

And the Earth Did Not Devour Him Study Guide

And the Earth Did Not Devour Him by Tomás Rivera

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Plot Summary

“And the Earth Did Not Devour Him” is the story of a young boy who lives the life of a migrant farm worker with his family. The novel spans one year. The life is difficult on individuals and families, and death is a common fear. The land owners are often greedy and demanding as is seen in one of the very early chapters when a farm owner refuses to allow the workers additional breaks for water even when the temperatures are soaring and the children are among the workers. Several people slip away to a water tank on the pretense of needing to urinate. The farmer sees this and plans to scare them into stopping the practice by shooting in that direction. He shoots a little boy standing by the tank and the child’s body falls into the water. The farmer is found not guilty of murder but guilt ruins his life and he eventually loses everything.

Another scene from the book includes a visit to a fortune teller in which a mother is assured that her son, who has been reported missing in action in Korea, is safe and will return home. In another scene, a mother prays a fervent prayer for her son’s safe return, pleading that God will spare his life even if it means giving up her own life. In yet another scene, a family spends some of their hard-earned money on a photographic memento only to discover that the deal was a scam. In another scene,

Poverty and hardships are seen throughout the book. The families are often traveling and living in primitive conditions. Often, the situations are unsanitary, such as the scene in which a woman throws a dirty diaper from a moving vehicle. The characters are largely uneducated and are sometimes skeptical of things they don’t understand. An example of this is seen in a brief conversation between two people. Both are apparently men, and they discuss an offer of jobs in Utah. They have never been there, and one of them is certain that the state is near Japan.

The people are largely at the mercy of circumstances, poverty, and prejudice. The young boy who narrates much of the story is caught up in a fight at school because others make fun of his ethnicity. He is stereotyped as a thief and when he stands up for himself in the only way he knows how - with violence - he is punished. He hates to disappoint his parents but he also hates school. Since he is forced to attend school and his parents are forced to move often to follow the migrant farm circuit, he has no opportunity to settle in and actually gain from the experience.



The Lost Year

Summary

In the first section of “The Lost Year,” the author describes the main character’s struggle to keep track of a period of time. The character is never named and, for the purposes of this guide, is referred to merely as “The Narrator.” The narrator sometimes wakes to discover that he’s still asleep and dreaming. He often hears someone calling his name but can’t find the caller and there comes a time when he can’t remember his own name. One day he realizes that he has called his own name and it’s then that the “lost year” begins. It’s in the moments before he falls asleep that he “sees and hears many things.”

In the second section of “The Lost Year,” the Narrator’s mother puts a glass of water under the boy’s bed each night. The water is for the spirits and the water is gone each morning, making the mother think the spirits are drinking it. In truth, the boy is drinking it but he doesn’t tell his mother. He decides that he will wait until he’s grown up to tell her.

Analysis

There is a great deal of symbolism throughout the book, beginning in the opening chapter. In “The Lost Year,” the author describes a young boy who sometimes hears someone calling his name, but the caller is gone when the boy turns toward the sound. The boy turns completely around and “there he would end up - in the same place.” This could be the author’s way of saying the boy is trapped in an escapable situation though a better way of life is calling out to him.

The second section points out the level of superstition in the story. The mother of the Narrator puts a glass of water under his bed each night “for the spirits.” This kind of superstition makes little sense except to those who believe them. The author does not explain this particular superstition. An interesting aspect of this is that the Narrator thinks he might tell his mother that he drank the water, but only once he’s an adult. This shows the Narrator to be a thoughtful youngster who realizes that his mother may not see the lighter side of the situation now because she is deeply steeped in the superstition. If the reader ties the first and second sections together, it might be assumed that the Narrator’s act of drinking the water that’s really left for the spirits might be the reason he has the dreams.

Discussion Question 1

What do you believe “The Lost Year” represents and why?



Discussion Question 2

Why does the Narrator's mother leave a glass of water under his bed each night and what happens to it?

Discussion Question 3

What is the dream the Narrator has?

Vocabulary

Suddenly, realize, spirits, continued.



The Children Couldn't Wait

Summary

In the first section of “The Children Couldn’t Wait,” a young boy is working in the fields with his father. The boy tells his father that he’s very thirsty and that his throat is dry. His father says the farm owner has pledged to fire anyone who gets a drink when it’s not time for a break. The workers are paid by the hour and the farmer wants to be sure he gets every bit of work he can from the workers. The boy suggests that he go to the nearby water tank and pretend to urinate, using the opportunity to get a drink without angering the farmer. The farmer sees this happen several times and he is planning to wait until he can fire a large number of them at once. Eventually, he decides to scare them. He gets his rifle and waits. When the boy returns to the tank, the farmer fires at him. The boy doesn’t even jerk when the bullet hits him. His body lies in the tank with blood pouring out into the water.

Two people are talking about the outcome. The farmer is tried for the crime but is found not guilty of killing the boy. He doesn’t serve time in jail but he begins drinking a great deal and loses his farm. He climbs up in a tree and falls on purpose, apparently trying to kill himself. He doesn’t succeed in that attempt but is completely broke and looks like a beggar.

In the second section, a Fortune Teller is holding audience. The people gathered there are careful not to cross their arms, legs, or hands as they watch the Fortune Teller, already in a trance. The Fortune Teller asks what she can do for them and a woman says she hasn’t heard from her son in two weeks. She has received a letter from the government saying he is missing in action. The Fortune Teller says that the son, Julianito, is unharmed and will return in a month.

Analysis

The farmer is a greedy man who is harsh with his employees and who wants to wrest every minute of work he can from them at the least expense. He goes so far as to ignore the first few who get water when it isn’t break time so that he can catch more of them. It appears that he plans to fire them without paying them for the hours they worked up to that point. An unexplained aspect of this is seen in the man’s decision to shoot at the boy rather than firing them as he’d planned.

There is a graphic piece of imagery in the first section of this chapter. The farmer shoots the boy who is getting a drink before break time. The writer describes the boy’s body as it lies in the water trough, “like a dirty rag,” while the water turns bloody.

This section is an interesting turn on the perspective. This section is not presented in first person like some of the later chapters. There is also information that the Narrator



probably didn't have personally, such as the dialogue between the unnamed characters who talk about the fate of the greedy farmer.

Discussion Question 1

Describe the attitudes of those who go to the fortune teller.

Discussion Question 2

Why does the farm owner shoot at the boy?

Discussion Question 3

What is life like for the child of a migrant worker during this time?

Vocabulary

Severity, furious, furrow, intensely.



A Prayer

Summary

In the first section of “A Prayer,” a woman is praying for the safe return of her son from Korea. She prays that he won’t be harmed while fighting against the Chinese and Communists. She recalls how gentle he was as a child and says she knows he doesn’t want to hurt anyone. She asks God to put His hand over her son’s heart as protection. She says that if God demands blood, she wants to offer her own in exchange for her son. She pledges to pay homage to several shrines and touts her son’s prayers the Virgen de San Juan del Valle. She says that her son was afraid when he had to leave home.

In the second section, two people are talking about a new contract that’s being offered to laborers. The laborers will be working in Utah and one of them says he has never even heard of that state. The other says he hasn’t heard of Utah either, but he knows this is the first time they’ve contracted for laborers in that area. He says he doesn’t know where Utah is located but thinks it must be “close to Japan.”

Analysis

The prayer offers some clues about the time setting of the story. The woman praying asks that God protect her son from the Chinese, Communists, and Koreans. She also asks that her son be allowed to return safely from Korea. This indicates her son is likely serving in the military during the 1960s. It seems likely this woman is the mother of a young man named Chuy who dies in Korea.

