future. But she does know that she's where she belongs at this moment, "sailing on a perfect ocean of light, east of the sun and west of the moon."

Analysis

In the chapter titled "Astri's Dream," the author changes the perspective so that Astri is referred to in third person. Though the action still revolves entirely around Astri, there is a focus on the change of perspective. This is likely a way to make the reader realize that Astri is not in control of the story at this point. Throughout the book, Astri is



revealing pieces of information she wants the reader to have. In this chapter, the reader sees the events unfold at the same time Astri sees them.

There is a great deal of imagery and symbolism in “Astri's Dream.” She talks about encountering her Father from heaven and deciding that she doesn't want to share a drink with him because all fathers neglect and abandon their children. This is the first time that Astri has spoken ill of her own Papa but it seems that she is angry with him for his decision to leave Astri and Greta. He may have felt he didn't have a choice other than going to America without them, but Astri and Greta were left in a serious situation. Astri might have been sold to someone even worse than Svaalberd and she might have been held in a marriage against her will. Astri doesn't mention this anger again and it's left to the reader to decide what her feelings are toward her Papa.

Mor Kloster is not educated but she does seem to be reasonably intelligent, probably from her years of working as a healer and observing life. Astri asks why Greta didn't die. Astri suggests that it might have been a spell Mor Kloster used from the Black Book or that Astri's dream played a role in Greta's recovery. Mor Kloster says it was probably a combination of things that came together to help Greta. Mor Kloster later reveals that the Black Book is probably not really a book of witchcraft or magic, but is actually a book that would be used for healing. She says that Astri will find some useful pieces of information in the book once she's learned to read, but that some of it is “rubbish.”

The story of Astri's twin sister is another example of the superstitions that are a theme seen in this story. Astri asks Mor Kloster how her mother could have abandoned Astri's twin. Mor Kloster explains that Astri's mother was doing what she believed to be right. It seems possible that children who were abandoned in this way might sometimes have recovered from their illness while the mother was away, and that the mother might then have assumed that the trolls gave the human baby back. If this ever happened, or if there were stories of this happening, Astri's mother would have used that as a reason to leave her own child. While the modern-day reader will think Astri's mother is cruel for abandoning her child, the parents of Astri's time would have believed they were doing the right thing.

Grace's confession about the hairbrush is an important look at her adaptability. Grace is unhappy about leaving her home and her friends, and she admits to Astri that she might have thrown herself overboard because she was so sad. Her preoccupation with the “magic hairbrush” keeps her from doing so. Looked at from that light, it can be said that the hairbrush has some “magic” qualities. This kind of comparison is seen throughout the story with regard to items that have magic powers.

The personification of Death is not that surprising, considering the magical aspects of the book. Death is seen as a man in a slouch hat. Astri doesn't seem to be really afraid of him but she doesn't doubt that he is Death. The way she tricks Death by turning Greta around is an example of Astri's intelligence. She is always able to think her way through situations. The fact that she escapes Death is an accident, though, and not something Astri accomplished on purpose.



When the ship is nearing America, Astri thinks about the story of the white bear and the girl. That story comes to an end with the bear and the girl living happily ever after. Astri has been comparing the story to her life throughout the book but now realizes that her own story isn't at an end, but that she's beginning a new chapter of her life. This is an important look at Astri's emerging maturity and her effort to make the most of her life.

Discussion Question 1

Why does the perspective change from first person to third person in "Astri's Dream?"

Discussion Question 2

What did Grace expect from the magic hairbrush, and what does it actually provide for her? Can you justify the idea that the hairbrush really is magic?

Discussion Question 3

Describe Astri's encounter with Death and the outcome of that meeting.

Vocabulary

stave, dubious, incantation, cantering, clustered, thrum, avert, remnants, writhing, flick, destiny, bustle, rubbish, plaintively



Characters

Astri

Astri is a young girl who constantly compares her own life to the events in fairy tales. She expects trolls, treasure, and magical items at every turn. As a very young girl, Astri is at home with her mother when her mother goes into labor. Her mother sends Astri for an old woman named Mor Kloster who provides healing services for the community but Astri stops along the way, daydreaming in a field. Mor Kloster finds Astri there and together they rush back to Astri's house. Astri's mother gives birth to another daughter, named Greta, and dies a short time later. It's not until years later that Astri remembers these events and realizes that she is at least partly responsible for her mother's death.

