Age of Iron Study Guide

Age of Iron by John Maxwell Coetzee

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

In South Africa an old woman diagnosed with terminal cancer spends her last days writing a long, last letter to her daughter who lives in America. As death approaches she begins to look back on her life and her country. Her usual perception of events is challenged by association with some new people that have a closer relationship to the political turmoil raging in the country.

On the very day that she is informed that her ailment is incurable and that she will die soon, the narrator, former classics professor Mrs. Curren, finds a homeless man and his dog camped outside her home. Perhaps due to a combination of loneliness and fear after her recent diagnosis Mrs. Curren is less adamant than she once would have been about sending the man away. In a very short amount of time this homeless man named Mr. Vercueil who is certainly an alcoholic and possibly illiterate becomes the closest confidant of the former professor. Mrs. Curren tries to offer Mr. Vercueil money in exchange for work, but he is more interested in money for nothing and a constant supply of liquor. Still, over time the two begin to display genuine interest in each other beyond her immediate need of companionship and his immediate need for alcohol.

With the return of her live-in housekeeper, Florence, Mrs. Curren is exposed to aspects of her nation that she has perhaps known about and disagreed with but never before on a first-hand basis. First, Florence's teenage son, Bheki, arrives with his mother because Bheki has recently become politically active, and Florence fears that if she leaves him unsupervised in the township he will get into trouble. Soon one of Bheki's teenage friends arrives, and Mrs. Curren is able to see the brazen attitudes of the young generation of black South Africans. All her life Mrs. Curren has believed that aggressive activism, especially when it includes violence, is dangerous and harmful. Her well-defined views are first challenged when she witnesses the police brutally assault Bheki and his friend outside her house in an unprovoked assault.

The next major event to shake Mrs. Curren's worldview involves a trip to a township. The news media do not report on the violence and repression occurring in the townships, but Mrs. Curren sees first-hand the effects of waging war on a population already in poverty and living without hope. Her visit to the township culminates in viewing five dead bodies, one of which is a body of someone she knows. Deeply shaken, Mrs. Curren continues to question her own responsibility in the current sorry state of affairs.

After the incident in the township, Mrs. Curren begins to wonder if there is something she can do with the little bit of life she has left. With Mr. Vercueil as her confidant she considers a dramatic and martyr-like act. Fortunately, the shiftless vagrant also has a way of making her see the absurdity of some ideas. Before Mrs. Curren can act or achieve any sort of stability after the event witnessed at the township, another traumatic event occurs. The police storm her house and kill a teenager.

In the end, Age of Iron is both a novel about a dying woman trying to accept her own mortality and trying to understand her own responsibility in creating the society in which she lives.

Part One, p. 3-15

Part One, p. 3-15 Summary

In the form of a long letter, an aged woman who has been diagnosed with terminal cancer tells her thoughts about the apartheid system that have bothered her all of her life. Though the woman is white and has not faced the inequalities first-hand, during the time she writes this letter, she makes some new contacts that allow her to become a witness to the reality of South Africa in the mid 1980s.

At the opening, the narrator tells of finding a homeless man camped near her garage. This occurs on the same day that the narrator gets some disturbing news from a medical doctor. The narrator tells the homeless man that he cannot stay. The man leaves, and the narrator thinks of all of the homeless in Cape Town.

The narrator reveals that she is a mother addressing her child. She reveals how much she misses her child. In the evening she goes outside and sees that the homeless man has returned. She tells him not to light any fires. She also offers him some food.

The following morning the narrator takes coffee to the homeless man. He accepts, but when she speaks to him in a condescending manner, he spits and gives her back her coffee cup. The narrator notices that the man is not present at night, but she also sees that he has left belongings, and she suspects that he will return. The following night she hears the homeless man and his dog return.

When the narrator tries to leave to go shopping she is seized by pain, and the homeless man helps her inside. She tells him that she has advanced cancer. The man says that she has a large house and she could rent extra rooms to students. The narrator tells him that her husband is dead and her daughter moved to the United States in 1976 where she is married and has children. The woman asks the man about his disability, and then she offers to pay him to cut the lawn. He starts the job but quits.

To ease her pain, the narrator takes some medication and spends the next day in bed reading.

Part One, p. 3-15 Analysis

The use of second person in the first sentence immediately lets us know that this narrative is addressed to someone particular. Since we as readers do not have all of the knowledge of the person the letter is addressed to, we have to pay particularly close attention to pick up clues along the way rather than receive exposition that explains all necessary background information.

One by one, we can find clues as to the narrator's identity and her situation. When the novel begins we do not know gender, age, location, or any of the details commonly

revealed in the opening. An example of how subtle details emerge is the line "Shrew was death's aim when he chose my breast for his first shaft." This can lead us to believe that the illness the narrator has alluded to possibly began as breast cancer.

Later, some of these details are confirmed in ways such as the narrator's discussions with the homeless man. We do not know much about the homeless man because he rarely speaks. We can tell something about the narrator by her thoughts concerning the man such as her immediate and ongoing belief that the man's dog is stolen even though she has no evidence of this.

Part One, p. 15-33

Part One, p. 15-33 Summary

The narrator, continuing to write to her daughter, tells of a morning that her car will not start. She asked the homeless man to help her push-start the car, and he does. She says that she is going to town, and she asks if he would like to come along. The homeless man and his dog go along on the trip. Along the way she tells the man stories of her childhood and stories she heard from her mother. She asks the man if he is from the Cape, and he answers yes, but he declines to answer her other questions or respond to attempts to get him to talk. Before they got out of the car and went their separate ways, the narrator looked at the beauty of the coast and began to cry.

Later that afternoon when both are back at the house the narrator shows the homeless man around the backyard and all the things that have become unkempt due to neglect. She says she will pay him to tidy up as best he can. Though he shows no enthusiasm, the man works for a couple of hours, and the woman pays him. When she pays him, she says that she knows the man is not a gardener but she cannot simply give him money for nothing. He asks why, and the narrator says that he does not deserve it.

This comment makes the man laugh, and he asks who deserves anything. Angry, the narrator passes her purse to him and says to take what he wants. The man takes all the money in the purse and leaves. When he returns, the narrator sees that he has bought liquor and acquired a small mattress. She demands he return what is left of the money, and he does. She then tells the man her thoughts about charity and how there is no point to charity if it is not appreciated.

One afternoon the narrator plays the piano. She is especially fond of Bach. She receives a telephone call from a neighbor to warn of a vagrant. The narrator explains that the man is not a vagrant. He is her employee. This makes the narrator decide that she will not answer the telephone. She thinks there is not anyone she wants to speak to except her daughter and possibly Bach.