There seems to be something amiss in the prayer of the woman in this chapter. She says she found a kite “in the back of a closet.” The kite belonged to her son when he was young. The son is now of an age to serve in the military. This seems to indicate that the family has lived in the same house for at least a decade. That’s probably not typical of migrant families of this period, indicating that either this woman is not a migrant family or that she is one of the few women who remained at home while her husband traveled the farming circuit.

The prayer ends with the woman offering a bargain to God. She pledges that if God will return her son unharmed from his military service in Korea, she will give God her heart.

Discussion Question 1

What is learned about the woman who prays?



Discussion Question 2

What is revealed about the people who are considering going to Utah?

Discussion Question 3

Why might people be willing to go to a strange place where they have no family or friends?

Vocabulary

Homage, humble, pierce, noble, medallion, contracting, shrine.



It's That it Hurts

Summary

In the first section of "It's That It Hurts," the Narrator has been expelled from school. He continues to say that perhaps it's a mistake and he hasn't really been expelled, but that he knows it's true and he has been. He hates the idea of getting home where he'll have to tell his parents. The boy says he arrives at school and is told to completely undress in front of the school nurse. He complies and she apparently examines him thoroughly. She then checks his hair for lice and smears something that smells of bug killer all over his head. He is then sent into the classroom where he is seated apart from the other students. He is subjected to stares and the other students are obviously disdainful of the Narrator. When he goes to the restroom, another boy says he hates Mexicans because they are thieves. The other boy then hits the Narrator on the side of his head, making his ears ring. The details of the fight are not revealed, but the boy is taken to the principal where the principal talks to someone on the phone. The principal says the Narrator beat up a couple of the local boys, but not badly. The principal then says the best thing will probably be to expel the Narrator because his family will likely appreciate having him available to work in the fields.

The Narrator says his parents will probably whip him and that his punishment might be even more severe than that. He says they will be very disappointed in him because they are counting on him to complete his education so he can become a telephone operator.

The Narrator talks about a woman named Dona Cuquita who sometimes takes the children with her to the dump. She warns them to stay away from any area where smoke is rising because the top layer could collapse into the burning coals underneath. She also warns them not to eat anything they find until they wash it and that they are to tell anyone who asks that they are there to throw away garbage. The Narrator says he would like to go to the dump with Dona Cuquita now rather than going home to face his parents.

In the second section of "It's That It Hurts," someone asks the Narrator why he attends school "so much." The Narrator replies that his father wants him to be prepared if an opportunity should ever come his way. The second person says there's no need to worry about that. He says the "poor can't get poorer" but those with something to lose always have to worry about loss.

Analysis

The Narrator talks about the dream of becoming a telephone operator but the details and origin of that dream seem very confused in his mind. He says his parents want him to become a telephone operator but they present it to relatives - including the Narrator's godfather - as the Narrator's personal goal. It seems more likely that one of the parents



has chosen this as a goal and the Narrator has accepted that. The Narrator mentions a movie in which the operator was a very important character and that seems to be the catalyst for this dream. It's also very obvious from this passage that the parents want a better life for their son and are proud of his accomplishments up to this point. They have the Narrator read for his godfather each time the man comes to visit and the Narrator plans to hide rather during the next visit rather than admitting that he's been expelled from school.

The Narrator's life in the school system is chaotic at best and he obviously hates attending school. The principal considers the situation after the Narrator is involved in a fight and decides the best course of action is to expel the Narrator. He is likely trying to keep peace with the "regular" students who attend all the time rather than finding out why the fight began and addressing that problem. The Narrator recounts another incident in which older boys pushed two Mexicans into a fight against each other. This prejudice against the Mexicans who are dropped into the school for short periods of time as their families follow the harvests is obviously a problem and it seems to be propagated by the attitudes of the school officials. The Narrator is humiliated when he's forced to undress in front of the school nurse and is smeared with an odorous ointment as treatment for head lice. The officials - including the principal - seem to care little about the child and give no thought to the effect the expulsion will have.

Very often, the children are forced to find their way alone in the system without parental support, probably because the parents are so far from their own comfort zones. The Narrator recounts a first day at a new school in which his parents refuse to go inside with him. It's obvious the boy wants an adult to pave the way but it seems the adults feel incapable of doing so. They send him in alone, urging that he be unafraid and that he is to ask for help if he needs it. This is among the themes of the story in which the children are able to acclimate more quickly to new surroundings than the adults.

Discussion Question 1

Describe the prejudice against the Mexican students. Why do you believe it is so prevalent?

Discussion Question 2

Describe the situation that leads up to the fight that ends with the Narrator being expelled.

Discussion Question 3

What does the Narrator say he wants to be when he grows up? Why does he choose this? Is it really his dream?

Vocabulary

Expels, dread, gesture, briskly, scuffle, swat, conch.



Hand in His Pocket

Summary

In the first section of "Hand in His Pocket," the Narrator has a few weeks of school left when his parents have to leave the area for another harvest. They leave the Narrator with Don Hilario and Dona Bonafacia, a couple who have a home in the Narrator's school district. Everyone likes Don Hilario and Dona Bonafacia though there are some rumors about a "bad side" to the couple. They often have items for sale and when people don't have money, they sometimes give their items away. Those items include food, toys, clothes, and shoes. The Narrator soon realizes that the bad rumors about the couple are entirely true. They sometimes cook rancid meat for the Narrator and he eats it rather than hurting their feelings. One day he sees Don Hilario kneading the dough for sweet bread. Occasionally, the man puts his hands into his sweaty armpits before continuing his work. The Narrator says he never again touches the sweet bread though it's almost always on the table at mealtimes.

Don Hilario and Dona Bonfacia steal most of the items they sell and give away. One day they push the Narrator to steal a bag of flour. When he refuses, Don Hilario says he is a coward.

Dona Bonafacia sometimes entertains an illegal immigrant while Don Hilario isn't at home. The Narrator learns that he is to stay out of the house while this is happening and if he happens to be home when the man arrives, Dona Bonafacia makes him go outside. This goes on for a few days and the Narrator hears Dona Bonafacia and Don Hilario talking about the man, who they call "a wetback." Dona Bonafacia says the man is illegal with no standing in the community, no family, and no one to notice if he goes missing. She says "it" will be easy, but doesn't explain what "it" is. They tell the Narrator they plan to build a cellar and set him to work digging a hole. After a few days, they say they've changed their mind and tell him to stop. When he returns home, they send him to his room where he finds the illegal immigrant is dead in the bed where the Narrator sleeps. He is forced to help them drag the man to the hole and help cover his body. When the Narrator's family finally returns to pick him up, he's eager to leave with them. A few days later, Dona Bonafacia and Don Hilario find the Narrator's family in their new home and give the Narrator a ring he'd seen the immigrant wearing. The Narrator can't bring himself to throw the ring away and keeps it in his pocket. He says each time he sees a stranger for weeks after that, he finds himself putting his hand in his pocket.

In the second section of "Hands in His Pockets," someone - apparently the Narrator - is in town waiting for the beginning of the afternoon movie. With an hour to wait, he decides to get a haircut and goes to a nearby barber. The two barbers there refuse to cut his hair and he returns to the sidewalk to wait for the beginning of the movie. One of the barbers then tells him he has to leave and "it all became clear to him." He goes home to tell his father.



Analysis

Dona Bonafacia and Don Hilario are obviously criminals and the people of the community seem to realize this. They are rumored to bootleg liquor, and the Narrator sees this for himself during his time with the couple. Though the Narrator's father has paid for room and board, the couple force the Narrator to work for them after school each day. They feed him ruined food and the Narrator is obviously malnourished and terrified by the time his parents return for him. It seems likely that the neighbors know at least some of the illegal activities - including the outright theft - perpetrated by Dona Bonafacia and Don Hilario. It's not clear whether the friends and neighbors ignore the wrongdoing because the couple often give away items or if the neighbors simply don't care that they are breaking the law. Either way, Dona Bonafacia and Don Hilario seem to be respected members of the community. Though the Narrator's father is poor, he cares greatly about his family, as seen in the fact that he is willing to pay room and board for the Narrator to finish out the school year. It seems unlikely he would have left the Narrator there if he hadn't trusted the couple.