Astri's family is poor. Her father is the younger twin of the family, meaning his older brother has inherited all the property. Astri's aunt is greedy, leaving Astri's father little to use for raising his own family. Astri's father soon goes to America, hoping to earn enough money to send for Astri and Greta. Astri and Greta live in the home of her greedy, mean aunt. Though her uncle is apparently kind, her aunt sets the rules. One day, the aunt sells Astri to an old man named Svaalberd and Astri leaves her family to go live with him.

Astri's life is difficult with the old man. He makes her work long hours, provides her only the barest necessities, and threatens to marry her. She thinks constantly about running away but can't figure out how to manage to run away. When she finally does figure out how to get away, she takes the Spinning Girl and her little sister, Greta, with her aboard a ship heading to America.

Greta

Greta is Astri's younger sister. She is a pretty child who is treated badly by her aunt. She is obviously not treated like her aunt's biological daughters. When Astri says they are running away, Greta says she has no possessions of her own to take. Astri is sad to know that her cousins have so many things while Greta has none.

Greta is conscientious about her actions. She worries about doing the right thing but follows Astri's directions when she's called on to help secure their passage onto a ship bound for America. She steals items and uses devious means to secure things needed for the journey. She also hides in a trunk and becomes a stowaway aboard the ship.

Greta is a very likeable character. She makes friends with everyone aboard the ship. Parents love for her to play with their children because she is so good with the smaller children. The children like Greta and are always happy to spend time with her. She moves from one family to another, always welcome and always fitting in with anyone she encounters. This is the opposite of her sister, Astri.



While Astri has trouble finding happiness and can't seem to allow herself to feel joy in everyday situations, Greta is always cheerful. She finds reasons to laugh and enjoy herself all the time, which is part of her appeal.

Greta's mother died shortly after giving birth, leaving Greta and Astri with only their father. Greta doesn't talk about this loss and she has no direct memories of her mother. This may explain why Astri is so often unhappy, though it's left to the reader to decide what effect the death has on Greta and Astri.

Svaalberd

Svaalberd is a goatherd. He is a mean man who basically buys Astri from her aunt. Svaalberd makes Astri work hard and barely meets her basic needs in return. He says he wants to marry her, and that prospect disgusts Astri. When Svaalberd tries to stop Astri from running away, she chops off two of his fingers with a knife. He later dies, apparently from some infection related to the injury.

Spinning Girl

Spinning Girls is a young girl who lives in Svaalberd's storehouse and spends all her time spinning wonderful skeins of yarn. She is quite talented but never speaks at all. Astri later discovers that the girl is her own twin sister, abandoned when it seemed that she might be a troll or a changeling. Astri leaves the Spinning Girl at a farm where a kind lady lives with her son.

Bjorn

Bjorn is a young boy who stops by Svaalberd's house on his way to catch a boat for America. He is kind and initially believes Astri is simple-minded. He doesn't immediately recognize her once they are on the boat together but eventually figures out that he'd seen her before. He helps her begin to learn to read while they are still on the ship.

The Blacksmith

The Blacksmith is among the passengers on the boat headed for America. He is married and has young children, but his wife and children die of a disease referred to as "the Pest" before they reach America. When a crew member confronts Greta about being a stowaway, the Blacksmith says Greta is his child, and he asks that she consider living with him after they arrive.



Aunt

Astri's Aunt is a mean woman who cares only about her own daughters. She buys things for her daughters' dowries though it means Astri's family lives in poverty. She may have used money sent by Astri's father to pay for an elaborate wedding for one of her daughters. She sells Astri to Svaalberd and obviously doesn't care about taking care of Astri and Greta.

Grace

Grace is a young Norwegian girl who is aboard the ship with Astri and Greta. She buys the “magic hairbrush” from Astri and is initially angry that the brush isn't really magic. She later admits that her preoccupation with the hairbrush has helped her cope with the move to America. She plans to turn Greta in as a stowaway but later befriends Astri.

Mor Kloster

Mor Kloster is an old woman who is described as a “crone” and who works as a healer of sorts. It's Mor Kloster who arrives to help Astri's mother when she is in childbirth with Greta. In a strange twist of fate, Mor Kloster is aboard the ship bound for America and she helps care for Astri and Greta when they are both ill.