The narrator shares some of her thoughts on concepts like heaven, death, and how others face death. She remembers a time three years previously when her house was burglarized. The thieves took only what they could carry, but they committed many acts of vandalism, and the vandalism is what she found most troubling. She can understand need or greed, but she cannot understand why the thieves destroy things just to deprive others from enjoying them.

One day while sharing tea and biscuits, the narrator asks the homeless man if he will do something for her after she dies. She wants him to mail a parcel containing papers to her daughter in America. The man asks if there is anyone one else that she can ask. He says he does not know if he will do it. The narrator says she had also considered asking

him to feed the cats, but now sees that it would be a better idea to have them euthanized. The man says he will mail her parcel.

Part One, p. 15-33 Analysis

The narrator's references to things like Rocinante, a horse in a sixteenth century novel, and her discussion of the etymology of the word charity reveals that she is a person with a high degree of education. She seems to also exhibit contrasting characteristics. She exhibits liberal views and criticizes her nation's government, but makes many stereotypical assumptions about the homeless man, such as that his dog surely was stolen from a "good home."

The narrator's criticism of the South African government is unwavering in its censure. She compares South Africa to a sinking ship, and she says that the government has completely abandoned reason. The narrator also hints that her daughter might feel much the same way when she says that the papers she wants sent are the only things her daughter would accept from South Africa.

Part Two, p. 35-56

Part Two, p. 35-56 Summary

Florence, the housekeeper, returns with her two young daughters and teenage son, Bheki. The older of the two daughters is named Hope, and the younger, just a baby, is named Beauty. Florence has brought Bheki because the school in Guguletu township where her family lives is closed, and she fears that Bheki will get into trouble and be hurt by police.

Florence has much work to accomplish in order to get the house back in order after her month-long absence. Florence asks about the homeless man, and the narrator says that his name is Mr. Vercueil. The narrator reassures Florence that if he causes trouble she will ask him to leave.

One day the narrator observes Mr. Vercueil working on the lawn mower in the back yard. The two little girls watch him, and the narrator expects that they will bother the usually sullen Vercueil. Instead she is surprised to see him play with the girls.

The narrator asks Florence about the trouble in the townships, and says she does not understand. The media does not report news from the townships. She says she does not understand why students would want to burn their own schools. Florence says that the youth of today are different and there are no longer mothers and fathers.

Late one night the narrator has trouble sleeping so she writes a note to Florence asking that she keep the children quiet so that she can sleep late the next day. She signs the note "E.C." The narrator thinks about the time she took Florence to see Florence's husband at his job at a chicken farming plant. This makes the narrator think of all the people like Florence and her husband who spend lifetimes working hard, at low paying jobs.

With more access to money, Mr. Vercueil drinks constantly. One day he arrives home, and Bheki and another teenage boy harass him and break his bottle of liquor. Later in the day they attack Mr. Vercueil. The narrator tries to intervene, but the boys do not stop kicking and beating Mr. Vercueil. Florence commands the boys to stop. The narrator asks who the other boy is, and both teenagers are arrogant. The narrator says that this is Mr. Vercueil's home. Florence is disgusted and calls Mr. Vercueil rubbish. The narrator says that there is no such thing as rubbish people, just people.

Mr. Vercueil leaves and remains gone for a long time. The narrator argues with Florence about the incident, but Florence is proud of what the boys did to a person she regards as worthless. The narrator warns Florence that all this hate, such as that demonstrated by the boys, will one day hurt all people. She says that the youth that today demonstrate hate will one day have forgotten how to show compassion to anyone, including their own people.

One day the narrator sees that Bheki's friend has brought a bicycle to the house. Later that night, the narrator hears a disturbance. She asks Florence about it, but Florence said it was nothing. The narrator sees a police van parked in front of the house. She goes outside to see if the police want any information from her. They speak to her in a disrespectful manner. Later the narrator tells Florence to send Bheki's friend home. Florence says she cannot because Bheki will go with him, and when the police come to the townships they arrive shooting.

Part Two, p. 35-56 Analysis

With no media reports to go on, the only news the narrator receives about the situation in the townships is from Florence. This is not a subject Florence talks about readily. Though the narrator shows curiosity, even concern, to Florence she is a privileged old white woman who could not possibly understand the horrors of the townships.

Mr. Vercueil continues to be an enigma, yet his behavior is consistent. He seems to live only for the moment. If he does anything that requires forethought, it is only in planning what he must do to get his next bottle of liquor. The narrator's concern for and affection for him is also difficult to understand.

The boys' attack on Mr. Vercueil demonstrates their utter disregard for previous social conventions such as respect for their elders. To the narrator, it also seems to illustrate the blindness, or at least narrow vision, of those too long exposed to slogans and generalizations in response to oppression. When the narrator tries to discuss the situation with Florence, she finds that Florence believes that the boys' attack shows their bravery and dedication to certain ideals. The narrator tries to explain that all it demonstrates is mindless cruelty and hate. She tries to explain that once hate is unleashed it cannot be controlled. It can even turn on their own people.

The behavior of the police seems to mirror the narrator's ideas on hate. They show contempt and sarcasm to a kind old woman. Once hate enters the mind, everyone is an enemy.

Part Two, p. 56-86

Part Two, p. 56-86 Summary

Early one morning the narrator hears rain and goes outside to find Mr. Vercueil. She tells him to come inside, but once they are inside the narrator sees that a woman has followed him. The narrator's warm tone changes, and she tells them that they must leave when the rain stops. The narrator returns to sleep, and when she awakes she sees Vercueil asleep on the couch. The woman emerges from the bathroom reeking of perfume. Florence enters the room, and the narrator says she has no idea what is going on. She says to give them some more time because they appear to be sleeping off the effects of liquor or drugs.

Later in the morning the narrator confronts Bheki about sleeping in her car. During the discussion, Mr. Vercueil enters the kitchen, and the narrator tells him to get the woman out of the house. Vercueil does not reply, so the narrator and Florence pick up the woman and push her out of the house.

Up the street the narrator sees Bheki and his friend on a bicycle being followed by a police van. The police van pulls up alongside the boys. The police use the van door to hit the boys, and then the police van continues on. The bike wobbles out of control, and the boys collide with the rear of a plumbing truck. The narrator and Florence run to the boys, and a plumber who owns the truck arrives. Bheki is badly cut, and Florence helps him back to the house saying she wants no ambulance for him. Bheki's friend is unconscious with a serious and badly bleeding head wound. First the plumber and then the narrator try to stop the bleeding. When the ambulance crew arrives, they ask how it happened.

