Hunger Knut Hamsun

*Sult* (1890; *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.

**INTRODUCTION**

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. Following the publication of *Hunger*, Hamsun went on to write several other novels, including *Mysteries* (1892), *Pan* (1894), and *Growth of the Soil* (1917). The last earned Hamsun a Nobel Prize in Literature in 1920, thus paving the way for his work to be translated into other languages, and becoming accessible to larger audiences.

Hamsun was born in 1859 in Lom, Gudbrandsdal. His parents, Peder and Tora Pederson, were forced to move the family to the town of Hamaroey for financial reasons. There, a wealthy uncle had acquired a farm called Hamsund, which they were to farm. Hamsun was separated from his family at the age of nine to go and work for his uncle, who also owned and ran the town post office. The young Hamsun was ill-treated by his uncle, who often starved and beat him. Years later, Hamsun would continue to refer to the abuse he suffered at the hands of his uncle, which he believed, was responsible for many of his chronic nervous illnesses. In 1874, Hamsun managed to escape from Hamaroey. He lived itinerantly for the next few years, working various petty jobs. Simultaneously, he also published several books, even
presenting literary lectures for interested audiences. However, he was unable to interest a major publisher in his work. Disappointed with the failure, Hamsun moved to the United States in 1882. Once again, Hamsun was faced with a life of labor, with little literary success. He returned to Norway in 1884, publishing an article on Mark Twain under the name of Knut Pederson Hamsund. Hamsund returned to the United States in 1886, moving back to Norway permanently in 1888. It is believed that his harsh experiences in America influenced his political views deeply and were partly responsible for his reactionary politics later in life. Hamsun continued to write and lecture, publishing the first few chapters on *Hunger* anonymously. When the novel was published in its entirety, it finally brought with it the literary success Hamsun had been seeking for many years.

**Plot and Major Characters**

*Hunger* is a monologue related 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 later developed by writers such as James Joyce, 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, Oslo, 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.

**Major Themes**

Many critics consider *Hunger* an illustration of the literary views Hamsun had expressed in his other early works. Although *Hunger* is very autobiographical, drawing deeply on Hamsun's years of suffering, loneliness, and struggle both as a child and later, as an artist, it is also a literary experiment. As such, it describes an artist-hero struggling to survive while trying to maintain the purity of his artistic thoughts and inspiration: “Nothing escaped my eyes. I was sharp and my brain was very much alive, everything poured in toward me with a staggering distinctness.” The novel is very different from Hamsun's other works, in that it focuses its attention solely on a single character—characterized by many critics as a Dostoievsksian hero, sick in body, suffering from physical depravity that forces him to have hallucinations and paranormal ideas. 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. 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.

**Critical Reception**

*Hunger* was published to great critical success in Norway in 1890, and Hamsun was hailed as one of the most significant Norwegian writers by many. International recognition followed later, once he received the Nobel Prize in 1920. Although much attention is paid to Hamsun's controversial political and social views, he also is acknowledged as one of the most significant precursors of stream-of-consciousness literature, and writing focused on the subjective, mostly due to his work on *Hunger*. In many ways, this novel exemplifies the contrasts that characterized Hamsun himself, notes Edwin Björkman in his introduction to George Egerton's translation of that work. Lauding him as “the foremost creative writer of the Scandinavian countries” after Ibsen and Strindberg, Björkman writes that *Hunger* is a novel about an unusual theme, told in a strikingly different format, heralding the neo-romantic movement in Scandinavia. 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. 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. 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.

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**Hamsun bibliography**

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  Collections: [Literature](https://example.com), [Entire Library](https://example.com)

When Americans remember him at all, they no doubt think of Knut Hamsun (1859-1952) as the author of *Hunger* or as the Norwegian who, along with Vidkun Quisling, betrayed his country by supporting the Nazis during World War II. Yet Hamsun, winner of the Nobel Prize in 1920 for his novel *The Growth of* ...
• 2.

Six Scandinavian Novelists: Lie, Jacobsen, Heidenstam, Selma Lagerlof, Hamsun, Sigrid Undset
Book by Alrik Gustafson; Biblo and Tannen, 1969
Subjects: Novelists, Scandinavian, Scandinavian Fiction--History And Criticism
Collections: Literature, Entire Library

...of Dostoievski. The novel I refer to is Hamsun Hunger -- and this novel, it is worthy of note...Selma Lagerlof and Heidenstam in Sweden. Hamsun followed up the publication of Hunger in 1890 with a series of public lectures...

• 3.

The First Moderns: Profiles in the Origins of Twentieth-Century Thought
Book by William R. Everdell; University of Chicago Press, 1998
Subjects: Intellectual Life--History--20th Century, Modernism (Aesthetics), Science--History--20th Century, Thought And Thinking--History--20th Century
Collections: Philosophy, Entire Library

A lively and accessible history of Modernism, The First Moderns is filled with portraits of genius, and intellectual breakthroughs, that richly evoke the fin-de-siegrave;cle atmosphere of Paris, Vienna, St. Louis, and St. Petersburg. William Everdell offers readers an invigorating look at the ...