The Farm Boy

This is a boy who lives on a farm along the route taken by Astri, Greta, and the Spinning Girl. The boy is willing to help Astri by loaning her a horse. In exchange, Astri is supposed to bring part of the treasure back to the boy. Astri believes this indicates that the boy is greedy. His fate is unknown.



Symbols and Symbolism

Snowflake

This is the goat that always manages to escape from the barn. Astri discovers how Snowflake is escaping but never tells Svaalberd. When she is running away from him, she uses the hold in the barn for herself and the Spinning Girl.

The Huldrefolk

The “invisibles” or huldrefolk are a group of people who are magical or enchanted in some way. The people of this time in Norway blame the huldrefolk for problems and phenomenon that they can't otherwise explain.

The Pest

Also called the Blue Death, it's a disease that causes diarrhea and dehydration, and that ends in death for many who contract it aboard The Columbus. Greta falls ill with the disease but Astri tricks Death and saves Greta's life.

The Lord's Prayer

This literally refers to the Lord's Prayer from the Bible. The prayer is often used as a defense against dire circumstances and is added on to chants or spells, such as is seen with Svaalberd's chant that is supposed to keep a wasp away. Astri asks Death for permission to recite the Lord's Prayer before he takes her away and he grants that request. She doesn't finish the prayer and believes that Death will be waiting for her as soon as she does finish it. She says it will be a challenge for her to live in the home of a minister without ever reciting the Lord's Prayer, but that she'll have to be careful not to do so.

The Goatherd

This refers to Svaalberd's occupation as a goat farmer but it can also mean anyone who tends goats as a job. Goats are considered smelly and dirty, and the goatherd is not a well-respected position.

The Silver Brooch

This is the piece of jewelry that belonged to Astri's mother and is the one reminder the sisters have of their mother. Greta urges Astri to take the brooch with her when she



leaves their aunt's home. Astri gives it to the Spinning Girl when she and Greta leave her behind at the farm house. Mor Kloster suggests that Astri's mother put the brooch on Astri to keep her safe and that's why her twin became sick.

Soria Moria

This is a fairy tale castle that “lies east of the sun and west of the moon.” Astri tells stories about Soria Moria and dreams of finding that castle. The castle represents a place of safety and refuge for Astri.

Death

Death is presented in this story as a man who Astri encounters during a dream. He might be real or he might exist only in her dream. He grants Astri the power to see him and explains to her how she can tell whether a person's death is certain. Astri tricks Death by turning Greta's body to a different position, making it possible for Greta to be saved. The fact that some people can be saved from Death is a symbol of the uncertainty of life and of Astri's inability to control all aspects of life.

The Magic Hairbrush

This is just an ordinary hairbrush but Astri uses it to fool a young girl named Grace. Astri says the brush is magic and that she can make coins fall from her hair just by brushing with the magic hairbrush. Grace trades for the brush and is later upset when she doesn't get any coins from her own hair. She eventually realizes that she has been so preoccupied with the hairbrush that she forgot to be so upset about moving to America.

America

None of the action is set in America but this is a symbol of a better life for Astri and Greta. Astri talks about the opportunities they'll have in America and all the things they'll be able to do once they arrive there.



Settings

Astri's Family Farm

This is property owned by Astri's uncle, as the oldest son of the family. The property provides for the Aunt and Uncle's family. As a child, Astri lives on the property with her mother, father, and sisters. When her mother dies and her father goes to America, Astri moves into the house with her Aunt. The farm is typical of the time and place. There is a main house and several outbuildings, all with specific purposes.

Norway

This is the country where the first sections of the story take place. The country is real and there are some specific places described. Those descriptions include brooks, wooded areas, small villages, and farms. Astri talks about the gloomy weather and says America is sunny every day that Norway is cloudy, meaning America is sunny most of the time. The setting is believable considering the time frame.

The Goat Farm

The Goat Farm is where Astri lives for several months with Svaalberd, the old goatherd. The farm is located in Norway and includes a small house, a goat barn, and a large storehouse. The farm is adequate but relatively poor and there is a great deal of work required to keep the farm operating.

The Columbus

The ship that takes Greta, Astri, and others to America. The ship is crowded with passengers and provides little in the way of comfort, especially for the passengers in the poorer accommodations.. There are places to cook and there are animals aboard as well as the passengers and crew. A disease rips through the passengers and causes many deaths during the journey. The ship becomes an important setting in the story in the final section.