The fact that the Narrator is left to finish out the school year is another example of the recurring theme of the importance of education.

Dona Bonafacia and Don Hilario are outright cruel to the Narrator. They sneak up on him to frighten him at odd times. They feed him food that makes him sick and don't eat any of it for themselves. They force him to work every minute that he's not in school. They set the stage for him to fear them even before they kill the illegal immigrant. They send him to bed and he climbs in beside the dead man before he realizes what's happened. When the Narrator rushes from the room, he has blood on his clothing and the couple tell him they'll blame him for the murder unless he does exactly what they say. It seems risky to include the child in the situation when they could easily have buried the man themselves, but they force the Narrator to help drag the body to the yard and cover it. When the Narrator is leaving with his family, the couple remind him not to tell the police. They say it loudly, so that the Narrator's father can hear, but he believes it to be some sort of joke and laughs with the couple. The ring they give the Narrator is a reminder of their crime and their threat. The Narrator understands this as seen in his reflex to grab onto it each time he sees a stranger.

Discussion Question 1

Describe Dona Bonafacia and Don Hilario and their actions.

Discussion Question 2

Why does the Narrator decide that he won't tell his parents about the actions of Dona Bonafacia and Don Hilario? Do you believe he made the right decision?



Discussion Question 3

Why does the Narrator spend time with Dona Bonafacia and Don Hilario? What does this indicate about the priorities of the Narrator's parents?

Vocabulary

Almanacs, kneaded, nauseous, habit, cellar, preserves, client.

A Silvery Night

Summary

In the first section of “A Silvery Night,” the Narrator is very curious about the Devil and plans to sneak out of the house at midnight. His curiosity began at an early age. He remembers seeing Don Reyos dressed as the Devil for a play, wearing a black metal mask. One day the Narrator loses one of his marbles under the house and when he goes to retrieve it he finds the costume there. It’s dusty and he shakes the dirt off before donning the mask. He remembers someone saying that it’s not a good idea to “fool around with the Devil.” Sometimes people who are afraid gather in groups to summon the Devil, thinking they won’t be as fearful if they are with others. The problem, according to the advice given to the Narrator, is that the Devil never appears to the group. Instead, he waits until each of them is alone. He might then appear in different forms and each is forced to face it alone. Sometimes people go insane from the fear. Other people revert inside themselves and it is as if they are without a soul from that point.

The Narrator waits patiently as each of his siblings falls asleep, and then his parents. He has convinced his parents to leave the door open to better combat the heat and he feels as if he can sense the people in the nearby shacks falling asleep as well. He watches the clock and the fifty minutes after eleven o’clock pass very slowly. The Narrator decides he will go to the center of a nearby knoll and that he’ll call the Devil at exactly midnight.

He takes the clock with him to be sure he calls out at exactly midnight. He isn’t certain what to call the Devil at first but he begins calling and uses every name he can remember, including Satan, Lucifer, and imp. Then he begins to use curse words and even curses the Devil’s mother. He continues until he can think of nothing else to say and eventually ends his tirade. He comes to the conclusion that if he is unable to summon the Devil with the curses he just spoke, the Devil isn’t real at all. Following that logic, he believes that if the Devil isn’t real, other things are also untrue, such as punishment. He reaches home and goes back to bed. He is upset and realizes that the people who go crazy after summoning the Devil have reached the same conclusion - that the Devil isn’t real. He says they go crazy because the Devil doesn’t appear to them and they know that there is nothing to fear and nothing to look forward to.

In the second section, the men of the community become excited when they are told they’ll be taught carpentry. The men believe they’ll be able to use this new skill to work at jobs other than those in the fields. A man arrives with a minister’s wife who is supposed to serve as interpreter. They spend all day in a trailer for several days, then leave without teaching any of the men any skills. It’s later learned that the man and the minister’s wife have run away together.



Analysis

The Narrator's decision to call on the Devil is an attempt to prove that Heaven and God are real. The Narrator has undoubtedly been subjected to a combination of religious, spiritual, and superstitious teachings and beliefs. He has been taught that the Devil is a terrible creature but he obviously holds to some level of disbelief. His purpose in trying to find the Devil himself is an effort to quell his doubts. It could be that he's struggling with the religious teachings. The Narrator mentions a couple of times that if there is no Devil, there are other things he's been taught that are also not true. He never comes out and says that if there is no Devil, there is no God, but he makes a reference to that fear a couple of times.

There is some indication of the living conditions of the family seen in the early part of this chapter. The Narrator is trying to convince his father to leave the door open. He wants the door open so that he can slip away without being heard but he argues that leaving the door open will help combat the heat. These are primitive conditions. There is no air conditioning and probably no electricity to even run a fan. The Narrator refers to the shacks inhabited by his family and the other migrant workers as "chicken shacks." That could be an accurate term and could indicate the buildings were once used as chicken houses of some sort. It could also be a slang term that made sense to the author and the time.

The second section of this chapter is an example of how this group of people were often the target of unfair practices. The men hear that someone is going to teach them to do basic carpentry. It's undoubtedly a dream of most of these families to somehow escape the rigors and uncertainty of the migrant farm life so their hopes are high when the teacher arrives with his translator. But the two are unreliable and leave a few days later without any interaction with the group. It's bound to be terribly disappointing and that tiny ray of hope likely set many of these families back a great deal.

Discussion Question 1

Why does the Narrator try to summon the Devil?

Discussion Question 2

What is the Narrator's conclusion when he is unable to summon the Devil?

Discussion Question 3

Why are the men disappointed when the carpentry teacher leaves without offering any instruction?

Vocabulary

Protestant, summoned, curious, proceeded, cautiously, imp.



And the Earth Did Not Devour Him

Summary

In the first section of the chapter titled “And the Earth Did Not Devour Him,” the Narrator expresses feelings of anger and hatred over his situation in life. He says that his aunt and uncle become ill with tuberculosis, which prompts these feelings for the first time. When his aunt and uncle are sent to a sanitarium, their children are sent to live with relatives. Then the Narrator’s mother sometimes cries and the Narrator is angry over her pain. He is angry because he wants to blame someone for the pain.

Then the Narrator’s father falls victim to a heat stroke while working in the fields. The Narrator explains the situation to his mother, saying that his father initially refuses to stop working though he is obviously sick. He is soon vomiting and eventually allows the children to literally drag him to the shade at the end of the field. When they manage to get him home, the Narrator’s mother says she would have prevented him becoming so seriously ill. She says she could have stopped him from working so long if she had been there. She begins lighting candles and praying, and that makes the Narrator angry. He begins to cry out against God but stops just short of voicing that anger, fearing that he would feel responsible if his father were to die.

The Narrator’s father is seriously ill and spends days in agony. The Narrator becomes responsible for overseeing his younger siblings in the field. One day begins slightly cloudy but is soon unbearably hot. In the middle of the afternoon, the Narrator’s younger brother falls ill, vomiting and obviously ill from the heat. The youngster, though only nine, is paid an adult wage and has felt the need to keep up throughout the hot day. As the Narrator carries the child home, he rants against the unfairness and openly curses God. With each step, he believes the earth will open up and devour him and he is constantly surprised when it doesn’t. He arrives at home without being swallowed up by the earth and feels stronger for it. He moves forward the next day, feeling strengthened by his rebellion. His father and brother recover.

