

Hunters in the Snow

Tobias Wolff (1981) — A Literary Analysis

The Author

Born 1945, Washington State. Vietnam War paratrooper. Graduate of Oxford & Stanford. Professor at Stanford. Winner of the PEN/Faulkner Award and O. Henry Prize.

The Themes

Wolff's combat experience shapes his fiction. Violence, betrayal, and moral ambiguity run beneath the surface of every story — never resolved, always felt.



Setting & Characters

Snowy farmland, deep winter. No cell phones. No help nearby. The cold is not merely weather — it is **emotional and moral coldness**, a landscape that mirrors the characters within it.



Tub

Overweight, insecure, clumsy.
Always falling through the snow
while the others watch.



Frank

Passive, wears a diamond ring
engraved with "F." Quietly
concealing a damaging secret.



Kenny

Aggressive, sarcastic, drives recklessly for sport. The engine of cruelty in the group.

The Shooting — Plot & Tub's Arc

What Happens

Tub waits an hour in the snow before Kenny nearly runs him over — a "joke." They hunt for hours: no deer, no tracks. Kenny kills the farmer's dog without reason: *"I hate that dog."* He then turns to Tub: *"I hate you."* Tub shoots from the hip — pure reaction, no aim.

Tub: Victim Turned Perpetrator

He lies about "gland problems" — a studied self-deception. He secretly binge-eats: Oreos, Mars Bars, Twinkies, Sugar Babies, Snickers.

"The truth is I just shovel it in. Day and night. In the shower. On the freeway... Nobody knows. That's the worst of it — the lying."

His arc closes when the passive sufferer becomes the one who pulls the trigger.

Frank — The Passive Bystander

Married, Frank is conducting an affair with a 15-year-old babysitter. He justifies it with literary precedent — *"Juliet was only thirteen"* — another form of self-serving distortion.

His Rationalization

"She's opened up whole worlds to me that I never knew were there." Frank reframes exploitation as personal awakening.

His Decision-Making

After the shooting, Frank assumes control — but makes every wrong call: no ambulance, stops for coffee, orders pancakes. He manages the crisis into catastrophe.

His Voice

"You've really done it this time. This definitely takes the cake." Blame without accountability — the defining Frank move.



Kenny — The Bully Becomes the Victim

Kenny is sarcastic, cruel, and reckless. He kills the farmer's dog without hesitation — pure, pointless violence. After being shot, his tone shifts entirely:

| *"I was just kidding around. It was a joke."*

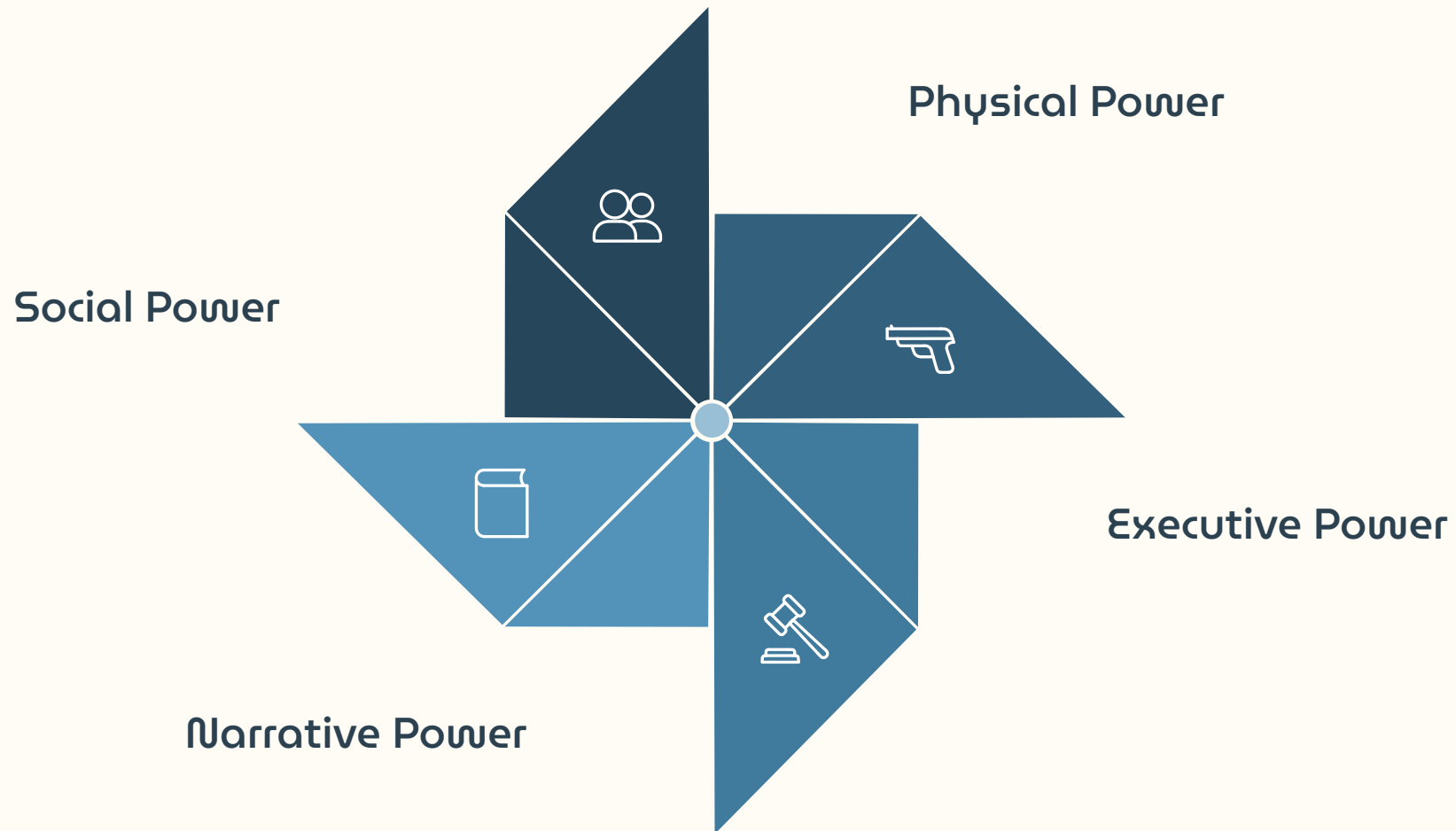
He ends the story freezing in the truck bed, blanketed, helpless. His final line — *"I'm going to the hospital"* — is delivered with confidence.