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• 4.

John Fante: A Critical Gathering
Book by Stephen Cooper, David Fine; Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1999
Subjects: Fante, John--1909---Criticism And Interpretation--Conferences, Italian Americans In Literature--Conferences
Collections: Literature, Entire Library

...fantasies. She asks Dominic what he is reading: And what are you studying, 0 wise and clever Grandson? Is it a book about hunger and men walking the streets seeking work? Is it a book telling of your father without a job for seven months, or is it the...

• 5.

Knowledge and Opinion: Essays and Literary Criticism of John G. Neihardt
Book by John G. Neihardt, Lori Holm Utecht; University of Nebraska Press, 2002
How important were Sioux authors such as Charles Eastman in the opinion of the writer responsible for Black Elk Speaks? What will be the legacy of modern poetry according to the poet behind The Cycle of the West? Knowledge and Opinion offers an unparalleled glimpse into the social and literary...

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1. 

Knut Hamsun

Journal article by Edmund White; The Review of Contemporary Fiction, Vol. 16, 1996

Subjects: 

Hamsun, Knut--Criticism, interpretation, etc., Nobel laureates--Criticism, interpretation, etc., Scandinavian literature--Criticism, interpretation, etc.

Collections: Literature, Entire Library

...Before he could write Hunger at age thirty Hamsun (who named himself...the publication of Hunger. As Robert Ferguson...in this essay on Hamsun's life, the young...When I first read Hamsun in the 1960s. I...introduction to Hunger by the most important...

2. 

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Journal article by Ellen Rees; Scandinavian Studies, Vol. 80, 2008

Subjects: 

Books--Book reviews, Knut Hamsun, Novelist: A Critical Assessment (Book)-Book reviews
...To date he has translated by my reckoning seven **Hamsun** texts: **Hunger**, Mysteries, Pan, Rosa, The Last Joy, In Wonderland...continue to read and love even the most flawed **Hamsun** novels), only **Hunger**, Mysteries, Pan, and Victoria contribute to **Hamsun**s...

3. 

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Journal article by [Darren C. Zook](#); Scandinavian Studies, Vol. 77, 2005

Subjects:

**Hamsun, Knut--Works, Novels--Criticism and interpretation, Scandinavian history--Evaluation, Scandinavian literature--Evaluation**

**Collections:** Literature, Entire Library

...exploration of psychological tension (the "ubevidste Sjaeleiv") partly to respond to **Hamsuns** critique. (21) **Hamsuns** novel Sult 1890; **Hunger** was his first concerted effort to put this into literary form. For an analytical reading, see Kittang, "Knut..."

4. 

**Representation of Consciousness in Pan: Knut Hamsun as Modernist**

Journal article by [David J. Mickelsen](#); Symposium, Vol. 39, 1985

Subjects:

**Hamsun, Knut--1859-1952--Pan**

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...the individual in question. Hamsuns early novel Hunger (Sult, 1890) attends centrally...novel, however, which like Hunger features a first-person narrator...interpersonal, as did many of Hamsuns contemporaries, then Pan constitutes...

5. □

Are Norwegians European? the Bohemians Say So!

Journal article by Anne G. Sabo; Journal of European Studies, Vol. 34, 2004

Subjects:
Bjoerneboe, Jens, Bjornson, Bjornstjerne, European Union, Ibsen, Henrik, Life style--Analysis, Lifestyles--Analysis, Politics--Analysis, Society--Analysis

Collections: Entire Library

...Robert Blys translation of Hunger that European writers know that Hamsun is the father of the modern...twentieth century stems from Hamsun ... They were all Hamsuns...Haave, Oslo: Gyldendal. Hamsun, K. (1967) Hunger, trans. R. Bly, New York...

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Subjects:
Books--Reviews, Literature, Modern--20th Century--History And Criticism

Collections: Literature, Entire Library
...modest culinary proposal for relieving the hunger in Ireland could be brought up to date...the world of the scourge of mankind: hunger. Anyone who can pay the price can get...finds astonishing applications. Only hunger seems to resist. It is even increasing...

7. □

A Bibliography of Modern Scandinavian Literature: (Excluding H.C. Andersen) in English Translation, 1533 to 1900, and Listed by Translator

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8. □

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Subjects:

Fiction--20th century, Literature, Modern--History

Collections: History, Literature, Entire Library
...might plausibly offer three texts, written a few years apart, immediately following the apogee of naturalism: the expressionist Hunger (1890), Jarrys postmodern Ubu Roi (1896), and Jamess high modernist The Sacred Fount (1901) or The Wings of the Dove (1902...