When she arrives back at the house, the narrator asks Florence why she left the scene, and Florence says she does not want to be involved with the police. Bheki asks about his friend, and the narrator says he has been taken to the hospital. She also says she intends to file a complaint about the police, but Florence says not to do so.

Florence telephones the boy's family to inform them of the accident. Hours later Florence receives a call. The boy's family cannot find him in the hospital. The narrator telephones the hospital and learns that there is no record of the boy having arrived. Bheki tells the narrator that the police and ambulances often work together. He says that ambulances, doctors, and police are all the same. The narrator disagrees, and Bheki informs her that the police regularly attack boys who are not in school. The narrator asks Bheki why he is not in school. Bheki says school is an institution designed to make him fit into the apartheid system.

The narrator offers to take Florence and Bheki to the hospital. She also insists that Mr. Vercueil must go along even though Vercueil does not want to go, and Florence certainly does not want him along. The hospital again says they have no record of such

a patient, and they recommend trying another hospital. When they arrive at the other hospital, Mr. Vercueil decides to wait in the car. After searching the hospital for a while, the narrator becomes tired and frightened by seeing so much misery. She returns to the car to wait with Mr. Vercueil while Florence and Bheki continue searching.

Mr. Vercueil says he does not understand why he had to come along, and the narrator at first says she needs him to help with the car. Then she adds that she does not like to be alone. Even if she did not choose Mr. Vercueil as her companion, he is the only companion she has. The narrator tells Vercueil that she has not told her daughter of her illness. Vercueil responds that she should tell her daughter. If the daughter finds out later, she will not forgive her mother.

Florence and Bheki return to the car. They found the boy in the hospital, and he is well. Once they are at home, Florence tells the narrator the truth. The boy is in the hospital, but he is being kept in a ward with older men, including one that seems insane and shouts all the time. The narrator and Vercueil return to the hospital, and Vercueil accompanies her inside. When they reach the room where the boy is kept, they see the shouting man, and Vercueil explains to the narrator that the man suffers from delirium tremens, withdrawal from alcohol.

The narrator speaks to the boy and tries to show kindness. The boy remains stiff and reserved. The narrator explains that she used to be a teacher at a university, and that if the boy had been in one of her classes he would have learned something about what could happen to humanity during times of war.

Back at home the narrator and Vercueil eat and look at a book. She asks questions about where he is from, but he says only that he was at sea. The narrator continues to ask, and he says only that he worked on trawlers.

The narrator follows through with her plan to make a complaint against the police for what they did to the boys, but her efforts are in vain. She is told that since she is not directly involved she has no right to file a charge.

Part Two, p. 56-86 Analysis

The narrator is visibly happy to see Mr. Vercueil return, but that affection immediately cools when she sees that he has brought a woman. In addition to the desire to avoid having yet another vagrant on her property, there is also a small amount of jealousy.

The incident is a jarring vision of reality for the narrator. While she has known about the injustices of a racially based system all her life and has heard rumors of recent atrocities, this is likely the first example she has witnessed first-hand. Despite the terror of the situation, the narrator remains calm and offers assistance as if she has led a life accustomed to witnessing trauma. In truth, the worst injury the narrator remembers involved her daughter having cut a finger. Though her conduct is calm and admirable, her interpretation of what she saw is still naïve. She seems to think that what she

witnessed was an unusual occurrence, and she plans to file a complaint against the police.

The narrator continues to learn about the state of affairs for others outside her privileged environment through a brief discussion with Bheki. His comment that school is designed to help his generation accept and fit into the apartheid system leaves her with no response.

The longest exchange between the narrator and Mr. Vercueil, and the closest thing resembling a conversation, occurs in the car while they are waiting outside the hospital. Mr. Vercueil is amused that in the narrator's analogy explaining why she wants him near, he is cast in the role of the child.

During and after the second visit to the hospital, we learn more about both the narrator and Mr. Vercueil. She is a retired professor, and he spent many years at sea.

Part Three, p. 87-115

Part Three, p. 87-115 Summary

Late one night the telephone rings, and the call is for Florence. There is trouble with Bheki. The narrator offers to drive. She tries to wake Mr. Vercueil, but he mumbles obscenities and will not rise. The narrator, Florence, and the two little girls drive in the night to the township area. As they drive in the predawn before 5 a.m. Florence tells the narrator that no matter what she sees on the side of the road or if people wave for her to stop that she must keep going.

At a police roadblock the narrator says she is taking her domestic employee home. The policeman says they must walk from this point, but the narrator draws his attention to the fact that it is raining and they have two small children. He waves them through. After stopping at a shack, they are joined by Florence's cousin, Mr. Thabane. Mr. Thabane says he knows where to search for Bheki's friends. First they stop at another shack and a ten-year-old boy joins them and serves as guide.

After driving for some distance, Mr. Thabane says they can drive no further. He tells the narrator to stay in the car with the doors locked, but she refuses to stay alone. Mr. Thabane gives her his jacket to put over her head, but she says she is not afraid of the rain. Still, he insists she put the jacket over her head, and then she understands that the reason is because she is white. As they walk, the narrator begins to fall behind until Mr. Thabane helps her along. They reach a group of hundreds watching a horrific scene.

They see burning shacks, and the narrator sees what at first she thinks are men trying to fight the fire. Then she realizes that the men are forcing people from their homes and setting the fires. The crowd shouts and throws rocks, and the men advance upon the crowd. The narrator is knocked to the ground, and as she gets up she realizes there is fighting going on nearby. The narrator hears gunfire, and Mr. Thabane says they must go.

As they go back the way they came, they meet a young man Mr. Thabane says is a friend of Bheki's. The young man wants to use the narrator's car, but the narrator refuses, saying she wants to go home. Mr. Thabane asks about the people who are already home, and a crowd listens to the discussion between the two. The narrator is impressed with Mr. Thabane's speech. Once back at the car the narrator asks if Mr. Thabane is a teacher. He says he was, but he currently sells shoes.

They arrive at a building with a crowd gathered outside. The narrator sees Florence being comforted by many people. Inside the building the narrator sees Bheki among five other dead bodies. Horrified, the narrator asks who did it. Mr. Thabane says that if she digs out the bullets she will find they were made in South Africa.

Once back at her car the narrator finds that someone has thrown a rock through the windshield. She drives to where she sees soldiers stationed, but they offer little assistance in giving directions. After some brief directions from Mr. Thabane, the narrator finds her own way home.