The Seaside

This is the area near the sea where the Columbus is waiting to set sail for America. Astri and Greta spend time here, gathering what they need for their trip to America. This is where Astri convinces Grace that she has a magic hairbrush and where Astri and Greta steal many items, including bread and potatoes.



Themes and Motifs

Fairy Tales vs. Real Life

Astri spends a great deal of time comparing the people and events of her life to those of fairy tales. In some cases, Astri believes the real life situations are similar to those in fairy tales. Svaalberd's wealth is one of those comparisons. Astri talks about the fairy tale of a large white bear that takes a young girl and promises to give both the girl and her family anything they want.

Astri compares Svaalberd to the white bear and believes that Svaalberd must be very rich. She sees that he has given two coins and a piece of goat meat as payment for Astri, but she imagines that her family is much better off for the exchange. She also imagines that Svaalberd has a huge treasure hidden away. It's not until Svaalberd is dying that Astri realizes he isn't a wealthy man. What she sees as treasure is really just a small amount of money that Svaalberd probably worked hard to save.

Another example of this theme is seen in the "magic" hairbrush. The brush is really just an ordinary item and Astri is typically disappointed whenever an item doesn't end up being magic. This time, she uses the brush and a few coins to get items necessary to board a ship bound for America. Grace, the young girl who winds up with the brush, is initially upset that the brush isn't magic but then realizes that it has served an important purpose. Grace was very upset at leaving her home and friends, but her obsession with the hairbrush helps her get through the initial days on the ship, making the transition much easier than it might otherwise have been.

Other examples of this theme are seen in the seven-league boots and the magic ball of yarn. Instead of the boots, Astri and Greta accept the loan of a horse to help them rush to their destination. Instead of the magic yarn, they receive directions to help them on their way.

Another important example of this theme is seen in Astri's first days aboard the ship bound for America. She compares that with the fairy tale in which a young girl is riding on the back of a huge bear. The ship encounters bad weather making the trip very rough. Astri is afraid, though she believes she shouldn't be.

Opportunities in America

Astri doesn't plan to go to America until she sees the young boy who stops by Svaalberd's farm on his way to the ship. From that moment, Astri sees America as a means to a better life for herself and Greta. She decides that they will go even though they face many challenges before they are able to get on the ship. As Astri and Greta are headed toward the sea, Astri tells Greta about all the things that are wonderful about America. She says the weather is almost always good and that there is fruit hanging from trees, just waiting to be picked by anyone who wants it. At one point, Astri is in the



forest in Norway and notes that she is in a perfect setting. She imagines this is how America will be.

When Svaalberd dies, Greta recites scripture. Astri says Greta should be a parson but Greta points out that women can't be parsons. Astri says that women can become parsons in America. She thinks about this as they continue their travels and admits to herself that she isn't certain if this is the truth. She then says that it doesn't matter if it's typical for women to be parsons in America, but believes that it can be the truth for Greta. Astri is certain that she and Greta can make a good life for themselves once they are in America.

It seems that Astri might have thought of this as a possibility earlier because her own father is in America. Astri hasn't heard from her Papa but he must have believed it would provide a better life, otherwise he wouldn't have left his two young daughters to make the trip. The ship is filled with people who believe they can find a better life in America. The Postmaster talks about delivering letters from Astri's Papa. He says the envelopes were heavy and he assumed there was money inside. This would be a typical assumption since so many people believe a person willing to work can make a good life in America.

Superstitions

There are many instances of this theme seen throughout the book. One of the most important involves Astri's twin sister, the Spinning Girl. There is something wrong with the girl that is never explained in the book. However, the author suggests in an explanation section that the girl might have had rickets. The disease was common in this time because children often didn't get enough Vitamin D. The people of the time didn't have medical explanations and many people used superstition to explain away mysteries of this kind.

For example, some believe that trolls would often leave their own children in place of a human child. The troll baby would not look or act like a normal child. In some cases, parents would abandon the baby, believing the trolls would switch the babies back rather than see their own children die. Many superstitions were used to explain defects or problems. Svaalberd says the Spinning Girl's mother might have gotten too near an elder tree while she was pregnant, which caused the girl's vocal problems.

Svaalberd believes that the Spinning Girl is a "changeling," or a being with magical powers. He says he can't let her get too near the goats because she could cause them to stop giving milk. He also says he can't let her get any of his whiskers because she could use them to cast a magic spell against him.