In the second section of “And the Earth Did Not Devour Him,” a grandfather suffers a stroke which leaves him “paralyzed from the neck down.” One of the man’s grandsons comes to visit him, and the grandfather asks the grandson’s age and what he wants most from life. The grandson says that he is twenty and that he wants the next ten years to pass quickly so that he can know what happens. The grandfather is angry and refuses to talk anymore. The grandson doesn’t understand until ten years pass and he turns thirty.

Analysis

In the first section of this chapter, the Narrator describes feelings of hatred and anger over the situations faced by his family. One aspect of this anger is seen when his aunt



and uncle are sent away to a sanitarium after contracting tuberculosis. His aunt dies in the sanitarium and his uncle is sent home but dies a short time later. Between the death of the aunt and that of the uncle, the Narrator sometimes discovers his mother crying. Her pain hurts him more than the deaths of his aunt and uncle. It seems the Narrator is of an age to realize that his mother hurts over these deaths and the Narrator wants to do something to ease her pain. However, he notes that he can't figure out where to direct his anger. He finally decides that he should be angry against God. He begins to cry out against God but stops, saying that he shouldn't because he would feel responsible if his father gets worse. The Narrator's mother pleads with him to stop, saying that it's as if he has the Devil's blood running through his veins. The Narrator says he wouldn't mind if that were true, saying it would be easier to deal with his anger if that were the case. An important aspect of this is seen when the Narrator feels empowered once his father and younger brother begin to recover. He feels somewhat invincible once it becomes apparent that they aren't going to die from the heat exhaustion.

The second section of this story is a classic coming-of-age scene. A young man who is twenty years old tells his grandfather that he wants the next ten years to pass very quickly. This makes the grandfather angry, and the young man doesn't understand why until ten years later. The young often want time to pass more quickly, but the old realize that time passes much too quickly already. The young man was insensitive to the fact that the grandfather's life is almost over and that he would have given anything to turn the clock back ten years while the grandson is wishing for the exact opposite. The reader should keep in mind that the care for someone in this condition would be rudimentary at best. The old man's mind is apparently still capable of thought and reasoning, meaning he knows exactly what is happening to his body and that he has little hope of any productive or meaningful experiences. He is basically waiting for death.

Discussion Question 1

Describe the Narrator's feelings of anger. What prompts these emotions to erupt?

Discussion Question 2

The heatstroke suffered by the Narrator's father frightens the family. Describe what leads up to the heatstroke and the reactions of the various family members to it.

Discussion Question 3

Why is the grandfather angry when the young man wishes the next ten years of his life would pass quickly?

Vocabulary

Sanitarium, endured, suffocating, resounded, instilled, swelled, subsided, frequently, capable, devour.



First Communion

Summary

In the first section of "First Communion," the Narrator spends a great deal of time preparing for the event. He is to meet his godfather at the church at eight that morning and he fears being late. He has a great many fears that morning based on the teachings from the nuns in the months leading up to the First Communion ceremony. He is terribly afraid that he'll forget to name one of his sins and he knows that he is supposed to come up with a number of sins he has committed. He finally decides that number must be one hundred, fifty, but he decides to tell the priest that he has committed two hundred sins, just to be certain he doesn't leave any out. He says that he has sinned against all the commandments. He has been told that taking Communion after forgetting to list some of his sins will mean he is destined for hell. He has pictures of hell and the devil all over his room as a reminder from his mother to take the event seriously.

The nuns have had the Narrator and the others in his class practicing for the First Communion. Among their studies have been sessions in which they practiced admitting to sins of the flesh, specifically those times in which they have touched their own bodies. The Narrator doesn't really understand this. On the morning of the First Communion, the Narrator rises early, unable to sleep, and wants to leave for the church at six o'clock though his godfather is not supposed to meet him until eight. His mother irons his pants, and he goes to the church but finds the door locked. He walks on past the church and, hearing noises at the nearby cleaners, looks in the window. He sees a man and woman there, naked and writhing on the floor. He is unable to look away and stands there until they notice him and yell for him to go away.

Back at the church, the Narrator is ashamed that he wants to go back and look inside the cleaners, hoping that the people would still be there. He realizes this feeling is the sin the nuns have been talking about. He wants to tell the other boys gathered for First Communion what he's seen, but he feels this would make them sinners as well. He struggles, wondering if he can skip First Communion rather than confessing what he's seen and how it makes him feel.

The Narrator's view of the world is changed dramatically once he has seen the naked man and woman. He can't control his thoughts and begins to imagine all the adults naked, partnered with other adults and writhing on the floor together. After the ceremony, he leaves his party early. His father is disappointed at his seemingly rude behavior. His godfather excuses the behavior, saying youngsters want only to go play. However, the Narrator goes to a tree where he sits alone and thinks about the situation for a long time.

In the second section of "First Communion," a teacher points out to a student that there should be a button on the poster to represent local industry. The boy rips a button from



his own shirt. The teacher knows this is probably his only shirt and she is surprised by his passionate response.

Analysis

The importance of religion is seen clearly in this section of the book in which the Narrator is being pushed by his family and religious teachers to believe that he has committed many sins. Though the boy doesn't understand what the nuns are talking about, they have the young boys practice confessing their own sins of the flesh. There are pictures of Hell and Satan all over the boy's room as reminders that he is bound for Hell unless he follows the instructions of the religious leaders. The boy's fervor to confess every single sin is increased because he suffered a burn a short time earlier. The pain of that injury has made him fear hell more than he might otherwise.

Insights into the mother and the family's living conditions are shared when the boy rises early, planning to go to the church two hours ahead of the time he is supposed to meet his godfather. His mother is ironing his pants and the Narrator is impatient, asking why she didn't iron them the previous evening. She says she "couldn't see anymore last night." This indicates there is probably no electricity or only very poor lighting in the house. She says that her eyesight is failing, apparently referring to her age as well. Finally, she says that she will have his pants ready in a very short time, saying that she can get a lot done as long as she has light.

The second section of this chapter is rather obscure. A student has apparently created a poster about the local industries and the teacher points out that he needs a button on the poster to represent the button industry. The student rips a button from his own shirt. The teacher knows he probably has only one shirt and that this is a huge sacrifice. The author then refers to the teacher's surprise at the student's "passion." It's unclear whether she is referring to his passion toward her as a woman or his passion to do well on the project. Considering the tone of the previous section in which the Narrator has seen a naked man and woman, it seems possible that he is feeling sexual passion toward his teacher but it's left to the reader to decide.

Discussion Question 1

Describe what the Narrator sees at the cleaners and the effect it has on him.

Discussion Question 2

Why is the Narrator obsessed with figuring out exactly how many sins he has committed? What does this say about his religious education?



Discussion Question 3

What is the role of the Narrator's mother? What would have been the role of most women of this culture during this time?

Vocabulary

Mortal, venial, images, confessing, basin, reciting, embracing, distorted, represent, intensity.



The Little Burnt Victims

Summary

In “The Little Burnt Victims,” Don Efrain and Dona Chona Garcia are farm workers with three small children. Raulito is seven, Juan is six, and Maria is five. One evening the family goes to see a movie about boxing and Don Efrain buys boxing gloves. He strips the children down to their shorts and rubs alcohol on their chests as they had seen done in the movie. Though Dona Chona objects to the play, Don Efrain points out that perhaps one of their children will become a boxing champion which will take the family out of poverty.

Each day, Don Efrain and Dona Chona go to the fields to work, leaving the three children at home alone. They worry about them but there is no alternative. One day they see smoke from the direction of their house and they rush back to discover the house engulfed and only their oldest child alive. He had rubbed alcohol on the chests of the smaller two and was cooking eggs. Some believe the stove blew up, setting the two younger children on fire. The story soon circulated that Maria’s body was charred but the boxing gloves, still on her hands, were not damaged at all.

In the second section of this chapter, a man and woman are married. Everything is perfect for the ceremony, and they are accompanied down the street by family and friends shouting, “Here come the newlyweds.”

