***The Liar* – Martin A. Hansen, 1950**

This masterpiece in Danish Literature has seen its ups and downs. At its publication, it was, indeed, hailed as a masterpiece, but the ideological winds of the 60s and 70s viewed it in a more critical light as a reactionary book tied with pathos to a specific time and place. In the 90s, it was “re-discovered” and once again gained its rightful place among the immortal masterpieces in literature.

*Løgneren / The Liar* is a very difficult book to translate. Its style of writing, its “artfulness” (“finurlighed”) is difficult, if not impossible, to convey. At the same time, this artfulness also defines the content of the book, leading us deliberately astray in our assumptions about the narrator, the plot, and its message. A beautiful example is in the Danish edition on page 8 where Johannes Vig introduces himself with the famous words: “Mit navn er Johannes Vig. Sig ikke det navn for hurtigt...” In translation, it doesn’t make sense, but the duality of the original language is reflected in the book’s title and ubiquitous in the action throughout the book. “Vig” (cove) is a neutral last name, but saying his name too fast leads to the last name being “Svig” that means deceit. In such a perfect manner, we are introduced to the liar!

Here are some questions and thoughts for discussion: (page numbers are from the Sun & Moon Press Version from 1995)

1. Who is Nathanael? How many years has Johannes been on the island? What are the seasons he is focusing on in his descriptions?
2. Several poems and songs are quoted in the book – who is Ambrosius Stub, Steen Steensen Blicher, and Charles Gandrup? And what is their importance for the narrator, his thought-processes, and his attempts at understanding life and death?
3. What does he mean when he says that man may be an island, and that we are birds of passage? (pp 18, 19)
4. The Danish version uses the pronoun “man” meaning “one” in a very general sense. Sometimes, it includes the speaker, and at other times the speaker uses it to create a distance between him/herself and other people. In the English version, this pronoun has been replaced with either “I” or “you.” Does that make a difference in your perception?
5. The theme of being a fugitive on earth is introduced on p. 21. How is it developed, and what does he mean about humans (we) being refugees on earth? What does it mean to have roots and a home? (38)
6. The word “unrest” is used repeatedly. What does it denote – what kind of unrest is he referring to?
7. His beloved spruce trees in the back yard are cut down. What do they symbolize, and why must they be sacrificed?
8. What is the symbolic significance of spring?
9. What is really going on in the beginning? Who is the narrator? Who is Annemari? Why does he call the engineer Alexander? Why is he unable to talk about himself?
10. The book deals with existence and why we are here one earth. Is there an answer to this question?
11. How is his relationship with the nature and natural life surrounding him?
12. As the parish priest, he also has religious duties on the island. What do they entail, and how does he perform? Think about his feeling possessed by evil during the sermon about casting out a devil (106). What happens during that morning?
13. Is Johannes a man of action? Why / why not?
14. What kind of freedom is he looking for?
15. What is he thinking of when he talks about the troublesome / false dream of love and happiness? (47)
16. What do the decorations in the school room symbolize, and what do they tell us about Johannes?
17. Is Johannes vain? If yes, in what way? He thinks of himself as vain – but how is it apparent in his life?
18. He uses bird metaphors – Annemari is a woodcock, and the engineer is an oystercatcher. Why?
19. Characterize his relationship with Rigmor – and her husband Frederik. What is he looking for, and what is Rigmor looking for?
20. What does the sick child, Kaj, represent?
21. How does he use the old Danish folksong “It was a Saturday evening?” (61) Why does he cry at the end of chapter 4? (71)
22. Why does he want to write a book about Sandø?
23. What are Rigmor’s problems, does Johannes help her, and how can she solve her problems?
24. What happens between Oluf, Annemari, and Johannes?
25. Is Johannes in love with Rigmor or Annemari? Does he play with them – or does he play with himself and his own feelings?
26. On p. 131, he is pondering the purpose and meaning behind one’s actions. How does one become “human?” and accept oneself?
27. Is he a manipulator of humans? Is he a good person? Is he religious (he says yes)?
28. What is the meaning of the title? – there are many ways to look at the title and the book. Think about the choice of title, and think about life, existence, death, and the choices we all make every day.