One day the narrator asks Mr. Vercueil to drive her into Cape Town and park near Government Avenue. The narrator wants to know if it is possible to get her car onto the avenue. Her plan is to set the car on fire and drive it down the avenue so that it burns in front of the Houses of Parliament, or as she calls it "the house of shame." Mr. Vercueil says it can be done, but wonders why she would want to do it. Back at home over tea, she explains that there is not much left to her life. She wonders if anyone would understand her protest or think she was simply old and crazy.

Part Three, p. 87-115 Analysis

The journey in the predawn hours to the township is yet another occasion for an education in painful reality for the narrator. Despite saying that she will turn back at the first sign of trouble, and despite being given many opportunities and many warnings to turn back, she cannot seem to stop herself from going forward and witnessing the atrocities first-hand.

Through her encounter with Mr. Thabane the narrator is able to more fully comprehend the madness and cruelty of apartheid. She has probably suspected a great deal for many years, but now she is beginning to understand the severity of the system. The encounter with Mr. Thabane is also a moment of revelation for the reader. Up to this point, we have had no specific time for the setting. The apartheid system was in place officially between 1948 and 1994. When Mr. Thabane tells the year he was born and his current age, we know that the year is 1986 or 1987. The 1980s were the most violent time of the apartheid system.

After her return home and her trip into Cape Town to see if her car can get onto Government Avenue where she can drive it burning in front of the Houses of Parliament, our thoughts as reader must be somewhat like the thoughts of Mr. Vercueil. He answers her questions and listens to her thoughts, but all the while he wonders if she is really contemplating such an outrageous act.

Part Three, p. 115-147

Part Three, p. 115-147 Summary

One day Mr. Vercueil appears excitable, not at all his usual sedated semi-drunken self. He curiously, perhaps nervously, follows the narrator around during the morning until during breakfast she snaps at him to stop pacing and making her nervous. She soon apologizes, and Mr. Vercueil asks if she would like to go for a drive.

They drive to scenic spots like the one where the narrator looked at the coast and cried during one of their previous drives. The narrator looks at her watch and says that it is time to go home. Mr. Vercueil points out what a beautiful day it is and suggests that they keep driving. They stop on the side of the road and the narrator explains how she feels about her decision to drive her car onto Government Avenue. Mr. Vercueil mostly listens but occasionally asks questions such as why not do the same thing in the present location or drive to the top of a mountain.

At another stop Mr. Vercueil gets out of the car and returns with a bottle in a paper bag. He offers the narrator the bottle and encourages her to drink. She says she does not like brandy, and he says it is not brandy but medicine. She drinks and they drive to another area overlooking the coast where they continue to drink. She tells Mr. Vercueil about Bheki being shot. While she tells the story Mr. Vercueil nods and occasionally encourages her to drink. At one point angry and tipsy the narrator tries to take the bottle and throw it out the car window. Mr. Vercueil stops her, and she commands him to get out of the car. He does so, but first he takes the car key and throws it into the bushes. Mr. Vercueil and the dog walk away.

Sitting in the car alone the narrator thinks about her impending death, and she wonders if she should have gone to America when her daughter invited her. She thinks she is glad she resisted and did not go to be a burden on her daughter. Even in the most recent telephone conversation she has continued to claim to be well.

Mr. Vercueil returns, retrieves the key, and drives home. The narrator thinks about the trust she is putting in Mr. Vercueil. If he does not mail the letter, none of her words will be read.

The narrator is troubled by a bad cold for a few days and then decides to go shopping for groceries. On the way home she feels weak and almost does not make it. During the night she hears Mr. Vercueil's dog barking and wonders why he does not stop it. She goes downstairs to find someone in the kitchen. She initially thinks it is Mr. Vercueil but soon realizes it is Bheki's friend who was taken to the hospital. The boy asks for money for the bus so he can get home, but the narrator encourages him to stay because it is safe. She feeds the boy, but he has difficulty staying awake. He asks about the bicycle, and she tells him it is safe.

The narrator thinks about how she is helping the boy despite feeling absolutely no affection for him. She wonders if her inability to love this child affects her ability to love others. She remembers the day in the airport when her daughter left South Africa and said she would never return. Amid all these thoughts, the narrator thinks aging is like riding a bicycle downhill: one just goes faster and faster the longer the hill.

Mr. Vercueil has gone off again and left the dog. The boy comes downstairs and startles the narrator while she is writing. She helps him bandage his head and asks if he is running from someone. He again asks where Bheki is. She tries at length to convince the boy to stop fighting and stay in safety. He silently listens. The narrator asks if the boy has a name, and he says his name is John. She asks if he has any plans, but he does not answer.

Part Three, p. 115-147 Analysis

Mr. Vercueil's motivation in goading the narrator is open to interpretation. It could be as he says, that he is giving her "a push down the path." There is also another interpretation supported by his out-of-character nervousness in the morning. Perhaps he remembers how she was struck by the beauty of the coast and he thinks that by showing her things she finds beautiful he can give her cause to change her mind or to further delay her decision.

Mr. Vercueil's decision to incorporate liquor, or "medicine" as he calls it, into the day is also subject to interpretation. The most obvious possibility is that he wants some any time he can get it. He could also think it will help in the effort to give a push down the path. Yet another possibility is that Mr. Vercueil knows that the narrator saw something on her trip to the township that deeply troubles her, and her initial reaction to the event is to think her life is almost over and the remainder is not worth living. He might think by getting her to relax, especially if aided by the euphoric effects of alcohol, she might be able to talk about the events or at least think about them and adjust. Evidence of this latter possibility is found in his frequent urging her to drink more. Someone that likes liquor as much as Mr. Vercueil is not likely to want to share.

The narrator feels compelled to help the boy despite her conscious dislike of him. She knows he left the hospital without being discharged because of evidence such as the ill-fitting clothes he wears. She wishes she could feel affection for him but she cannot, and she believes it is this lack of desire to show kindness that presents the very reason she must be kind. The narrator seems to believe that what gives us humanity and compassion is the ability to decide to act with compassion and kindness when we do not want to.

Part Three, p. 147-176

Part Three, p. 147-176 Summary

The narrator passes by Florence's room and sees John sitting on the bed looking at an object in his hands. When he becomes aware of her presence, he shoves the object under the bedclothes. The narrator also notices that a portion of the baseboard has been removed. She tries to question John, but he refuses to answer.

The narrator tries to telephone Florence and identifies herself as Mrs. Curren. She instead reaches Mr. Thabane. The narrator (hereafter Mrs. Curren) tells Mr. Thabane that she thinks John has weapons, and she wants someone to talk to the boy. Mr. Thabane says he will do what he can to find someone to come fetch John, but he cannot predict how long that will take. Mrs. Curren says she thinks that whatever form of comradeship the youths have is insane, and Mr. Thabane says that she knows nothing of comradeship. He says that the older generation knows nothing of the comradeship among youth who are willing to die for each other and for a cause. Mrs. Curren says that others in history such as the Germans and Japanese have had similar ideas of comradeship.