Analysis

There is a sharp contrast between the two sections of this chapter. In the first, two children are burned to death and the family forever changed. In the second, a man and woman marry and begin their lives happily together. The point of the two sections seems to be the comparison and the fact that there are no guarantees of happiness though it sometimes happens.

The fact that Dona Chona allows the children to continue boxing is a sign of her desire that they have a better life than she and her husband have been able to provide. The fact that they are leaving small children alone may seem incredible to the modern-day reader, but it would likely have been typical for this time and situation.

Discussion Question 1

Why does the mother initially object to the boxing but why does she give in and allow it to continue?



Discussion Question 2

Describe the contrast that is seen between the two sections of this chapter.

Discussion Question 3

Why do the Garcias leave their children unattended? What does this say about the lifestyles of the families of this culture and time?

Vocabulary

Respectively, engulfed, charred, mischief, distracting, procession.



The Night the Lights Went Out

Summary

In the first section of “The Night the Lights Went Out,” a young man named Ramon and a young woman named Juanita are “going around” together in a boyfriend-girlfriend relationship. Ramon suggests they marry but Juanita says her father wants her to finish school and she puts him off. They pledge loyalty to each other while they are separated as their families follow the harvests and work. Soon Juanita is spending time with a young man named Ramiro who dresses very well and is a “smooth talker.” Juanita says Ramiro knows she is involved with Ramon and that they just spend their time talking. She says she doesn’t want to break up with Ramon and enjoys making the other girls jealous. Ramon learns of the situation and breaks up with her. Both plan to attend a dance and Ramon insists that Juanita promise to dance with no one else. They argue about that with Juanita saying he doesn’t have the right to make that demand. There is a scene at the dance and Ramon leaves. Soon the lights go out all over town and Ramon’s body is found at the power plant. He has thrown himself against the transformers, shorting out the system and causing the lights to go down. Some remember that he threatened to kill himself.

In the second section of this chapter, a woman is driving home from a bar. She has been drinking because her husband has left her. She collides with a truck hauling farm workers, and sixteen are killed in the wreck and the fire that follows.

Analysis

The story of Ramon and Juanita is typical of young people in a relationship. Juanita seems to plan on being faithful to Ramon but is probably lonely when they are separated for a period of time. She is soon enticed into spending time with this “smooth talker,” but it seems she plans to keep the relationship platonic. There’s no doubt she’s pleased that the other girls are attracted to this Ramiro, and she enjoys their envy. She’s proud that he has chosen to spend time with her. Juanita insists that she isn’t breaking up with Ramon because she does love him. Ramon’s feelings may be deeper than Juanita’s, or it may be that his pride is hurt. After his death, it’s noted that he had told Juanita he planned to kill himself because of their failed relationship. There may be a doubt in the minds of some readers about that claim. It seems possible that Ramiro caused Ramon’s death or that it might even have been an accident. The final sentences of the section are between two people discussing the situation. One of them says that Ramon and Juanita “loved each other so much.” The second person responds that there is “no doubt” of that fact. The reader probably has a much different opinion.

In the second section of this story, another tragedy occurs. The author says that the truck involved in the wreck was transporting workers from the spinach fields. The woman who caused the wreck has been drinking over her failed marriage. The scenario



is very similar to that of Ramon and Juanita except this time the spurned lover causes the deaths of innocent people rather than her own.

Discussion Question 1

Describe the relationship between Juanita and Ramon. Why do you believe their relationship is so stormy?

Discussion Question 2

What do you believe happened to Ramon? Why?

Discussion Question 3

Compare the relationship of Ramon and Juanita to that of young people who have permanent homes and more stable lifestyles.

Vocabulary

Figured, refused, crisp, impact, thicket, wreckage.



The Night Before Christmas

Summary

In “The Night Before Christmas,” a woman named Dona Maria tells her husband she wants to buy Christmas presents for their three children. The children have asked why they never receive toys for Christmas. Their father and a man named Don Chon always bring fruit and nuts but never toys. When one of the children says Santa doesn’t bring gifts because they haven’t been good, Dona Maria becomes determined to buy presents for them. Her husband works long hours and they need to save as much as possible to prepare for their annual trip north, but he leaves her some money one morning and she plans to go downtown. She never leaves the house alone and is terrified of crowds.

She manages to make her way downtown but is almost immediately disoriented and terrified. She chooses a couple of toys but becomes panicked and runs from the store. She’s caught and accused of shoplifting. She is arrested but someone alerts her husband and he is able to explain the situation to authorities. Back at home, they discuss the day and she fears that she will be taken from her family if people learn she is “crazy.” Her husband says he will tell the children there is no Santa, but she urges him not to be cruel to them. The children hear the entire conversation and never again ask why they don’t get toys for Christmas.

In the second section of this chapter, a priest offers to bless the vehicles of people who are making their way to find work following the harvests. He charges five dollars for each car blessed and one year is able to return to his home in Spain to visit his family. He brings postcards with pictures of a very modern church and “words of gratitude from his family.” When he places these things near the door of his church, the people soon begin marking on them just as they had done when he purchased new pews for the church. The priest doesn’t understand the reaction.

Analysis

Dona Maria is living a very sheltered life. In this time period, her mental illness would have gone undiagnosed. It seems likely she suffers from agoraphobia. She believes she’s crazy and fears being taken from her family. An interesting point here is that her husband does all the grocery shopping and he gives her the money for Christmas presents. He is somehow either unwilling or unable to purchase toys for the children. It’s noted that he works long hours, but he has time to buy groceries. It might be that the grocery stores are open during his time off from work, while other stores are not. So, he isn’t able to make those purchases.

The second section of this chapter is about a priest who charges people to administer blessings on their cars before they set out on long trips. The premise is that his words



will ensure they arrive safely at their destinations. The priest could have offered these blessings free of charge, but he doesn't. The people pay five dollars for each blessing. The reader needs to remember that these people are poor and that spending the five dollars is a major commitment on their part. There are probably cases in which they are literally without food or some other necessity along the way because of that expenditure. When they find out the priest has used that money for a trip home, they are angry. The priest doesn't understand their anger, which implies a lack of empathy on his part.

Discussion Question 1

What is the mental illness Dona Maria has? Why does she believe people might think she's crazy?

Discussion Question 2

Why do the children stop asking about their Christmas gifts? What do you believe this indicates about the children and why?

Discussion Question 3

Why are people angry with the priest who blesses cars? Are they right to be angry?

Vocabulary

Sacrilege, awaited, explanations, symbols, asylum, insane.



The Portrait

Summary

In the first section of “The Portrait,” a traveling salesman comes through town soon after travelers have returned from the harvest season. He offers a three-dimensional portrait for thirty dollars. While the cost is very high, the salesman has a sample and everyone agrees that it looks very lifelike. Don Mateo and his wife decide to commission a portrait of their son, Chuy, who was killed in Korea. They give the salesman the only picture they have of Chuy and he promises to be careful to return the photo along with the finished portrait. Weeks pass and then someone finds a sack filled with pictures. They discover it's the photos given to the salesman. Don Mateo goes to San Antonio where he believes the salesman is from and hunts the man down. When he locates him, he demands the portrait and the man complies though he is working from memory. When he returns home with the finished portrait, he asks someone if the portrait looks like Chuy. They answer that they can't remember what Chuy looks like but that it seems he must have looked a lot like Don Mateo.

In the second section, a man named Figueroa has been released from prison after serving a term for being in a relationship with a seventeen-year-old girl. The two people discussing his release say he isn't well and predict that he'll soon die.

