

Knut Hamsun's *Hunger*: A Self-Narrative towards a Self-Discovery

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Abstract

In Knut Hamsun's great novel, *Hunger*, the unnamed protagonist is a writer living in raw and self-imposed poverty in Norway in the city of Christiania, near Oslo, in 1890. Out of work, he struggles to write articles for the local newspapers to make a little money to feed himself. However, he ends up with no money for rent, and resorts to selling off his meager possessions to the pawn broker one at a time until he has nothing left. After experiencing manic highs and bleak depressions, he finally takes a job on a ship sailing away from Norway, to England, and says goodbye to his native land. *Hunger* is a self-narrative of a narration, Knut Hamsun's real life. The novel is clearly a great autobiographical modernist work, by referring to its undated times, and the stream of consciousness technique; still, there are some weak clues, such as its double-narrative quality and its almost fragmented structure, due to some visions, making it seem rather a premier post-modern work. This article aims to explore some parallel propositions of Gérard Genette's *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* and Knut Hamsun's *Hunger*: Repetition, Stream of Consciousness, Time, and Voice as the most noticeable clues and analyses of any narration. In brief, it may be said that the author of this paper intends to read *Hunger* once more under the light of some of the common conceptions of narratology to confirm its artistic expression.

Key words: Repetition; Stream of Consciousness; Time, Voice

Introduction

One of the most important and controversial writers of the 20th century, Knut Hamsun made literary history with the publication in 1890 of this powerful, autobiographical novel recounting the abject poverty, hunger and despair of a young writer struggling to achieve self-discovery and its ultimate artistic expression. The book brilliantly probes the psychodynamics of an alienated writer. *Hunger* is Hamsun's breakthrough novel about a young writer struggling to maintain his dignity while trying to survive in a desolate and lonely world. Published in 1890, *Hunger* was a literary breakthrough for Hamsun, establishing him as one of the most important writers of his time. Written from the perspective of a struggling writer living in the city of Christiania, near Oslo, Norway, the story is somewhat autobiographical, reflecting Hamsun's own struggle as he worked to establish his literary reputation. "Today, the work is acknowledged as a work of powerful originality, infused with Hamsun's unique writing style, and a premier example of the psychological novel" (Critical Essays, p. 1). It is the year 1890, and the narrator, who never reveals his name, has come to this city in pursuit of a career as a writer. As the novel begins, the unnamed first person narrator of *Hunger* is living in a tiny attic apartment in a boarding-house in Christiania. He looks out his window hungrily at advertisements for food during the early morning hours. Most of his possessions have already gone to his "uncle" (Critical Essays, p. 1), the pawnbroker. His room is poorly made and furnished. He has not eaten and has no food or money. His rent is due, and he is evicted from his apartment. He meets a woman whom he gives a fantasy name, Ylajali, and fantasizes about. The narrator is saved at the end of the first part by a few hours of inspiration that lead him to write a story that is published for ten kroner. However, in exchange, the narrator has given up his home. He has no possessions and nowhere to stay. A few kroners is a transient thing. The second part finds the narrator starving again and reduced to living in a workshop above a stable, abandoned because the snow comes into the building. The weather has turned cold, and the narrator's writing is going nowhere. After losing his keys, he is forced to spend the night in the jail as homeless, but he is turned out starving because he has lied about his position in life. At each avenue he tries, the narrator fails to earn or borrow money. Finally, a pawnbroker turns down his last possession, the buttons on his coat. During this part, he is saved; not by his own work, but by an unnamed passing friend who realizes what a desperate situation the narrator is in. In the third part of the novel, the narrator is poor and starving again. He continues to write, but his writings are rejected. He tries to buy a candle on credit, and the store clerk accidentally gives him change for five kroner. The starving man buys food that he cannot keep down. In his euphoria, he talks to a woman whom he has seen hanging around his apartment, and he discovers that she is his "Ylajali." He walks her home and makes a date with

her. However, soon the narrator is overcome with conscience and gives away his money. He is saved again when his editor gives him ten kroner, but on his date with Ylajali, she rejects him when he tells her the truth about himself.