Early in the morning the doorbell rings again and again. As she makes her way to the door, Mrs. Curren hears voices outside the kitchen door. She then hears a shot and rushes to the kitchen door. Three men are outside the door, and she pleads with them to let her talk to John. She walks outside in the rain wearing only her nightgown and tries to yell up to the broken window of the room where John hides. The police tell her to tell John to pass out his weapons. She tries, and then the police grow impatient and escort Mrs. Curren back in the house and out of the rain.

Many more police arrive in the house, and some ask Mrs. Curren if she knew the boy was armed. A female police officer arrives and tries to be kind to Mrs. Curren. The female officer says that Mrs. Curren must leave the house for a while. Mrs. Curren refuses, and the female officer drapes a blanket over Mrs. Curren's shoulder, and two officers begin to carry Mrs. Curren. Mrs. Curren shouts and even says she has cancer. The officers give up and place Mrs. Curren on the couch.

The female police officer waits with Mrs. Curren while many more police officers rush into the house. They hear gunshots, and later when Mrs. Curren goes to the front door she sees John's body being taken to an ambulance. Mrs. Curren tries to get into the same ambulance as John, but the police will not let her. Crying and frantic Mrs. Curren says it is not her house anymore. In only her nightgown and wrapped in a blanket she walks down the street.

Mrs. Curren stops under an overpass and lies down. She sleeps until she is disturbed by some curious children poking at her. One even pokes a stick into her mouth. Mr. Vercueil arrives and picks her up and begins to carry her. She is shocked that he has

the strength, and she asks not to go home. Mr. Vercueil takes her to a wooded area and places her on a large piece of cardboard. Mr. Vercueil and his dog join her on the cardboard, and she says she needs to talk. Mrs. Curren talks at length about what happened and what responsibility she thinks she shares in the current condition of South Africa. After talking for a long time, she says that it is time to go home.

When Mrs. Curren and Mr. Vercueil arrive home, they find that the house has been thoroughly searched, including the long letter to Mrs. Curren's daughter. A policeman has remained behind to watch the house, and he says that detectives will arrive later to talk to Mrs. Curren. Mrs. Curren takes her medication, and it is beginning to affect her by the time the detective arrives. He asks her about John and about the pistol. Mrs. Curren is beginning to fall asleep and answers that the pistol was hers and she lent it to the boy. The detective asks additional questions, but Mrs. Curren falls asleep under the effects of her medication.

When she wakes she tries to telephone Mr. Thabane. She cannot reach him, so she leaves a message instructing him to be careful.

Part Three, p. 147-176 Analysis

Mr. Thabane's comments in disagreement with Mrs. Curren are frank without being disrespectful or condescending, and it seems he has made some valid points until Mrs. Curren speaks. As in other times when she speaks, especially when in the forum of argument, we can see that it is her body that is failing her, not her mind. Despite her age and her cancer, it is difficult to imagine anyone triumphing in an argument with Mrs. Curren.

When Mrs. Curren wakes from her exhaustion and medicated stupor and immediately tries to telephone Mr. Thabane, her reasons may not be immediately clear. Her reasons are not clear until we remember that everything we as readers know is also likely known to the police. Mrs. Curren found evidence that her letter had been disturbed. In her letter she recounted discussions she had with Mr. Thabane.

Mrs. Curren's claim that she supplied John with the pistol is shocking and disturbing at first. We must worry about her after she makes such an admission, which as the detective says is admission to a crime. The police must know that she has been through a terrible shock and that she is under the influence of medication. Most importantly, if the police indeed read her letter to her daughter, they already know that she tried to stop John.

This last portion of Part Three contains a higher amount of action as compared to other sections. In other sections the amount of action is far less than the amount of text that describes Mrs. Curren's thoughts.

Part Four

Part Four Summary

Mrs. Curren tells Mr. Vercueil about her dream of burning on Government Avenue while watching Florence dressed like a Greek goddess walking down the avenue with her two daughters. Mr. Vercueil wants to know what it means and if there is more to the dream. Mrs. Curren says she would like to know more about Mr. Vercueil.

She asks Mr. Vercueil to fix the radio antenna, but he offers instead to bring the television into her bedroom. She says, no, it makes her sick. Later Mr. Vercueil brings the television into the room. When he turns it on, the national anthem is playing, and Mrs. Curren commands him to turn it off. Instead he turns up the volume and does a silly shuffle dance to entertain her. She is not entertained and shouts again for him to turn off the television. He does so and asks her why she is getting so angry. She says she is afraid she will die and hear that anthem through all eternity.

Mrs. Curren is in a great deal of pain. The medication helps, but it also causes hallucinations. She telephones Dr. Syfret, and asks him to change her medication. He says he cannot do that unless she comes to see him. The two debate with the doctor still refusing to do anything unless she comes to his office. An hour later a deliveryman from the pharmacy arrives with new medication.

Mrs. Curren asks Mr. Vercueil to let the dog sleep in the bed with her. He says he would, but the dog insists on sleeping where he does. Mrs. Curren asks Mr. Vercueil to sleep in the bed too. Having Mr. Vercueil and the dog near seems to help with the pain. While he and the dog sleep, Mrs. Curren is able to write.

Mrs. Curren is finally able to get Mr. Vercueil to tell her something of his past. For many years he worked on trawlers. His career at sea ended after an accident where his hand was crushed while trying to abandon ship. He and others spent the night drifting at sea before being rescued.

Mr. Vercueil does the shopping and the cooking. In addition to having little appetite because of her cancer, Mrs. Curren thinks Mr. Vercueil is a terrible cook. When he is not looking, she feeds most of her food to the dog. Though he has use of the entire house, Mr. Vercueil stays constantly with Mrs. Curren. Mrs. Curren acknowledges that all of her writing about Mr. Vercueil might upset her daughter, but she says that one must love what is nearest. She signs that portion of the letter "Mrs. V."

Mr. Vercueil has become interested in many of the objects in the house and is curious about the subjects Mrs. Curren once taught. He enjoys listening to her speak in Latin. Mrs. Curren wonders if Mr. Vercueil, or his dog for that matter, was sent to help her. She thinks maybe they simply fell into each other. Mrs. Curren writes that she knows the letter will end soon, and she hopes that her daughter will think kindly of Mr. Vercueil.

