Knut Hamsun (1859-1952)

*Dean Krouk, St. Olaf College*

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Hamsun_bldsa_HA0269.jpg>

A photograph of Knut Hamsun taken in Lillehammer in 1895.

<http://www.nb.no/hamsun2009/english>

The Norwegian National Library’s Website about Hamsun

<http://www.nb.no/hamsun2009/hamsuns-liv-og-verk/mannen-og-forfatterskapet/mannen-og-forfatterskapet/knut-hamsuns-takketale-i-anledning-nobelpristildelingen-i-1920>

Photograph of Hamsun’s handwritten Nobel prize speech

<http://www.nb.no/var/ekstern/storage/images/media/images/hamsun/digitalisertoslo/ha0075/34733-1-nor-NO/ha0075.jpg>

Photograph of Knut Hamsun in Bodø in 1914

<http://www.nrk.no/skole/klippdetalj?topic=nrk:klipp/258108>

Clip of Hamsun returning to Norway from Austria during WWII (in Norwegian)

<http://www.nrk.no/skole/klippdetalj?topic=nrk:klipp/262705>

Clip of Hamsun interviewed during the German occupation (in Norwegian)

Norwegian writer Knut Hamsun’s novels anticipated modernist psychological fiction and influenced a generation of major European figures. Winner of the 1920 Nobel Prize in literature, Hamsun wrote over thirty works in various genres, including both experimental modernist and neo-realist novels. In the final decades of his life, Hamsun became a Nazi sympathizer during the German occupation of Norway, which has complicated his literary legacy.

Hamsun was born as Knut Pedersen in central Norway in 1859, but moved to the coastal north of the country while very young. He grew up with little formal education, writing his first works of imaginative fiction in the late 1870s. Hamsun made two extended stays in the United States in the 1880s, when he worked on farms and gave lectures about contemporary European and Scandinavian literature.

Part of Hamsun’s breakthrough novel *Sult* [*Hunger*] appeared in 1888 in the Danish literary journal *Ny Jord*. In the 1890 essay “Fra det ubevidste Sjæleliv” [“From the Unconscious Life of the Mind”], Hamsun rejected literary realism in favor of a nervous psychological literature attuned to what he called “the whisper of the blood”. Later that year, he published the complete version of *Hunger*, a first-person narrative of a young aesthete’s fluctuating mental states while starving in Oslo. Two years later Hamsun published the novel *Mysterier* [*Mysteries*], about an inscrutable stranger in a small Norwegian town, continuing his proto-modernist excavation of the unconscious. Another important early novel from 1894, *Pan*, is a disturbing love story known for its stunning depictions of northern Norway.

Around the turn of the century, Hamsun moved away from narrative experimentation in his longer fiction and began to publish short stories, poetry, and drama. The 1917 novel for which Hamsun won the Nobel Prize, *Markens Grøde* [*The Growth of the Soil*], is a sweeping narrative about the need for closeness to nature and the corruptions of urban civilization. The later neo-realist trilogy about the vagabond August, beginning with *Landstrykere* [*Wayfarers,* 1927], explores themes of mobility and rootlessness in modern society.

In the decade after his final novel *Ringen Sluttet* [*The Ring is Closed*, 1936], the octogenarian Hamsun became a staunch public supporter of Nazi Germany, welcomed the occupation of Norway, and was tried for treason and taken to a psychiatric clinic after the war. In 1949, Hamsun published *Paa gjengrodde stier* [*On Overgrown Paths*], a recollection of his time under psychiatric observation after his arrest for treason. The significance of Hamsun’s Nazism has been a controversial and widely-discussed topic in the postwar period.

Key Works

*Samlede Verker*. Ed. Lars Frode Larsen. Oslo, Gyldendal, 2007-2009.

*Sult* (1890)

*Mysterier* (1892)

*Pan*  (1894)

*Markens Grøde* (1917)

*Landstrykere* (1927)

*Ringen sluttet* (1936)

*Paa gjengrodde Stier* (1949)

In Translation

*Hunger*. Trans. Sverre Lyngstad. Penguin, 1998.

*Mysteries.* Trans. Sverre Lyngstad. Penguin, 2001.

*The Growth of the Soil.* Trans. Sverre Lyngstad. Penguin, 2007.

*The Ring is Closed*. Trans. Robert Ferguson. Souvenir Press, 2010.

Secondary literature:

Kittang, Atle. *Luft, vind, ingenting: Hamsuns desillusjonsromanar frå Sult til Ringen sluttet*. Oslo, Gyldendal, 1984.

Žagar, Monika. *Knut Hamsun: The Dark Side of Literary Brilliance*. Seattle: U of Washington P, 2009.

Sjølyst-Jackson, Peter. *Troubling Legacies:* *Migration, Modernism and Fascism in the Case of Knut Hamsun*. London: Continuum, 2010.