Analysis

The story of the portrait is probably typical of the lives of these people on many level. The salesman is dressed well and the people accept him without question because of his appearance. The author notes that many of them want their children to be just like this man. The fact that the man is able to produce the portrait means he should have been able to honor his contracts with the people he stole from. He no longer has the photo of Don Mateo's son, Chuy, and Don Mateo says the man has to work from memory. In fact, the man is probably basing his entire project on the appearance of Don Mateo. The fact that people say they can't remember what Chuy looked like is evidence that he has been gone for some time and the fact that they all now believe he looked very much like Don Mateo is evidence that the portrait-maker used Don Mateo for his model rather than his memory of Chuy's photo.

The second section of this chapter points to the ever-present prejudice faced by the Narrator's people. The two people discussing the release of the man named Figueroa say that he was imprisoned because someone turned him in. They believe the basis for that was that Figueroa was involved with a Caucasian girl. She was seventeen which apparently made the relationship technically illegal. The conversation indicates that Figueroa is not well. They believe he was given injections in prison that will rob him of his health and eventually kill him. The truth is that he was probably brutalized and given little or no medical care because of his relationship with the white girl.



Discussion Question 1

Why are Chuy's parents willing to go to such extremes to get his portrait completed?

Discussion Question 2

Describe some of the prejudices faced by the Narrator's people. Why are these prejudices present?

Discussion Question 3

Describe the reason Figueroa goes to prison and what people are saying about him once he's released.

Vocabulary

Swindled, ruined, portrait, injections, denied, capable.



When We Arrive

Summary

In the first section of “When We Arrive,” a truck breaks down on the side of the highway. The truck is hauling many people bound for the beet harvest. The people are standing up, so there is room for more of them in the truck because the cost of transportation is high. Some of them are looking forward to their arrival, while others hate the lifestyle. One woman worries that her husband will have to work in the fields by himself because their two babies are very young. A man hopes he can find a place for them to live that doesn’t have a concrete floor. He says the concrete was very cold. One cites the need for a bed so that his wife, who suffers with kidney problems, will be more comfortable. Another is furious that someone threw a diaper out of the moving truck, flinging it’s contents on other passengers. One of the men pledges to buy a car if he makes enough from the onion crop in an effort to avoid traveling in the crowded truck again. One wants to be certain his children will be able to attend school.

The driver says there is no more money in hauling people to the beet fields. He hopes he can get the truck fixed and finish the trip but plans to leave them on their own once they arrive. He considers looking for a new line of work hauling watermelons.

In the second section of this chapter, a man named Bartolo arrives in town each year as the migrant workers have returned from their work in the northern states. He sells poetry and urges the buyers to read the words aloud.

Analysis

There are a number of curse words seen in this section, and it’s because of these that some schools banned the book from its shelves. The author uses this language as a means of imparting the true attitudes and language of the characters. It is reasonable to assume the curse words were part of everyday language for this time and situation. Some readers may find the words offensive, and it’s up to individual readers to determine whether they are willing to read this book.

The people who are traveling have varying attitudes. Some of them are excited about the current trip. They are looking forward to their arrival at a new job and hold to the hope that this will be the job that lends them a better life. Their hope is, in some cases, almost desperate and they feel the pressure of delivering better lives for themselves and their families. Other travelers are hopeless. They see themselves as doomed to travel to the next manual labor job where they will barely survive and will then be forced to move on to yet another similar job, all with no hope that conditions will improve. Some borrow money to make the trip and have to pay back ridiculous interest rates, meaning they will probably work the entire season just to pay for their transportation.



Discussion Question 1

Describe the language seen when the truck breaks down, leaving the passengers stranded. Why does the author choose this language? Is he correct in doing so?

Discussion Question 2

Why do the people go to such extremes to arrive at a new location for a new job?

Discussion Question 3

Is hope a theme seen elsewhere in the story?

Vocabulary

Whir, awakened, disbelief, practically, contract, hauling, hassling, ceased, commenced.



Under the House

Summary

In “Under the House,” the Narrator is hiding under a house though it’s not very comfortable. He was on his way to school when he decided to hide out under the house instead. He spends the day thinking about his life over the past year. Events race through his mind along with their outcomes. He thinks of his father promising violence if the barbers continue to refuse to cut his hair. He thinks of those who died in the fire after the wreck involving the drunk woman. He thinks of other situations and scenes as well, and knows that he has done the right thing by remaining hidden for the day, giving himself time to think and be alone.

Eventually, the children playing in the yard find him and begin to throw rocks at him. They alert their mother who begins poking at him with a board. A dog barks at him as well. He finally decides it’s time to come out and surprises those who have gathered to watch. He hears someone say that his mother had lost her mind and that now he is following her example. But he knows that he hasn’t lost anything. Instead, he has made an important discovery.

Analysis

The Narrator’s thoughts while hiding under the house are a jumble of images and ideas, but some of them give closure to the stories told earlier in the book. For example, he thinks about the firemen who cried as they carried the bodies of the children from the house after they’d been boxing and caught the house on fire. He thinks about his father, pledging violence against the barbers unless they agreed to cut his hair. He thinks about the people who lost family members in the fiery wreck after the drunk woman sideswiped them.

Discussion Question 1

Why does the Narrator enjoy spending the day under the house?

Discussion Question 2

What are some of the memories that run through the Narrator's mind during his hours under the house?



Discussion Question 3

Now that you have seen the events of the entire year, has your opinion of the "lost year" changed? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

Unafraid, remained, constantly, perched, reality, thrilled, rediscover, valiantly, revolution, desire, hearse, embrace, practically, twilight.



Characters

The Narrator

Like many of the characters, the main character is never named. What the reader knows about him is learned through his interaction with other characters. He seems to be a young boy of Mexican descent. Since he is not named, he is referred to as “The Narrator” throughout this guide. He typically attends school as much as possible, though he does so because his parents insist on it. He is routinely subjected to prejudice and hates it, but he is also ashamed when he is expelled from school for fighting. He has a strong sense of what’s right and wrong as is seen in his reaction to his time spent with Dona Bonafacia and Don Hilario. When they send him to steal a bag of flour, he refuses. He is ridiculed for his decision. He also has a strong realization that he is at the mercy of the couple when they kill an immigrant and threaten to blame him. The Narrator’s strong religious background is seen when his father falls victim to heatstroke. The Narrator wants to curse God but initially fears doing so, knowing that he would feel responsible if his father were to become worse or die. He later steps past his teachings, cursing God for their situation once his little brother falls to heatstroke as well.

The Narrator's Father

This man is determined that the Narrator will have a better life than his own. He sends the Narrator to school, though many families take every opportunity to keep their children available to work in the fields. The man is probably completely uneducated. He takes great pride in his son’s ability to read. He has the Narrator read aloud each time the Narrator’s godfather comes for a visit. He is determined that the Narrator will become a telephone operator. He came up with the idea from a movie in which a telephone operator was the most important character. He has convinced the Narrator that this is a worthy goal. When the Narrator’s father tells his foreman of his plans for the Narrator, the foreman laughs. The father believes it’s because the foreman doesn’t believe the Narrator is smart enough to achieve the goal, though it is more likely that the foreman can’t imagine why this is a worthy goal. The father evidently stands up for his family in the face of prejudice. When the Narrator is told he can’t get a haircut at a downtown barbershop and is chased away from a theater, the boy goes home to tell his father. The father is obviously a hard working man. When the family is in the fields in very hot weather, the father falls to heat stroke and almost dies.

The Greedy Farmer

Found in “The Children Couldn’t Wait,” he wants to be sure he gets every minute of work from the laborers. He refuses to give them all the water they want; and, when a young boy sneaks to a tank for a drink, the farmer shoots him. The farmer apparently doesn’t mean to kill the boy. He feels so guilty that he later tries to commit suicide.



The Boy Who Dies in the Water Tank

A young boy who is working in the fields with his father is very thirsty. He comes up with the idea to sneak over to a water tank for a drink. The farmer only intends to scare the boy by firing a shot. However, the bullet hits the boy and kills him.