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

Voice (Subjectivity, Existentialism and Dignity)

According to Gérard Genette (1983), voice is "mode of action of the verb in its relations with the subject of the statement." Since voice deals with the narrating, it will refer to a relation with the subject and the instance of the enunciating (pp. 31-32). *Hunger* is written from a first person perspective, from the point of view of its unnamed narrator. The story is more concerned with what goes on in the narrator's mind than with the world around him. In a way, the first person perspective, so closely tied to the narrator's thoughts and psychology that often ignores people and events outside the narrator's narrow vision, represents the narrator's fascination with the ideal. He lives in his own fantasy world; he lives inside his head. The novel does not give the main character a name, except a fictional fantasy name, and it does not give the main love interest a name, either (except another fictional fantasy name). Some of the characters remain unnamed and anonymous, including the friend who rescues the narrator after he has truly pawned his last item of any worth, having failed to pawn his borrowed blanket. "According to Paul Auster's analysis of *Hunger*, the radically subjective viewpoint expressed in the work immediately eliminates any connection with traditional narratives. Instead, writes Auster, *Hunger* is a work of existential art, a story in which a human being looks into the face of death, with no hope of salvation" (Critical Essays, p. 2). Throughout the novel, we see that in several occasions, the narrator finds some chances to feed himself, but he himself voluntarily prefers to keep on with his starvation. This character has neither name nor destiny and refuses to eat because, at all costs, he wants to reach the limits of sanity, of the rational mind, where everything is vast and mysterious. The character wanders the city without a fixed goal, without purpose, as a flâneur. He just walks and starves because he has decided so.

The narrator's pride prevents him from asking for help. He cannot ask the editor for an advance. He cannot tell his friends what dire straits he is truly in. He cannot tell the truth of his situation to the police when he stays overnight in the jail as homeless. He constantly lies and makes up stories to try to appear in a better situation than he is in, even to the pawnbroker to whom he sells his last article of any value. His pride is intertwined with a feeling of shame. He is ashamed of his own situation and feels that he should be above it. Part of this feeling of shame comes from the narrator's belief in his own ability. He has writing ability. The editor who buys his first article recognizes the narrator's talent. Despite all his failure and depression, the narrator views himself as a completely committed artist.

Undated Time

Urban modernity lives under an assault of clock. Throughout the novel, the unknown protagonist is always under such an assault of time, without mentioning any specific date. Though jobless, he is surprisingly concerned much about the concept of time:

"I was lying awake in my attic and I heard a clock below strike six" (Hamsun, 1921, p. 9).

"It was ten o'clock, and I went up to the newspaper office" (Hamsun, 1921, p. 38).

"It was nine o'clock; I had been asleep for several hours" (Hamsun, 1921, p. 44).

Time is of the great essence for all the narratologists. Almost each page of the novel gives us some hint of time, as if the protagonist were about to set off for some urgent arenas.

The next point about time in this novel is shifting from past to present and vice versa in one paragraph. The majority of the paragraphs of the novel provide us with combinations of tenses, past and present, shifting pendulously to one another. According to Genette, tense expresses the relationship between the time of the story and the time of the discourse (1983, p. 29). However, the novel denies such a clear distinction and leaves us bewildered with the vague relationships between them.

Everything influenced and distracted me; everything I saw made a fresh impression on me. Flies and tiny mosquitoes stick fast to the paper and disturb me. I blow at them to get rid of them—blow harder and harder; to no purpose, the little pestes throw themselves on their backs, make themselves heavy, and fight against me until their slender legs bend. They are not to be moved from the spot; they find something to hook on to, set their heels against a comma or an unevenness in the paper, or stand immovably still until they themselves think fit to go their way (Hamsun, 1921, p. 24).

His verbs dangle between past and present tenses, representing that he cannot make any progress in his life, nor in his writings. He sits at his table, pen in hand, ready to jot down something, but as if he were in a writer's block, fails to write some lines. Chronological time passes through any stroke of the clock; however, his thoughts are baffled via his psychological time.