📄 **Dramatic irony:** Kenny believes he is still in control. He is not. He has never been.



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Power Shifts — Who Is Really in Control?



No character holds power for long — and none truly holds it at all. Wolff, as narrator, controls the final meaning. The characters are less agents than subjects of their own story.

The Diner Scene — Moral Nadir

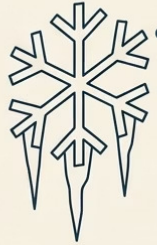
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Frank and Tub stop for coffee and pancakes while Kenny lies wounded in the truck. Frank orders four plates with extra butter and syrup. He takes Tub's napkin: *"No wiping."* He forces Tub to eat past sickness: *"Clean your plate."*

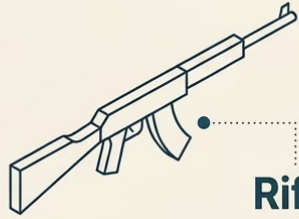
"I've never been so full." — Tub

- ❏ This is not friendship. It is mutual destruction. Frank and Tub have abandoned Kenny — literally and morally — and replaced guilt with appetite.

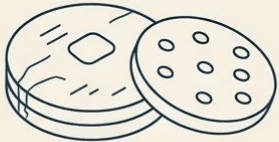
Symbols & Narrative Technique



Snow and cold
Emotional indifference.



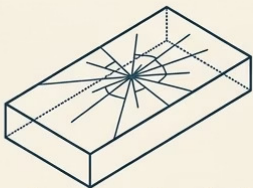
Rifle
Sudden violence.



Food
Guilt and inner emptiness.



Dead dog
Pointless cruelty.



Broken windshield
Truth cannot be kept out.



North Star
False hope.

Narrative Technique

The narrator stays limited omniscient throughout — quiet, restrained, observational. Then, at the story's end, Wolff breaks that frame deliberately:

"But he was wrong. They had taken a different turn a long way back."

This **authorial intrusion** is rare and purposeful. It strips the characters of the illusion of agency. Dark humor runs alongside it — Frank notes the bullet "missed Kenny's appendix," and Kenny quips about male nurses — comedy that sharpens, rather than softens, the horror.

Literary Fiction vs. Commercial Fiction

Why This Story Resists Easy Answers

Commercial fiction provides resolution: a clear hero, a punished villain, a moral lesson. *Hunters in the Snow* refuses all of it.

- **No hero** — Tub is a victim, but also a shooter
- **No clear villain** — Kenny is cruel, but ends up dying
- **No justice** — Kenny's fate remains morally unresolved
- **No message** — the reader must construct meaning alone

The Hunting Metaphor

They never find a deer. Not a track, not a sign. The hunt is a failure — and a clue.

- If they are hunters, what are they hunting? The story quietly suggests: **each other**. The real prey in this story is trust, dignity, and moral accountability.

The Final Twist — The Wrong Turn

"Right overhead was the Big Dipper, and behind, hanging between Kenny's toes in the direction of the hospital, was the North Star, Pole Star, Help to Sailors... 'I'm going to the hospital,' Kenny said. But he was wrong. They had taken a different turn a long way back."

Kenny

Trusts the North Star — the eternal symbol of guidance. He is already lost.

Tub

Shoots the bully and confesses his addiction. He finds no peace — only complicity.

Frank

Takes charge, makes every decision. He reaches nothing — not love, not redemption.

Final message: Self-deception and moral indifference are not navigational errors — they are the wrong turn itself. You cannot lie to yourself and still find your way.