Dona Bonafacia and Don Hilario

This couple takes the Narrator in to finish out his school year, but they are ruthless people with little regard for others. They are criminals who steal many things to sell and give away. They kill an illegal immigrant and force the Narrator to help bury the man, threatening to blame the murder on the Narrator if he tells anyone about the crime.

The Narrator's Godfather

Literally a formal godfather or patron, this man apparently plays an important role in the Narrator's life. Whenever the godfather comes to visit, the Narrator's father has the Narrator read aloud to demonstrate his ongoing educational advances. When the Narrator is expelled from school, he hopes to hide when his godfather next visits in order to keep the information from the man. When the Narrator goes to his First Communion, his father is disappointed that he leaves the party early because it makes him appear rude. The godfather excuses the Narrator's behavior, pointing out that he's just a boy but agreeing with the father that it's important for youngsters to respect their elders.

The Principal

The man who expels the Narrator from school after the Narrator is involved in a fight. The Principal seems to doubt that the Narrator is to blame for the fight but takes the easier path to expel the Narrator rather than facing problems with the parents of the regular students.

The Narrator's Mother

The Narrator's mother is a religious woman. When the Narrator expresses anger against God, she fears for him, saying that it seems as if he has Satan's blood in his veins. She feels responsible for her family and repeatedly blames herself for not being in the fields when her husband falls ill, saying she could have forced him to take precautions, resting before he became so sick.



The Narrator's Brother

The Narrator's brother, like most of the characters, is not named. He is working in the field alongside the adults, being paid for his labors. Though he is just a child, he feels that he has to keep up with the older children and has to work hard to accomplish this. On a very hot day, he falls victim to heatstroke and has to be carried home by the Narrator. He makes a full recovery.

The Grandfather

It's not clear whether he is the Narrator's grandfather but he is referred to as "the grandfather." The old man has suffered a stroke and is paralyzed from the neck down. His life is at an end, and he becomes angry with his twenty-year-old grandson who says he wishes the next ten years would pass as quickly as possible.



Symbols and Symbolism

The Lost Year

The lost year is the span of time covered in the book. The author doesn't fully define why this year is lost or even if it is actually a year.

The Water Tank

Located at the end of a furrow, this is the only available source of water for the boy who is shot and the others working in the field.

The Ring

The ring is a piece of jewelry belonging to the illegal immigrant killed by Dona Bonafacio and Don Hilario. They give the ring to the Narrator to remind him of their threat to pin the murder on him if he tells anyone.

A Telephone Operator

The Narrator's father hopes his son will have a job as a telephone operator when he's an adult. The Narrator's father apparently saw a movie in which the telephone operator played an important role, prompting this goal for his son.

Carpentry

Carpentry is the skill being offered to some of the men in an effort to help them escape the rigors and uncertainty of migrant farm work. The man who is to teach the skill shows up but teaches them nothing and runs away with a minister's wife.

Summoning the Devil

Summoning the devil is an action taken by the Narrator one night in an effort to prove the Devil is real. The fact that he is unable to summon the Devil makes him believe that punishment for sin, Heaven, and God are also not real.

Heatstroke

Heatstroke is an illness suffered by the Narrator's father and younger brother.



Tuberculosis

Tuberculosis is the disease that takes the life of the Narrator's aunt and uncle.

Sanitarium

The sanitarium is where the Narrator's aunt and uncle are sent after contracting tuberculosis.

The Cleaners

The cleaners is where the Narrator sees a naked man and woman just hours before the Narrator is going for his First Communion.

Settings

The Home of Dona Bonafacia and Don Hilario

This is where the Narrator stays for a period of time in order to finish the school year. He is miserable here and talks about the unsanitary conditions of the house and its occupants. The house is cluttered with all kinds of things, and a man's body is buried in the yard.

The Chicken Shacks

The chicken shacks are a group of houses where the Narrator and his family live alongside other migrant farm workers. The shacks are primitive, and the Narrator convinces his father to leave the door open one night to combat the heat. Actually, the Narrator asks so that he can sneak out at midnight. The houses are not described in great detail, but the Narrator says they are so close together that he can sense when the occupants of other houses begin to fall asleep.

Korea

Korea is where a young man is serving in the military when his mother talks to God in "The Prayer." The place is only mentioned as part of the prayer.

Utah

Utah is the state where a new contract for laborers has been issued. The men discussing the possibility of working there don't know

San Antonio

San Antonio is the city where Don Mateo goes in search of the man who sold him a portrait. The city isn't described in detail, but there are a couple of specific settings mentioned during Don Mateo's search.



Themes and Motifs

The Importance of Education

The children of the migrant families are seldom able to consistently attend school, but the Narrator's father insists that the Narrator attend as much as possible. While the father won't go inside with the Narrator on his first day, he encourages the boy to be brave. This is evidence of the father's own insecurities about being in the school building. It is likely at the heart of the reason the father wants a better life for his son. The father believes the Narrator might grow up to have a job that is better and easier than the farm work done by most of the adults he knows. His pride in the Narrator's education is evident by the fact that the Narrator is asked to read aloud each time his godfather comes to visit. The father also tells his foreman that the Narrator is going to be a telephone operator. When the foreman laughs, the father believes it's because the foreman doesn't believe the Narrator can achieve this goal. The father says the foreman simply doesn't understand how smart the Narrator truly is. When the Narrator is expelled, he's deeply worried and ashamed. He tries to figure out a way to avoid going home to face his parents but knows punishment is inevitable. He plans to hide the next time his godfather visits so that the man won't be hurt by the Narrator's failure. The father's focus on education is seen when the Narrator is left with a couple - Dona Bonafacia and Don Hilario - to finish out the school year. The Narrator's family is forced to move on to the next farm job and the father pays the couple to keep the Narrator to wrap up his studies for the year. The family would have sacrificed to pay the money for the Narrator's room and board, evidence of the father's determination that the Narrator will get an education. In addition, the Narrator might have worked in the fields for those few weeks, meaning his absence was even more costly to the family.

Prejudice

The students at the various schools make fun of the Mexican students and the Narrator says it's difficult to face the prejudice. It seems he would rather not face the problems at school but gives in to his father's insistence that he attend school. The Narrator is expelled after fighting with a boy who makes racial slurs, referring to all Mexicans as thieves. The Narrator points out that some of the prejudices are earned by the actions of his people. He talks about the women who sit together, picking lice from each others' heads, in plain sight of the road. He says people driving by see the women who are "acting like monkeys," and that prompts the attitudes of school officials who examine the children for lice as soon as they enroll in class. Another example of prejudice is seen when the Narrator is in town waiting for the opening of a theater. He decides to stop by a barber shop for a haircut while he waits, but the barbers on staff refuse to serve him. When he finally understands and leaves the shop, he returns to the sidewalk to wait for the movie to begin. However, one of the barbers makes him leave there as well.



Class Differences

There are several instances of this theme, most notably seen in the story of the greedy farmer who kills a young worker and in the conversation between the Narrator and a friend. In the first instance, a young boy slips away from his work to get a drink at a water trough, though they've been warned they'll be fired for doing so. The conditions are deplorable for the workers who are dealing with very hot weather with too few breaks for hydration. The farmer sees the boy go toward the water trough on the pretense of urinating there but he doesn't follow through with his threat to fire the boy or even confront the boy or the child's father. Instead, he watches as several others follow the boy's lead. The farmer is so angry that he plans to teach them a lesson. He fires a gun while the boy is near the trough but accidentally hits the child, killing him. The farmer is obviously distraught over the death even after being exonerated of the murder. He begins drinking and loses his farm. He is soon as poor as the people he'd once treated so cruelly. In the second situation, the Narrator is talking to someone who asks why he attends school so much of the time. The Narrator says his father wants him to have enough education that he'll be in a position to take a better opportunity, if one should come his way. The other speaker says being poor isn't a bad thing. He points out that a person really can't be any poorer than the migrant workers. He says they have little to worry about and can actually be content with their lives. However, a person who has a great deal has to worry about losing all of it and becoming poor. In this second speaker's view, the lower class is preferable, and he seems to see no reason to want more from life.