A singularly happy idea had just struck me about a church bell—a church bell that was to peal out at a certain point in my drama. All was going ahead with overwhelming rapidity. Then I heard a step on the stairs. I tremble,

and am almost beside myself; sit ready to bolt, timorous, watchful, full of fear at everything, and excited by hunger. I listen nervously, just hold the pencil still in my hand, and listen. I cannot write a word more. The door opens and the pair from below enters (Hamsun, 1921, p. 174).

Stream of Consciousness (Hallucination and Daydreaming)

“In his biography of Hamsun, Robert Ferguson notes that the writer himself considered *Hunger* a work representative of his own perspective on the role of the writer” (Critical Essays, p. 2). The story of the struggling artist, *Hunger* draws parallels to the author's own life, and gives the reader an insight into the labor of writing. The story stretches over the course of just a few months, in which this young man struggles against starvation, homelessness, and emotional breakdown for the sake of his art. “According to Ferguson, the novel remains largely undated except for a few minor details because of Hamsun's complete focus on the inner workings of an individual mind—for the first time in literature, writes Ferguson, consciousness itself is a hero” (Critical Essays, p. 2). *Hunger*, which was based on Hamsun's many unhappy experiences in Norway's capital city of Christiania, was one of the first modern psychological novels in world of literature. Told in the first person, it is the story of a young writer of exceptional sensibility, who, stripped of all of his property and without any reliable means of support, is about to perish from extreme hunger. The book contains little action in the traditional sense. With the exception of the story of a few attempts to secure employment and the account of a brief encounter with a lady of the middle class, the text consists almost exclusively of reports of the narrator's mental life during periods of starvation. The protagonist is a spectacled young man, a writer who cannot find a job. He starts out the novel hungry, and he starves throughout it, kept alive by intermittent, transient bounty that he soon squanders. He swings between highs and lows, alternating between euphoria and depression. Existing on the little money he earns with the selling of the occasional article to the local paper, and the pawning of nearly every item on his back, he begins to lose all control of himself and slips into a mad world. When he is accused by Ylajali of being tipsy, he does not deny it. “Yes, worse luck, I was tipsy that time” (Hamsun, 1921, p. 114). He might feel ashamed but accepts such an accusation easily in other occasions, too. “I must certainly have been tipsy that time too, more's the shame” (Hamsun, 1921, p. 116). Still, the reader does not know exactly if he is intoxicated or fainted due to hunger. Ylajali says that she thinks he is insane, and the modern reader may wonder if he suffers from manic depression and not merely the effects of hunger. The narrator wants to achieve something great and profound in his writing. He seeks to escape from reality into fantasy by making up wild tales about princesses, castles, and even his own luck in finding a job and a woman. Still, he also wants a higher morality and sense of spirituality. Knut Hamsun's semi-autobiographical account of his early years as an aspiring writer is the essential condition of starving artist literature. It combines something of the manic intensity of Dostoevsky's portrayal of Raskolnikov, with the first person narrative and near hallucinatory visions of the main character brought on by starvation rather than alcohol. Hamsun's fevered stream of consciousness classic is something special. Unwaveringly “in the now,” this novel's every word felt as if it had fallen from the narrator's mind, unfiltered, unrestrained, and unreflected upon. The unnamed narrator, with his exaggerated and unjustified notions of his own superiority reminds us a lot of Raskolnikov from *Crime and Punishment*. The message of the book seems to be that the experience of poverty and hunger are a necessary fuel to stoke the author's artistic fires. The experience of hunger was surely not uncommon among artists at the time and the social consequences of hunger figure prominently in the naturalistic literature of the Scandinavian countries. The importance of *Hunger* lies not in its subject matter but rather in the manner in which the author deals with it, for his focus is on a portrayal of the strange workings of the mind while in an altered state resulting from the lack of nourishment. To this end, Hamsun uses a stream of consciousness technique through which the reader is given access both to the perceptions, moods, and strange ideas of the narrator and to his reflections on his own state of mind. “It struck five o'clock! Again I sank under the weight of my prolonged nervous excitement. The hollow whirring in my head made itself felt anew” (Hamsun, 1921, p. 179). According to Edwin Björkman, “*Hunger* was a new kind of realism that had nothing to do with photographic reproduction of details. It was a profoundly psychological study that had about as much in common with the old-fashioned conceptions of man's mental activities as the delirious utterances of a fever patient” (Hamsun, Introduction, 1921, p. 5). Every now and again, the protagonist escapes from the reality to some visions. That is the reason why every so often we, as readers, lose the trace of his narration. The narrator, as another Walter Mitty, is always potent in his hallucinatory visions, mostly due to his hunger, like Don Quixote daydreams of his imaginary beloved in her palace.

