“Burial Rites depicts a society in which power and strength are valued more than compassion and love”.

Hannah Kent’s historical novel Burial Rites depicts the harsh patriarchal society that favours powers and strength over love and compassion, which is reflected in the severe, intolerant nature of the law and social structure it serves. In such a society, it is not uncommon for the poor and weak to be strongly disadvantaged and women to have little power relative to men. While power and strength may dominate in the wider community, the text also emphasizes the profound effect that storytelling has on individuals, eliciting empathy and understanding. Kent feels that the power of stories can surpass the prejudice ingrained in people, bringing comfort and love to even a brutal world, displaying how love and compassion are almost necessary in any society.

Kent expresses the idea that under 19th century Icelandic law, there is very little compassion, and violence often used as a tool of power. As crime was threatening to the social hierarchy within 19th century Iceland, desire for deterrence of crimes led to a social order dominated by powerful men. The desperation to maintain a stable social order consequently led to the administration of proper justice to become irrelevant. The lack of kindness in society of 19th century Iceland, is evident in the interactions between Blondal and Toti, where Blondal criticizes Toti’s compassionate approach of giving Agnes the “gentle tones of a friend”. Toti’s mentality is in stark contrast to Blondal’s view as he strongly believes the only solution is to “apply the Lord’s word to her as a whip to a hard-mouthed horse.” Kent’s use of a simile exposes Blondal’s harsh and cruel perspective on Christianity and the justice through the judgement of God, in which he would discipline Agnes like an animal. Blondal’s lack of regard for forgiveness or kindness is parallel to the lack of such qualities in the law of 19th century Iceland, highlighting how the power and strength was unnecessarily abusive. The cruelty of the law in eradicating crime is also evident in Blondal’s view on Agnes; that she is simply a criminal who is to die. Furthermore, Agnes’ mistreatment during her custody in Stora-Borg accentuates the lack of humanity in the law’s punishments. Agnes was constantly “left in the dark, and denied of light and bound” by the watchmen of Stora-Borg. The use of first-person narrative, Kent enables the reader to view the harsh abuse and brutal treatment that Agnes had to experience, creating empathy and building trust between Agnes and the reader. The watchmen who abuse her are simply referred to as ‘they’, emphasizing the absence of humanity from them, furthering the harshness of the justice system. Consequently, Agnes is horribly mistreated due to the administration of power proving the significance of strength in comparison to compassion in 19th century Iceland.

Kent criticizes the brutal patriarchal society of Iceland where men have complete power over woman, and who often abuse this power. The entire 19th century Icelandic culture have individuals brought up with the idea of men being superior to women ingrained in their minds, which results in a society that is completely composed of male authority figures. The double standards that are applied to male and female promiscuity exemplify the power imbalance that dominates Agnes’s world. Natan is perceived in the novel by the community around him as the “good Natan Ketilson” while Agnes possessed a “sharp tongue and loose skirts”. Kent contrasts the two very different public perceptions of the characters to emphasize the difference in standards between the two genders. Nathan, despite publicly being known as a womanizer, was still respected by his community due to the influence associated with his gender, whereas Agnes was ostracized; despite having little choice over the sexual actions she was involved in. Servants were often dominated by exploiting masters and as a result, servants such as Agnes would have to make a compromise or risk their livelihood. Agnes’ label as a “loose woman” was a consequence of her choice to “let a farmer under
her skirts” as “denying him” would risk her “finding herself homeless in the snow and fog.” Kent displays the difficult moral decisions she, and other work maids of the time, needed to make due to the power abuse displayed by men. Such events would have likely led to feelings of despair and complete disempowerment, solidifying the maltreatment these women in Icelandic society received by men who valued strength and power.

Kent advocates that Icelandic storytelling has the transformative power of inducing compassion and love within individuals, despite being raised in the unforgiving 19th century Icelandic world. Storytelling is deeply rooted within Icelandic culture, teaching Icelandic people life lessons through the emotional connections they potentially create. Many Icelanders, such as Agnes, were familiar with their stories being told as sagas, stories about heroic deeds of days long gone, and were inspired by such stories. The contrast between the opinion of Agnes from people who have refused to listen to her side of the story and those who have reveals a lot about the profound effect of the sagas. During her trial at Hvanmur, the attendants at the courtroom “plucked at [her] words like birds...looking for guilt like berries on a bush”. The carelessness of men is expressed through this simile of the men to birds picking off berries. The motif of ravens can relate to the reference of birds, who did not listen to Agnes in spite of the stone that her mother gave to her. The simile establishes the connection between the ravens and the men in the courthouse, who are also refuse to listen and understand Agnes. However, while Agnes was not listened to during her trial, Margret and her family did, which ultimately changed their opinion of her from a monster to a human through her evening storytelling. This culminated in Agnes receiving the brooch from Lauga personally as ‘it was the least they could do’, even though it was initially evidence of her criminal nature when she was told “to not touch a thing in this house”. The brooch of Lauga’s symbolizes the change that can result from hearing a story, which is prominent enough for Lauga, the most resistant to Agnes, to give her the brooch to take to the grave, signifying love and acceptance. It was only through Agnes’s storytelling, that love and compassion was able to rise despite all the emphasis on power and strength within Icelandic society.

Burial Rites depicts a harsh society where the strong exercise power over the weak and women possessing little supremacy over men, there is little space for kindness or sympathy. It was typical for violence to be used as a tool for the powerful to maintain the status quo, without any regard for compassion or its effects. However, benevolent qualities were not completely absent within individuals in the text, as compassion and love is roused through the power of Agnes’s story, in spite of the brutal culture in which they live in.