Part Four Analysis

Mrs. Curren and Mr. Vercueil have developed a closer more genuine relationship. After spending so much time alone with Mrs. Curren, Mr. Vercueil who once cared about nothing more than finding his next drink has become interested in the artifacts of the house and hearing more about Mrs. Curren's vast reservoir of knowledge.

Even in her weakest moments Mrs. Curren is a formidable debater. Though a combination of logic and tenacity she convinces a medical doctor to suspend his usual protocol and do as she wishes.

Mr. Vercueil displays an amount of care and compassion that is remarkable. It is touching that some of Mrs. Curren's final thoughts include concern for Mr. Vercueil and his future.

Characters

Mrs. Curren (the narrator)

For the majority of the novel, we do not know the narrator's name.

At the opening of the novel, Mrs. Curren has been diagnosed with terminal cancer and she has just found a homeless man camped outside her house. As the novel, an extended letter to her daughter living in America, unfolds we learn about her history. Mrs. Curren was once a university professor, and her field in the humanities, the classics, is evident in her every sentence. When she writes to her daughter or writes of having spoken to another character, she makes constant allusions to historical characters and works of art.

Another important aspect of Mrs. Curren's history is her opinion of the government of the Republic of South Africa. She has for most of her life felt guilt about the state of affairs. Even though the practices of racial prejudice began long before she was born, the apartheid system officially began when she was an adult. Though she individually had no role in either, she feels shame because she had no role in stopping it. By not openly acting against the system or voicing condemnation, she feels like she has silently condoned the present state. All her life she has silently hated the policies of her government.

With news of her impending death, she feels the need to act, to do something to show her condemnation of the state, the government. As she says, she feels the need to redeem herself, and she does not want to die in a "state of ugliness."

Mr. Vercueil (the homeless man)

Mrs. Curren finds this man camped outside her home one day. Though she tells him to leave, he returns. Probably as a result of her loneliness and her fear of impending death she allows him to stay. He is an alcoholic and homeless, and his constant companion is his dog. Throughout most of the novel he is an unknowable character. On the surface he is simply an alcoholic vagrant, but from time to time he presents hints at something deeper. Yet those hints are never fully revealed. Over the course of time and toward the end of the novel the narrator learns something of his past. He spent a lifetime at sea, but after an accident that left his hand crippled his career as a mariner ended.

There is a slight development of the character over the course of the novel. In the beginning he seems interested only in charity that will allow him to procure liquor. Though his distaste for honest work never changes, his care and concern for Mrs. Curren grows. The first indication of his concern for Mrs. Curren occurs on the day he believes she might harm herself. He appears nervous and agitated in the morning and then later asks her to take a drive with him. In Mrs. Curren's final days, she must rely on him for everything. He is a constant presence, never leaving her alone.

The most significant aspect of Mr. Vercueil to the novel is one that is attributed to him by Mrs. Curren. She has entrusted him to mail the letter (the novel) to her daughter after her death.

Florence

This is Mrs. Curren's live-in housekeeper. She has a husband, a son, and two daughters. She has been a housekeeper for Mrs. Curren for a long time, and she is the only source of news from the townships for Mrs. Curren since the media does not report on the oppression. Mrs. Curren thinks kindly of Florence, but their relationship is strained during the time of the novel by both the arrival of Mr. Vercueil and Mrs. Curren and Florence's difference of opinion and regard for the activism of the younger generation.

Bheki

This is the fifteen-year-old son of Florence, Mrs. Curren's housekeeper. Mrs. Curren has known Bheki all of his life and feels a great deal of affection for him, but since he has become a teenager and become involved in activism he has become cold. Florence brings Bheki to stay with her while she lives at Mrs. Curren's house because the schools in the township have been burned down. Florence believes Bheki will get into trouble without her supervision.

John

This teenage friend of Bheki's stays at Mrs. Curren's house until he is attacked by police and hospitalized. Mrs. Curren characterizes him as arrogant and possibly hate-filled. After leaving the hospital before being discharged, he returns to Mrs. Curren's house and stays there until his illegal activities are discovered.

Mr. Thabane

The narrator meets this character when she takes Florence to search for Bheki. The narrator notices the man's articulate speech, and even before he tells her she suspects the man is a teacher. In contrast to Mrs. Curren's views on the madness of the youth's activism and violence, Mr. Thabane believes that the new generation is strong and will change South Africa. He believes the older generation should stand behind the youths.

Hope

This toddler is Florence's older daughter.

Beauty

This is the infant daughter of Florence.

Dr. Syfret

This character relents and agrees to do things Mrs. Curren's way after a disagreement during a telephone conversation.

The Daughter

Though not present in the actual setting of the novel, Mrs. Curren's daughter is a significant character in that every word we read is intended for her. As the audience we are placed in the position of the daughter.

Objects/Places

Republic of South Africa

This nation located on the southernmost portion of the continent of Africa is the setting of the novel.

Cape Town

This city is the legislative capital of the Republic of South Africa and the specific setting of the novel.

Apartheid

This political system was officially in place in South Africa from 1948 to 1994. It is an Afrikaans word meaning "separateness." Its chief characteristic was racial segregation, which led to extreme oppression.

Townships

These were areas where non-whites were forced to live after being evicted from "white only" areas during the Apartheid era of the Republic of South Africa.

Government Avenue

This historic avenue in Cape Town is where the Houses of Parliament are located, and it is also where one character thinks about setting a car on fire.

House of Lies

This is what Mrs. Curren calls the Houses of Parliament. She also calls them "house of shame."

Afrikaans

This language spoken mostly in southern Africa evolved from the Dutch spoken by settlers. It is one of the official languages of the Republic of South Africa.

Guguletu

This township is where Florence's family lives. It was formed in the 1960s to relieve overcrowding in other areas set up for non-whites who were forced out of residences in Cape Town.

Fish Hoek

This coastal suburb of Cape Town has scenic ocean views. When the two main characters first drive together, Mrs. Curren is overcome with the beauty of the place.

Hillman

This is the make of Mrs. Curren's car. Cars made by Hillman Motor Car Company were once a common sight on South African roads, but hers is old and attracts much attention.

Themes

Social Responsibility

Mrs. Curren believes that a crime has been committed in the formation of governmental policies in South Africa, and for much of her life she believes that her role, or her function, is to live as a "good" person who is ashamed. She plays her role well. She teaches her courses in the classics staying far away from the turmoil. After retirement she stays home, reads, plays Bach, and is ashamed of the governmental policies for which she believes she is blameless. With the news of her impending death, Mrs. Curren begins to step outside of her usual routine and she sees things that challenge her notion of social responsibility. A series of experiences also challenges her notion that she is blameless for current affairs and her ability to sit quietly by and say nothing.

