The Angel Esmeralda: Nine Stories Study Guide

The Angel Esmeralda: Nine Stories by Don Delillo

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

Don DeLillo's "The Angel Esmeralda" consists of nine short stories originally published in six magazines, from 1979 to 2011. In the first story, "Creation," all of the three main characters become completely absorbed in their own reactions to being unable to leave a beautiful island because of airline delays. In "Human Movements in World War III," two astronauts in a space capsule orbit Earth, collecting information for America during the early weeks of the third world war. In "The Runner," a young man runs laps around a pond in an inner-city park while someone kidnaps a child from its mother. In "The Ivory Acrobat," a young American woman working in Greece experiences two earthquakes and tries to cope with the terror they induce in her. In "The Angel Esmeralda," two nuns serve the poor and the afflicted in a Bronx community beset by violence that frequently ends in the deaths of children. In "Baader-Meinhof," a divorcee who becomes fascinated by portraits of dead terrorists takes up a risky acquaintanceship with a stranger. In "Midnight in Dostoevsky," two students create an elaborate fictional story of the life of a man they know only by glimpsing him walking on the street. In "Hammer and Sickle," an inmate in a minimum-security prison watches his two young daughters present doom-and-gloom news broadcasts on a children's television program. In "The Starveling," a man whose life consists of going to the cinema becomes infatuated with a woman who likewise attends one movie after another, day after day.

DeLillo, a critically acclaimed American novelist, displays a remarkably consistent engagement in the important question of the challenges faced by people in finding meaning and a sense of belonging in contemporary society, beset as it is by the alienating forces of commercialism, personal interest, and ambition. Each of these stories deals with people who live at an emotional distance from others around them. Often, the prevailing attitudes in a capitalistic society play a major role in impeding the ability of characters in the stories to forge a spiritual connection between themselves and the whole of existence. Over and over, the problem faced by the characters in these different situations is the same one of how to be fully engaged in a society that seems bent on disengagement through manipulating, exploiting, sidelining, or destroying them. DeLillo's message seems to be that individual salvation can occur only through societal transformation, which must begin with the individual. The problem is that the structures and institutions of contemporary American society do not promote empathy and spiritual fulfillment. This makes it very difficult for an individual to maintain a healthy connection to society, as the author's characters repeatedly demonstrate. If DeLillo offers any solution, it is merely to portray sympathetically those characters who make serious efforts to forge connections with others, even in the midst of conditions that promote divisiveness. More important, the author persuasively and entertainingly dramatizes the challenges, as he sees them, of remaining spiritually and emotionally engaged in the modern world.

Creation

Creation Summary and Analysis

Creation Summary

"The Angela Esmeralda", a collection of short stories by Don DeLillo named after the title of one of the stories, frequently concerns characters who are at an emotional distance from those around them, and unable to connect. In "Creation," the first of two stories in Part One of the collection, the isolated figures are an unnamed, first-person narrator and a woman named Jill, who are being driven in a taxi through a mountainous, forest terrain to an airport on a Caribbean island. Jill is absorbed in reading during the ride, and continues to read amid the crowds and clutter of the airport. The couple has just finished a cruise in the Tobago Cays, during which they were unable to call and reconfirm their flight, and now the narrator discovers they have been wait-listed. Jill becomes agitated upon hearing from the narrator that they may miss the flight to Barbados on a plane that has just arrived from Trinidad, and he responds in a calm and reasonable tone, trying to placate her. They fail to obtain seats on the flight, and go back to the taxi. A European woman standing nearby with a small suitcase asks to share the ride to the hotel. A taxi takes them to a beautiful hotel, where the couple stays in a suite with its own pool behind a garden wall. At dinner, in a pavilion restaurant overlooking the sea, they notice the European woman eating alone in a corner. Jill, who has a business appointment in Barbados, complains about the airline. The man says if there is only room for one person on the two flights tomorrow, she should go. She refuses to separate, and he agrees it is better to stay together.