There are other examples of this theme. The Black Book is believed to have magic spells that address any number of problems and situations. When the pest strikes, Astri offers the book up as a means of saving Greta. Some are afraid of the book, obviously believing that there is magic within the pages of the book. The Blacksmith is angry



because he believes the book will save Greta and he doesn't understand why Astri wouldn't have produced the book when others were dying.

Coming of Age

Astri ages a few months over the course of the story but she also matures and begins to see the world differently. One of the main examples of this theme is seen aboard the Columbus. The Parson's wife approaches Astri with a job offer. Astri realizes that accepting the job will mean she will live apart from Greta and she doesn't want to do that. However, she knows that she has to have money in order to support herself and Greta and to eventually find their way to their Papa. This is one of the first times Astri really accepts that she is responsible for Greta and that she has to figure out a way for them to live once they reach America.

Another example of this theme is seen as Astri comes to terms with her part in her mother's death. Astri has blocked memories of her childhood and it seems possible that she simply doesn't want to remember some of the events. For example, it's not until after she meets Mor Kloster that she remembers her mother sending her to get Mor Kloster as her mother was giving birth to Greta. With these memories, Astri has to come to terms with the fact that she is at least partly to blame for her mother's death.

Astri is also guilty of attacking Svaalberd and probably caused his death as well. When Greta suggests they return to the home of their Aunt, Astri refuses. She knows that she might face legal consequences for stealing from Svaalberd and for killing him. She doesn't want to face that and believes that she has backed herself into a position where leaving the country is her only real option.

As the story nears an end, Astri is talking with Bjorn and becomes upset. She imagines Greta's voice saying that Astri should let the goodness inside her be seen. Astri has struggled with this throughout the story, often hating her situation even when there were reasons to be happy. In this case, she decides to look for the goodness inside and to act on that, rather than being unhappy. This is a sign that Astri is becoming more mature and is able to take charge of her life.

Achieving a Goal

Svaalberd takes Astri from her Aunt's home. While Astri is not happy there, she doesn't want to leave Greta. From the beginning of her time with Svaalberd, Astri's only goal is to escape and return to Greta. She hates the winter months because she knows it's impossible to escape because of the weather. When the opportunity to run away presents itself, Astri knows she can't leave the area without taking Greta.

Astri believes the money Svaalberd has in his locked chest is treasure and getting that treasure becomes one of her goals. She manages to steal the money as she's running away but later loses it back to Svaalberd. Though Astri, Greta, and Spinning Girl are safe in the home of a farm wife, Astri wants to get that treasure back. That becomes an



important goal and Astri manages to get the treasure again, though she finds it isn't worth much at all.

Astri's goal of reaching America becomes a long-term project. She and Greta have to steal and lie in order to gather the required possessions and get aboard the ship bound for America. Greta even hides in a trunk in order to get aboard the ship without paying for a ticket. Both Astri and Greta steal items from other passengers, including bread and potatoes. They never seem to question their actions and it appears they are willing to do anything to reach this goal.

Astri and Greta aren't the only ones with the goal of reaching America. Astri's father goes to America, apparently to make money so that Astri and Greta can join him there. There are hundreds of people aboard the ship with Astri and Greta, and all gave up their lives and homes in order to go to America.



Styles

Point of View

The book is written from the first-person perspective of Astri, a young girl who faces a series of trials and hardships in Norway. She is something of a romantic and is enamored with fairy tales. This makes her perspective unreliable and some aspects of the story are never fully explained.

Astri searches for some magical items that she believes will help her escape her harsh living situation and make it aboard a ship bound for America. She imagines that her captor, a mean goatherd named Svaalberd, might be a prince under the spell of the magical people of the land. She wishes for a pair of seven-league boots that will help her cover ground quickly but winds up with a horse instead. She wishes for a magic hairbrush and winds up selling her ordinary brush for some of the things she needs to get aboard the ship. In each case, she imagines herself as a character in a fairy tale and hopes for a happy ending. In each case, she is initially disappointed but then finds out that the things actually turn out right.

Other important examples of this perspective is seen when Astri is on the ship headed for America. She has some memories and a dream. She remembers some moments from her past and discovers that the Spinning Girl is apparently her twin sister. She also remembers that she was supposed to be going for Mor Kloster to help her mother during childbirth, but got sidetracked. Astri is apparently partly to blame for her mother's death but she doesn't really express guilt over that. She dreams about Death and believes that she has traded her life for Greta's, though Death has agreed that she can live until she finishes reciting the Lord's Prayer.