“...and they will bear me to Princess Ylajali's palace, where an undreamt-of grandeur awaits me, greater than that of any other man and she herself will be sitting in a dazzling hall where all is amethyst, on a throne of yellow roses, and will stretch out her hands to me when I alight; will smile and call as I approach and kneel: ‘Welcome, welcome, knight, to me and my land! I have waited twenty summers for you, and called for you on all bright nights. And when you sorrowed I have wept here, and when you slept I have breathed sweet dreams in you’” (Hamsun, 1921, p. 59)!

Almost always he is hungry; it seems so natural to have some visions or day-dreamings on food,

By some association of ideas, I find myself suddenly transported to a large, double room I once occupied in Haegdehaugen. I could see a tray on the table, filled with great slices of bread-and-butter. The vision changed; it

was transformed into beef—a seductive piece of beef—a snow-white napkin, bread in plenty, a silver fork. The door opened; enter my landlady, offering me more tea... (Hamsun, 1921, p. 43).

Through stream of consciousness technique, we see his refuge to dreams and returning to the reality again. “Someone comes up the stairs. I am recalled at once to reality” (Hamsun, 1921, p. 80).

Repetitions

Repetition and self-correction are noticeable not only in the language of the novel, but also all throughout the protagonist's life and writings. His repetitive descriptions of his flat in the attic, his several visitings to the pawn-shop, leaving and returning to his lodging-house, etc. represent his unplanned life. No progress does happen in his life. The novel depicts only few months of his wandering life, full of hesitations and dangling status. He tears the papers of his drama into tatters, later returns to the same place to find the torn papers to resume his writing.

Genette in his book, *Narrative Discourse* (1983), distinguishes different types of repetitions one of which is very prevalent all throughout the novel. “Day after day, I stroke at my work, begrudging myself the short time it took to swallow my food before I sat down again to write” (Hamsun, 1921, p. 94). Such a sentence, according to Genette, represents the repetition of an action, written once (1983, p. 116); however, carried out several times. There are a lot of cases in the novel for such repetitions.

During the following evenings, as soon as it got near eight o'clock and the gas was lit, the following thing happened regularly to me. As I come out of my room to take a walk in the streets after the labour and troubles of the day a lady dressed in black, stands under the lamp-post exactly opposite my door (Hamsun, 1921, p. 96).

Some names and objects are repeated a lot through the novel and they get some symbolic loads of meaning: lodging-house, the attic room, pencil, papers, waistcoat, pawn-shop, landlady, five Shillings, half-a-Sovereign, 2 St. Olaf's Place and etc. “I told her also that I had stolen five Shillings one evening” (Hamsun, 1921, p. 144). Sometimes the assault of time, the notion of repetitive actions (written once, done many times), and the name of a place as some keywords come together in one sentence. “When the clock struck eight, I walked once more towards St. Olav's Place” (Hamsun, 1921, p. 137). The whole novel with all its repetitions represents the monotonous life of the protagonist. “Week followed week, and the weather was, and remained, still the same” (Hamsun, 1921, p. 150).

The other kind of repetition in this novel is performed through the narrator's self-correction, mostly by use of ‘ay’, and ‘nay’.