For her entire adult life Mrs. Curren has been against many policies in South Africa. Ten years earlier her daughter left the country in disgust. Because Mrs. Curren has always been philosophically against the repressive policies and practices, she believes this alone separates her from the "bad" people that enact or enforce the policies. The shift in her thinking likely begins when she witnesses the police brutally attack two teenagers outside her house. Soon after she visits a township and sees extreme poverty and violence, events not reported by the news media. Events culminate with the police storming her house and killing a fifteen-year-old boy.

After the shock of the house assault begins to wear off, Mrs. Curren shares her new vision of social responsibility first with Mr. Vercueil and then with her daughter and us. She says that it not good enough to sit by and be a good person who says nothing. She says that what South Africa needs is heroism.

Death of the Mind versus Death of the Body

In many ways Mrs. Curren feels the tragedy of her own death more acutely because her body but not her mind is dying. As her body slows, her mind accelerates to a breakneck pace trying to make sense of things in what little amount of time she has left. Early in the novel she writes, "We sicken before we die so that we will be weaned from our body." Mrs. Curren's body is failing her, but her brilliant mind wants to go on.

Other characters in other works may die after they grow weary of existence itself. They lose their appreciation of beauty and want most of all to rest. Nothing could be further from the truth in regard to Mrs. Curren. She wants to live. She wants to experience. Once in looking out over the ocean she is so struck by the beauty and the thought that she may never again see such grandeur that she cries. In reference to her appreciation of life's beauty she says, "Despite all the glooms and despairs and rages, I have not let go of my love of it." Her body is departing, but Mrs. Curren is not ready to go.

Perhaps the best and most touching example of how the body of Mrs. Curren dies but the mind is as sharp as ever comes with her argument with her medical doctor. The old woman with a cancer ravaged body talks circles around the practicing physician, and he agrees to see things her way.

The Present Viewed Through the Historical Lens

Time and time again throughout the novel, Mrs. Curren interprets events in the present according to how they compare to her knowledge of past cultures. She even interprets her own feelings according to how they remind her of past works of art. Whether her allusion is to a battle in Russia or the horse ridden by Don Quixote, Mrs. Curren views everything in terms of her knowledge of history.

Though we do not know Mrs. Curren's profession until well into the novel, we can tell early on that she is an educated person. She has knowledge of classical languages, and she writes with poetic imagery. Her love of classical music runs deep. She can recall the etymology of words in multiple languages, and she sometimes corrects herself.

The most notable and profound example of how Mrs. Curren evaluates present events by comparing them to her knowledge of history comes during her telephone discussion with Mr. Thabane and their argument over the notion of comradeship. Mr. Thabane says that the youth's new activism is brave. Mrs. Curren says that there is nothing new about it, and anyone with knowledge of history would know it is not brave. When she observes that the youths' idea of comradeship involves rally around slogans that glorify death, she comments that other societies like the Spartans, Germans, and Japanese had similar ideas.

Though Mrs. Curren is certainly unhappy with the role she has played in her present society, it cannot be said that she did so due to a lack of knowledge of the past. Mrs. Curren lives in the past. Indeed, to her violence and hate of the past is every bit as real as the current tragedy in the townships.

Style

Point of View

The point of view in Age of Iron comes from the perspective of the narrator, Mrs. Curren. Because the narrative is in the form of a long letter to the narrator's daughter, it begins with a second person reference. Other second person references occur frequently throughout the text, and these remind us that the letter is addressed to a specific person, not to the general reader. Beyond these occurrences the story proceeds like any other first person narrative.

As with other stories delivered by first person narrative, we the readers cannot know anything about other characters beyond what the narrator knows. Every action and every statement we can attribute to a character has been interpreted and relayed to us by the narrator. Fortunately in this case, our narrator is a woman with a brilliant and insightful mind. She has spent a lifetime as a teacher, and she has a great ability to access how much of what she says a character understands, so she often reiterates a single point in many ways.

Another interesting direct result of the second person nature of the text is that it makes it seem utterly devoid of exposition. Surely exposition exists, but if so it is cleverly concealed by the author. Because the letter is addressed to a specific person, the narrator supposes a certain level of background knowledge that the rest of us readers do not possess. We are left to our own close reading to find the clues rather than being given block portions of distracting exposition.

Setting

The setting of the novel is Cape Town in the Republic of South Africa. Equally important to the location is the time of the setting, the mid to late 1980s. This was during the last and most violent years of the political system known as Apartheid. Often it is helpful in understanding a story to ask whether it could have been placed in a different setting. If asked, the narrator, Mrs. Curren, would almost certainly say, yes, this story could be placed in other settings, such as Nazi Germany or the American south during the time of segregation.

Within this broad setting, there are other smaller settings. Two sub settings, Mrs. Curren's house and the townships, are polar opposites of each other. Prior to the violent and chaotic events later in the novel, Mrs. Curren's house is orderly, like the ivory tower academic setting where Mrs. Curren spent her career. It is a detached and idyllic place suited for contemplation and enjoyment of aesthetics. In this sense, Mrs. Curren's house is far removed from reality. The townships on the other hand are a place of brutal reality. There is nothing beautiful about the mud, cruelty, and hopelessness.

Yet another setting is located within the confines of the mind of the narrator. Long portions of the text concern Mrs. Curren's perception and interpretation of events, including her struggle to accept her own mortality. By addressing us as she would her daughter, we are immersed in this last setting.

Language and Meaning

The distinct and beautiful prose is a direct result of the narrator and her previous profession. Mrs. Curren is a retired professor of the humanities. While she can communicate in the everyday language of the modern day, she is most comfortable thinking and writing in the best of many languages. Her brilliant mind sees not just an object as it is in the present but how it relates to the Ancient Greeks, the Romans, and other societies throughout history. Her thoughts are not shackled to the present but stretch through time to an array of past cultures and civilizations.

While this amazing mind with the eye of a painter and the voice of a poet can convey profound ideas and beautiful images, it is not without pitfalls. Sometimes listening to Mrs. Curren can take patience. Unless it suits her rhetorical purpose to go straight to the point, she rarely does. Mr. Vercueil is her most frequent companion, and he most often has to endure long speeches full of allusions to things he has never heard of. Fortunately for Mr. Vercueil he has the sedative effects of alcohol to help him get through. Other characters, such as Dr. Syfret and the police also get treated to Mrs. Curren's circumnavigating speech.

The reader also has to employ a bit of patience in getting through Mrs. Curren's winding descriptions along the way to her point. This patience on the part of the reader is always richly rewarded both in revelation of her end points and the vision she presents during the journey.