The perspective is limited to what Astri knows. For example, it's not clear whether this was merely a dream or if Astri really meets Death and makes a deal with him. Because Astri doesn't know this for certain, the reader doesn't know. It's left to the reader to decide which is the truth.

Language and Meaning

The story is set in Norway more than a century ago and the characters speak in their native language though the story is presented in modern-day English. There are a few words specific to the time and place, such as "huldrefolk." This word refers to the magical beings commonly believed to be responsible for otherwise unexplained events. There are only a few of these words used in the story and the meanings can be determined by the context.

Some of the names are unusual for the English reader. Svaalberd is one of those. The author provides a pronunciation guide at the end of the book that can help the reader determine how to say these names.



The story is written in first person and Astri seems to address the reader directly a couple of times. In the chapter titled “A Drop of Tallow,” Astri talks about the things she's learned from Svaalberd. She explains how to keep a wasp from stinging by reciting a specific chant, and that it's acceptable to add on the Lord's Prayer. She then says, “I'll thank you to keep that to yourself.” It doesn't seem that she would want the reader to keep the chant a secret but it might be that she doesn't want the reader to reveal that she's learning things from Svaalberd.

Astri refers to several fairy tales within the story. Most of these are explained in some detail but some of the references are vague. The reader who doesn't know all the fairy tales may have to guess at some of the details but these are not vital to the overall understanding of the story.

The author includes information at the end of the story about her motivation for writing the book. She found a reference in her grandmother's journal about a young girl traveling alone on a ship bound for America, which prompted her to imagine why this girl might be alone. The author also gives some possible explanations for events within the story, such as the reason Astri thrived while her twin was unhealthy.

The story is aimed at young readers but there are a few scenes that may be difficult for very young audiences. Astri is just thirteen or fourteen years old. Svaalberd is an old man. At one point, he tries to grab her and there seems to be sexual references involved. He also mentions marrying Astri.

Structure

The book is divided into three sections. The sections are titled by Roman numeral and by title. The titles of the chapters offer insight into the events of that chapter, though these often don't mean anything to the reader until after reading the chapter. For example, the chapter titled “The Drop of Tallow” includes a scene in which Astri tries to get a closer look at the sleeping Svaalberd with a candle. A drop of tallow falls on his shirt and that drop becomes an important part of the scene.

Section I is titled “The Goat Farm.” There are ten chapters in the first section. They are White Bear King Valemon; Work; The Drop of Tallow; Straw into Gold; Winter; The Ash Lad; To the Seter; Treasure; The Ring of Keys; and Red as Blood, White as Snow. Astri is introduced in this chapter and the reader learns some of her background while seeing Astri's current situation as the slave of the mean goatherd.

Section II is titled “Flight.” The chapters in this section are The Golden Wreath; The Birch Tree, The Magic Ball of Yarn, The Bridge, Seven-League Boots; The Seven-Headed Troll; The Spot of Tallow; A Feast; Welcome to a Church; and Trifles. In this section, In this section, Astri and Greta run away from their situation and Astri tries to figure out a way to get aboard a ship bound for America.

Section III is titled “The Columbus.” The chapters are The Winds; The Halling Dance; The Pest; The Postmaster; The Black Book; Soria Moria; Astri's Dream; Grace; and



East of the Sun, West of the Moon. In this section, Astri and Greta are aboard the ship bound for American and they begin to figure out details of the futures. Astri is hired to be a maid to a young minister and his wife while Greta is adopted by a blacksmith. The book ends when the passengers first see America from aboard the ship.



Quotes

Now I know how much I'm worth: not as much as Jesus, who I'm told was sold for thirty pieces of silver. I am worth two silver coins and a haunch of goat.

-- Astri (White Bear King Valemon paragraph 28)

Importance: Astri is about to leave the home of her Aunt and she sees the two coins and the piece of meat on the table. She knows this is what Svaalberd paid for her.

We had to eat bark bread. Still, I'd rather be back at Aunt and Uncle's starving with Greta.