Styles

Point of View

The story is written from several perspectives. As a rule, an entire chapter is presented from a single perspective. The majority of the chapters are presented from the point of view of the character referred to in this guide as “The Narrator.” He is a child but is never named. This may be an effort by the author to make the reader understand the story is typical of people of this time and lifestyle. The author may also have been relating information from a personal perspective though the story is presented as a novel rather than a biography. It’s left to the reader to decide who is narrating the story and whether the narrator’s identity is important. The perspective sometimes changes to that of other characters which may be confusing, especially for the casual reader. The fact that these characters aren’t fully identified may also be distracting for some readers and it may become more difficult to fully identify with the characters because they are not fully developed. When the story is presented from the Narrator’s perspective, the story is in first person. When another perspective takes over, the story is sometimes in third person, though this isn’t always the case. For example, the chapter titled “A Prayer” is a first-person prayer but the perspective is someone other than the Narrator.

Language and Meaning

The book is written in a prose that sometimes rambles and appears disjointed. Though there are some common themes throughout, the book doesn’t tell a story in the traditional sense of the word. There are many fragmented pieces that make up the book and the events, people, and places described are connected only by the people experiencing them. It can be argued that his thoughts and experiences are typical of those who travel the migrant farm path, making the book more a story of group of people than of a single person. There are several curse words in the book. These are apparently included in an effort to make the book appear realistic. These passages of dialogue seem appropriate for the story but some found it inappropriate for the targeted audience. Some schools have banned the book based on the language. The book has been translated from Spanish and the English translation appears to be true to the original text though some believe there are discrepancies. There are some words and phrases that may be unfamiliar to the younger reader. The book is filled with metaphors and symbolism, much of it up for interpretation. Readers will understand passages based on their own backgrounds and experiences. For example, the story opens with a chapter titled “The Lost Year.” The author never fully defines this time and even suggests that it’s not a calendar year at all. Some readers may feel the “year” represents the childhood of the boy while others may assume it means a season of traveling the migrant farm circuit.

Structure

The book is divided into fourteen “chapters” that vary greatly in length. Each chapter is titled and the name offers clues as to the content of that chapter, though the meanings are usually revealed only after the chapter is read. For example, the first chapter is “The Lost Year.” The reader learns only after reading the chapter that this is an undetermined period of time in which the young boy struggles with consciousness. Each chapter consists of two sections. The first has something to do with the title. The second section of each chapter is very brief, some with only a few sentences. The sections are sometimes only loosely related or serve as contrasts. For example, the second chapter, “The Children Couldn’t Wait,” relates the story of a farm owner who shot and killed a child who got water before the official time for a break. The second section of that chapter relates a woman who seeks the services of a fortune teller for news of her son and learns that he will soon be home. In the first section, a father loses a son; and, in the second, a mother learns her son is safe. One version of the book popularly available is presented as a dual text, one in English and one in Spanish. In this version, the first half of the book is Spanish and the second half is English. There is also a series of photos of the actors from a screen version of this book.



Quotes

He had made a discovery.

-- Narrator (Under the House paragraph 13)

Importance: The Narrator has been under the house for most of the day when he is found by the children and chased out. When the woman who lives there realizes who he is, she says she feels sorry for him. The boy has spent the day thinking about the previous year and realizes that he hasn't lost anything but has actually gained a sense of self-discovery.

It always began when he would hear someone calling him by his name but when he turned his head to see who was calling, he would make a complete turn and there he would end up - in the same place.

-- Narrator (The Lost Year paragraph 2)

Importance: The book is filled with symbolism beginning with the opening paragraphs. In this passage, the author seems to be expressing his inability to move past his heritage and current situation to discover anything about life or even about himself.

What he set out to do and what he did were two different things.

-- Unknown (The Children Couldn't Wait paragraph 12)

Importance: The "he" of this quote is a greedy farmer who shoots a child unable to wait for the water break. The farmer intends only to scare the child, though even that is extreme. He actually kills the boy and later loses everything.

Dear God, Jesus Christ, keeper of my soul. This is the third Sunday that I come to implore you, beg you, to give me word of my son.

-- Unnamed Mother (A Prayer paragraph 1)

Importance: The mother is never named, but it seems possible the boy, who is serving in the military in Korea, is Chuy. It's later revealed that he never returns from the war, though in this prayer his mother earnestly pleads for his safe return, pledging her life for his.

It's always the same in these schools in the North.

-- Narrator (It's That It Huts paragraph 2)

Importance: That Narrator is expelled after he lashes out for being humiliated and teased. He hates school, but he also hates disappointing his parents. He knows they will be angry because he is expelled. An important aspect of this is that his parents want him in school but are unable to help him get past the hurdles of being successful.

He crossed the street and stood there waiting for the theater to open, but then the barber came out and told him to leave. Then it all became clear to him and he went



home to get his father.

-- Narrator (Hand in His Pocket paragraph 12)

Importance: The Narrator has just been refused service by this same barber though he has the money to pay for the haircut. This is another example of the prejudice faced by the Narrator's family and others of his race during this time.

Those who summoned the devil went crazy, not because the devil appeared, but just the opposite, because he didn't appear.

-- Narrator (A Silvery Night paragraph 16)

Importance: The Narrator has gone against all warning and tried to summon the devil. He has come to believe that the devil isn't real, which means that God is also a myth.

The grandson replied that he was twenty and what he most wanted was for the next ten years to pass by immediately so that he would know what had happened in his life. The grandfather told him he was very stupid and cut off the conversation.

-- Unknown (And the Earth Did Not Devour Him paragraph 31)

Importance: The grandson could be the Narrator, but it's not certain. This is a typical coming-of-age scene with a younger character looking forward and wishing time would pass more quickly. The grandfather realizes the young man's mistake, but the young man doesn't realize it until ten years pass.

Furthermore, since Mother had placed a picture of hell at the head of the bed and since the walls of his room were papered with images of the devil and since I wanted salvation from all evil, that was all I could think of.

-- The Narrator (First Communion paragraph 1)

Importance: The Narrator is about to attend his first communion and is obsessed with trying to remember all his sins and to prepare for the event. The scene is an example of the importance of religion in the lives of these characters.

Maybe one of them will turn out to be good with the glove, and then we'll be set vieja. Just think how much money champions win.

-- The Father (The Little Burnt Victims paragraph 8)

Importance: The mother and father of three children are discussing the father's recent obsession with boxing. He has seen a movie about it and has bought boxing gloves for the children. The mother says she doesn't want them boxing, but the father points out that if one of them could become a champion boxer, the family's life would be greatly improved. The importance of this quote is that the mother gives in with that argument and the father makes plans to buy a punching bag as well.

I think that deep down they even longed for their children to one day be like them.

-- The Narrator (The Portrait paragraph 1)



Importance: "Them" in this quote is a reference to the salesmen who descend on the migrant workers once they return from the annual migratory farm season. The salesmen are dressed well and seem professional. They attract the attention of the families. The Narrator points out that some of the families hope for this sort of life for their children.

If things go well this year, maybe we'll buy us a car so we won't have to travel this way, like cattle.

-- Unknown (When We Arrive paragraph 7)

Importance: The speaker is among those who are packed into a truck so tightly that there literally isn't room to sit down. The conditions are horrible, but many subject themselves to it again in order to travel during the migrant farm season, with the hope of finding a better job in the next farming town.