Structure

The structure of the novel is in the form of a long letter. It is divided into four parts. The fourth part is distinct from the previous three in that it is composed while the narrator is mostly bedridden and her writing output is lessened due to pain and the sedative effects of medication. Judging by the date at the end of the letter, 1986-89, Part Four, while being the shortest part, probably covers the longest period of time. By contrast, Part Three comprises nearly half the novel in terms of text, but it covers a comparatively short period of time. Part Three contains the two most traumatic events in the novel, the incident in the township and the police assault on Mrs. Curren's house.

Within the four parts, the narrative is written in segments, which usually correspond to an event or a predominant idea. In this way, the narrative resembles a diary or memoir. Additionally, because the sections are generally composed immediately following a significant event, the narrative has a "real-time" feel more akin to journal writing than a long narrative composed all at once long after events.

Despite the division of four parts and the sections within the larger parts, the narrative has a unity not often found in other works. Part of this is due to the consistency of the narrative voice in relation to the purpose of the text being destined for a singular audience.

Quotes

Part One, p. 5
We embrace to be embraced. We embrace our children to be folded in the arms of the future, to pass ourselves on beyond death, to be transported. That it how it was when I embraced you, always. We bear children in order to be mothered by them.

Part One, p. 16
"When I was a child," I said, "I used to go downhills on a bicycle with no brakes to speak of. It belonged to my elder brother. He would dare me. I was completely without fear. Children cannot conceive of what it is to die. It never crosses their minds that they may not be immortal."

Part One, p. 23
There I lay in the dark listening to the music of the stars and the crackling and humming that accompanied it like the dust of meteors, smiling, my heart filled with gratitude for this good news from afar. The one border they cannot close, I thought: the border upward, between the Republic of South Africa and the empire of the sky. Where I am due to travel. Where no passport is required.

Part Two, p. 39
Of the trouble in the schools the radio says nothing, the television says nothing, the newspapers say nothing. In the world they project all the children of the land are sitting happily at their desks and learning about the square on the hypotenuse and the parrots of the Amazonian jungle. What I know about events in Guguletu depends solely on what Florence tells me and by what I can learn by standing on the balcony and peering northeast: namely, that Guguletu is not burning today, or, if it is burning, is burning with a low flame.

Part Two, p. 49
"But do you remember what you told me last year, Florence, when those unspeakable things were happening in the townships? You said to me, 'I saw a woman on fire, burning, and when she screamed for help, the children laughed and threw more petrol on her." You said, 'I did not think I would live to see such a thing.'"

Part Two, p. 72
"And if you think I am a fossil from the past," I added, "it is time you look at yourself. You have seen what the children of today think of drinking and lying around and leeglopery. Be warned. In the South Africa of the future everyone will have to work, including you. You may not like the prospect, but you had better prepare yourself for it."

Part Two, p. 79
Be slow to judge: what did I mean? If I did not know, who else could be expected to? Certainly not he. Yet in his case, I was sure, the incomprehension ran deeper. My words fell off him like dead leaves the moment they were uttered. The words of a woman,

therefore negligible; of an old woman, therefore double negligible; but above all of a white.

Part Three, pp. 102-103
I was shaking: shivers ran up and down my body, my hands trembled. I thought of the boy's open eyes. I thought: What did he see as his last sight on earth? I thought: This is the worst thing I have witnessed in my life. And I thought: Now my eyes are open and I can never close them again.

Part Three, p. 117
"You want to know what is going on with me and I am trying to tell you. I want to sell myself, redeem myself, but I am full of confusion about how to do it. That, if you like, is the craziness that has got into me. You need not be surprised. You know this country. There is madness in the air here."

Part Three, pp. 125-126
"Now that the child is buried and we walk upon him. Let me tell you, when I walk upon this land, this South Africa, I have a gathering feeling of walking upon black faces. They are dead but their spirit has not left them. They lie there heavy and obdurate, waiting for my feet to pass, waiting for me to go, waiting to be raised up again. Millions of figures of pig iron floating under the skin of the earth. The age of iron waiting to return.

Part Three, p. 136
I do not want to die in the state I am in, in a state of ugliness. I want to be saved. How shall I be saved? By doing what I do not want to do. That is the first step: that I know. I must love, first of all, the unlovable. I must love, for instance, this child.

Part Four, pp. 185-186
I will draw a veil soon. This was never meant to be the story of a body, but of the soul it houses. I will not show to you what you will not be able to bear: a woman in a burning house running from window to window, calling through the bars for help.

Topics for Discussion

Discuss your opinion of Mr. Vercueil seeming to goad Mrs. Curren toward acting on her ideas of suicide. What do you think he hopes to accomplish, and are there specific details in the text to support your belief?

The narrator states: "Because I cannot trust Vercueil I must trust him." What might she mean by this? Is this in any way related to her idea that to be saved she must love the unlovable?

Though the narrator, Mrs. Curren, often speaks of events in her daughter's past and speaks of other relatives, such as a mother and a brother, she almost never mentions her long-dead husband or other significant relationships in her life. What evidence can you find in the text to support the view that even before her cancer diagnosis Mrs. Curren was a solitary person, and how do you think this contributes to her willingness to reach out to Mr. Vercueil and others during her final days?

In Part Two when Bheki and John behave in an arrogant manner toward Mrs. Curren and sarcastically ask, "Must we have a pass?" they are likely referring to the Pass Laws Act which required rural non-white residents of South Africa to have a pass, and keep it with them at all times, to go into certain areas like cities. Can you think of other governments in history that have required people to possess passes or wear badges? Or can you think of governments that restricted the rights of certain citizens to use public facilities? How were these governments similar to the government of the Republic of South Africa prior to 1994?

Because the letter is long it shares similarities with a diary or a journal in that is written in segments after specific events. Though we may feel concern for the narrator during some of the more troubling events, we can always rely on knowing that she will make it home safely, otherwise she would not have been able to have written of the incident. What affect does the letter format have on the tension level of the novel as compared to a novel that is written as one long text in first person? And what effect does knowing that the narrator is relating the tales soon after the event have on our impression of her reliability?

Mrs. Curren cautions Florence that once hate is unleashed it cannot be controlled or directed. Discuss and explain Mrs. Curren's ideas of how hate is nothing but a destructive force.

At the end of the letter is the date "1986-89." We know that the incident Mrs. Curren witnessed in the township, including seeing Bheki's body, happened in 1986 or 1987 based on what Mr. Thabane said about his age. If the close of the letter happened in 1989, what might that mean about the length of time Mrs. Curren spent in bed with Mr. Vercueil tending to her as compared to the length of time of the action covered by the rest of the letter?