-- Astri (The Drop of Tallow paragraph 5)

Importance: Astri is settling in at Svaalberd's house and she has to admit that there is enough food here, especially compared to what she had to eat at her Aunt's house. Despite the fact that her life can be better in some ways, Astri wants to be back with Greta.

And that wiry, rough little thread tells me that if anyone is going to do any rescuing from this place, it's going to have to be me.

-- Astri (Straw into Gold paragraph 33)

Importance: Astri has just met Spinning Girl. She compares the work Spinning Girl does to the stories Astri tells. Both are referred to as "spinning yarns." Astri knows that things always turn out right in her stories but that she can't sit around and expect someone else to rescue her from Svaalberd.

The smell of the new grass, of growing things, of warm earth and running water – all of it smells of possibility. This is what America smells like, I think.

-- Astri (To the Seter paragraph 17)

Importance: Astri is outdoors and it's spring time. The earth is renewed and she's optimistic because of it. This is the best of Norway, in Astri's mind, and she believes this is what she'll find in America.

Even so, she's been helpful enough, for she's told us where we need to go. And that is just about as good as a magic ball of yarn.

-- Astri (The Magic Ball of Yarn paragraph 34)

Importance: Astri has just gotten directions from the milkmaid. There are several instances such as this with Astri expecting a magical item only to find that an ordinary item serves the same purpose.

Did I wriggle and squirm long ago when Mama brushed my hair? I don't remember. Now I am as still as a church mouse, feeling these brush strokes in my heart.

-- Astri (The Bridge paragraph 47)



Importance: The farm wife is brushing Astri's hair and she suddenly wonders if this is what it would be like to have a mother. The death of Astri's mother is an important event in her life and Astri doesn't really know what life with a caring parent would be like.

As I say this, it's as if I remember the dim halls of that castle, the torches glimmering and the smudgelike shadows on the walls, the look of that great, gleaming sword and the leather drinking flask, and the rancid, old-man smell of the troll and his many greasy heads.

-- Astri (The Seven-Headed Troll paragraph 35)

Importance: Astri is describing this scene to Greta as part of a story, mainly to distract Greta from their current real-life situation. Suddenly, Astri realizes that she's telling what she believes to be a make-believe story but feels that at least some part of it is real. She later discovers that her memories and the fairy tales are somewhat mixed up in her mind.

The treasure was no treasure at all, just the goatman's hard-earned money.

-- Astri (We Come to a Church paragraph 17)

Importance: Astri has suddenly come to realize the truth about the "treasure" kept under lock and key by Svaalberd. She believed it was a lot of money and that it would buy a lot of things, but she spent almost all of it on a meal and a night in an inn. She now understands that Svaalberd had probably saved for a long time for this small amount of money. Astri is beginning to become more mature in her attitudes.

The very stout man who could do with a bit less butter, and the woman who is so fluttery that she should not have another bit of tinned partridge. When they look away for a moment or turn their backs, Greta and I are there to lighten their loads.

-- Astri (Trifles paragraph 53)

Importance: Astri and Greta are at the docks, trying to gather the items they need to get aboard the ship bound for America. They are stealing many of the things they need and are justifying it in various ways. In these instances, they are talking about the people who don't need these things and Astri seems to believe that she's doing the right thing by taking these items.

The ship lurches; my stomach lurches; my soul lurches; my sins come out my mouth and over the rail and into the sea.

-- Astri (The Winds paragraph 8)

Importance: Astri is aboard the ship and has had time to think about their situation. She is feeling guilty about some of her past decisions and is worrying about their future.

Oh, both babes were healthy to start – that's the way it is. But then something fchanges. Somewhere along the way a healthy babe turns into a monstrous thing.

-- Mor Kloster (Soria Moria paragraph 11)



Importance: Mor Kloster is talking about Astri's twin sister. She says Astri's mother had done all the things a mother should do to protect her children but had only one silver brooch, meaning she had to choose which one wore it. Mor Kloster indicates Astri's twin sister was ill because Astri was the one who wore the brooch.

My story has not come to an end at all, but a sort of a beginning.

-- Astri (East of the Sun, West of the Moon paragraph 2)

Importance: Astri talks about the end of the story about the white bear and the girl, and says that story has a happy ending with all the questions answered and all the details wrapped up. It may be that Astri had expected to come to a similar conclusion once she was settled in America, but she now realizes that she is just beginning a new stage of her life and that she has a lot of work to do in order to make a better life for herself and for Greta.