

The difficult case of
Knut Hamsun (1859 – 1952) and
On Overgrown Paths (1949)

The Question: *Has History sought to exonerate Hamsun's Nazi sympathies because they were embraced by a literary "genius"?*

**Born Knut Petersen, 1859 in Lom, grew up in
NORDLAND, Hamarøy**

1880s Worked in America

**1888 Breakthrough with novel, HUNGER
Publishes many "Neo-Romantic" novels
which make him famous**

**1917 *Growth of the Soil*
Nobel Prize in Literature, 1920
Most celebrated 20th Century Scandinavian
Writer**

THE PROBLEM:

- **Hamsun supported Germany during WWI and Hitler after 1933, throughout the Occupation 1940-45.**

Sympathetic to Quisling's NS party; believed in notion of Germanic Empire. See Robert Ferguson's biography. (Hamsun denied any Anti-Jewish sentiments)

- **His views were rooted in the 19th century: rural and nationalistic, opposed industrialism, urbanization and commercialism; fanatic Anglophobia, hated of "English arrogance" and colonialism,, pro-German [common in 19th Century], Germany represented rural agrarianism and birthplace of Romanticism.**

- **"Literary" view of History and Politics:**

Nature (Germany) vs. Civilization (England)

Rural agrarian vs. modern capitalism

- **Hamsun's works popular in Germany as *Heimatchichtung* (romantic celebration of peasant farmer's relationship to the soil//**

NS ideology of Blut und Boden)

April 9, 1940 Norway Occupied. Hamsun and his wife support occupying forces.

- **Hamsun writes articles discouraging armed resistance.**

1943 Hamsun meets with Hitler at Berghoff

Protests barbarous methods of Terboven. (Meeting caused public outrage)

Membership in NS, Norwegian Nazi Party, illegal after April 8, 1940 (according to act passed by Government in Exile, Dec. 15, 1944).

May 7, 1945 Liberation of Norway

Arrests of 40,000 NS party members begin, trials and sentencing continued for several years.

- **Same day: Hamsun publishes a laudatory necrology for Hitler.**

Events recounted in On Overgrown Paths:

**May 26, 1945, 86-year old Hamsun and his wife (Marie)
house arrest at Nørholm.**

**June 14, 1945, Hamsun taken to hospital in Grimstad
(Marie to prison)**

- then to old people's home in Landvik,
- then to Psychiatric Clinic in Oslo
- for examination by Dr. Langfeldt, concluded that Hamsun had

**"Permanently impaired mental faculties"
not prosecuted for treason**

Dec., 1946 Trial, "Processen mot Hamsun"

- Evidence presented membership in NS, newspaper articles in support of occupying forces.
 - Fined \$80,00 for economic collaboration (575.000 crowns).
 - Appealed sentence and reduced in June 1948.
Fine left family financially destitute.
-
- *On Overgrown Paths* ends with verdict of Supreme Court, June 21, 1948

1949 publishes, *On Overgrown Paths*

**demonstrates his sanity, his “genius”, begins
process of rehabilitation of Hamsun as writer**

- **dies at Nørholm in 1952.**

The debate about Hamsun continues:

**1978, Thorkild Hansen, documentary work, *Processen
mod Hamsun***

**1978 Dr. Langfeldt publishes psychiatric
examination of Hamsun**

**1996 Nordic film production of “Hamsun”
Based on Thorkild Hansen’s work and on
screenplay P.O. Enquist.**

Historical and literary context

for Hamsun's literary work:

1890-1900: Industrial expansion, urbanization, mass emigration (no. of industrial workers doubles 1890-1900). New technological innovations.

New tendencies in literature of 1890s

& early 19th Century:

- **Protest against social realism**
- **Emphasis on the subjective, "subconscious impulses"**
(Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 1900)
- **Influence of Nietzsche's philosophy (irrationality of man)**

- Interest in religions, mysticism, nature (anti-materialism)
- Dominant genres: poetry and lyrical prose

1890, Hamsun, "From the Unconscious Life of the Soul,"
manifesto

Examples of early neo-romantic novels:

Hunger, Pan, and Mysteries

Period: "Neo-Romanticism" and "Modernism"

NOBEL PRIZE: *Markens Grøde*

(1917; Nobel Prize 1920)

Hamsun is most often placed in the context of literary modernism. (He is considered a "disciple of

Dostoyevski and Nietzsche, and a precursor of Kafka and Joyce”).

Tendencies of Modernism:

Hamsun’s manic-depressive heroes, his elitism, his emphasis on the subconscious, and his stream-of-consciousness techniques . .”)