“It was now two, ay, nearly three days since I had eaten anything” (Hamsun, 1921, p. 56).

“I passed into the back of the café, ay, even into the red alcove, without succeeding in finding my men” (Hamsun, 1921, p. 98).

Narrator's self-corrections or self-negations by use of ‘ay’, or ‘nay’ bear a slight sense of repetition emphasizing on his mental and physical depressions. “She regains her self-possession at once, looks insolently at me, nay, downright maliciously, and enters the house with a chiding remark to her offspring” (Hamsun, 1921, p. 155).

The protagonist could not complete his article, and his drama, *The Sing of the Cross*, like an author suffering the writer's block, all through his writings; he always demands a strong inspiration to accomplish them. “I only needed an inspiration for five minutes, and my essay on the conflagration would be completed well, I should have to submit to fate” (Hamsun, 1921, p. 157).

At the end of the novel, he admits that he is a failure in writing, “I fall suddenly into thought over all this, and am not able to find a solitary speech for my drama. Time upon time I seek in vain; a strange buzzing begins inside my head, and I give it up. I thrust the papers into my pocket, and look up” (Hamsun, 1921, p. 166).

Only when does he come to the self-realization, he discerns the absurdity of his talent in writing and he feels he is lost.

Halt! They sound questionable; they contrast rather strongly with the speeches in the first scenes; not a trace of the Middle Ages shone through the monk's words. I break my pencil between my teeth, jump to my feet, tear my manuscript in two, tear each page in two, fling my hat down in the street and trample upon it. I am lost! I whisper to myself. Ladies and gentlemen, I am lost! I utter no more than these few words as long as I stand there, and tramp upon my hat (Hamsun, 1921, p. 178).

The concept of alienation and diaspora appears at the end of the novel, “I just sit there and stare at the *Copégoro*, the barque flying the Russian flag” (Hamsun, 1921, p. 183) he had already taken keenly into his head that he was to sail this voyage, and he began to dread being hounded on shore again.

Out in the fjord I dragged myself up once, wet with fever and exhaustion, and gazed landwards, and bade farewell for the present to the town—to Christiania, where the windows gleamed so brightly in all the homes (Hamsun, 1921, p. 185).

Conclusion

Hunger is a monologue narrated by a struggling artist and is considered one of Hamsun's most autobiographical works. Regarded as one of the first examples of psychological literature and the stream of consciousness technique, the novel is largely devoid of plot and character development. Instead, the narrative focuses on the thoughts and actions of the first person narrator, a struggling artist, who lives in Christiania, hoping to strike success. Divided into four parts that are very similar in form, content, and style, the book follows an unnamed narrator as he attempts to find food, lodging, and

work while dreaming of making it as a writer. Instead, he finds himself alone, with nowhere to live, and nothing to eat. Alone in the big city, the protagonist reaches catastrophe in each section of the book, saved at the last minute by random events, such as the sale of an article, help from an old friend, and eventually at the end of the book, a job on a ship that takes him away from the desolation of the city. The novel focuses its attention solely on a single character—characterized by many critics as a “Dostoevskian hero, sick in body, suffering from physical depravity that forces him to have hallucinations and paranormal ideas” (Critical Essays, p. 2). The entire narrative, thus, focuses on the effects of an intense physical condition—hunger—on the psyche of one man. In addition to a study of the psychological effects of hunger, Hamsun’s novel is also a work of protest. “His focus on the protagonist is also interpreted as an act of resistance on the part of Hamsun, who reacted strongly to the realistic, socially-focused novels of nineteenth-century Scandinavian literature, especially the works of such writers as Henrik Ibsen” (Critical Essays, p. 2). In fact, Hamsun’s literary lectures shortly before the publication of *Hunger* focused often on his opposition to a theory and practice of literature that advocated the highlighting of social problems. Thus, the action and focus of this book is particularly significant in the way it focuses entirely on the protagonist and his thoughts, with no concern for any issues of social injustice or politics.

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