The next morning, the taxi takes them to the airport with the other woman, whose name is Christa. The terminal is crowded and Jill is close to tears. At the counter, the man finds one seat available, and takes it for Jill. Very reluctantly, she leaves. The taxi brings the man back to the hotel along with Christa, who was further down the waiting list. He asks for a pool suite. The author does not explain any developing relationship between Christa and the man, but they both stay in the same suite. They make love, and he thinks she is a sad person. They spend the next morning in bed and lounging around the pool. He asks her to speak in German to him, and she says she will do so in bed. He calls the airport and is told there is no record of them as ticketed passengers, but to come at six the next morning. Christa is nervous and upset about the delays. She has to fly from Barbados to London, where people await her. On the drive back to the airport, he asks if she will stay with him again if they cannot get a flight, but she refuses to consider such a scenario. He says he enjoys floating through life, although not alone. They discover that the scheduled flights have been grounded by high winds. Christa reacts by running outside in distress. He finds her in the bushes, holds her, and consoles her that they will spend a little more time together and it does not matter who she is or how she got there, and she can speak in German to him, and she can rest.

Creation Analysis

This is a story about the indolence, sense of entitlement, and lack of moral rectitude that privilege sometimes promotes. The three main characters in it are westerners traveling in the tourism playground of the Caribbean. Both women are incapable of remaining calmly philosophical when the airline fails to deliver the timely flights they expect. The man is unconcerned, but only because he embraces the delays as opportunities for sexual dalliance with Jill and then with Christa. He does his best to calm the nerves of both women, but his ulterior motive is clearly to relax them enough so he can enjoy their company. They stay at a sumptuous hotel with their own private garden and pool, but such comforts are not enough to divert either woman from her anxiety about being "trapped" on the island. The inability to come and go as they please makes them feel imprisoned, even though their departure will clearly occur in the near future. The man is like a sympathetic jailer, simultaneously protecting and exploiting them. That is why his enjoyment of this netherworld of waiting to go somewhere else has something slightly immoral or even sinister about it. Even so, he is the only one of the three who seems capable of appreciating the "dream of Creation" that this beautiful setting evokes.

Human Movements in World War III

Human Movements in World War III Summary and Analysis

Human Movements in World War III Summary

The second story, "Human Movements in World War III" concerns two astronauts circling Earth on an information-gathering mission during the first weeks of World War III. The unnamed narrator, who commands the flight, is on his third mission. His 23 year-old companion, Vollmer, is an engineering whiz on his first space flight. Nuclear weapons have been banned, which has had the effect of encouraging war. At an altitude of only about 1500 miles (CK), the two can see many features of the planet and its weather. The narrator tries to take a simple and practical view of their duties and of the awe-inspiring view of Earth, but Vollmer is given to large abstractions and intelligent, philosophical observations. The narrator finds these comments to be precise and accurate, yet he does not like hearing them. The only personal memento the narrator carries from Earth is an old coin but Vollmer has a number of knickknacks. The narrator does not know if Vollmer or his parents chose the items to assure he would have "human moments" in space. The narrator begins to develop a distaste for Vollmer's bass voice, which sounds stupid to him, even though what Vollmer says is always smart. In news broadcasts, Vollmer thinks the announcers' voices betray boredom with the war, although it is only in its third week, and the narrator believes he is right. Vollmer thinks people wanted to feel part of something grand, but that has not happened.

The narrator hears a conversation over his headphones that the command center in Colorado tells him is "selective noise." The people at mission control define this term as weather signals designed to sound like human speech, but the narrator is certain the speech he heard was human. When Vollmer hears conversations later, the men realize that radio signals are reaching them from broadcasts made decades earlier. As the two collect data on troop movements, Vollmer says he is happy, which disturbs the narrator, who cannot imagine what the word means in the context of their current situation. The two run a test for firing weapons, which was deliberately designed to be executable only by two people, as a security measure. As the craft passes over Minnesota, Vollmer speaks of his youth there. They hear more radio shows, and Vollmer recognizes some of the performers. Looking at Earth, he expresses amazement that humans could live in such foreboding terrain. He thinks the war will end in convincing people that no intelligent life exists beyond Earth. The Colorado command center people speak to the astronauts in jargon that seems to become increasingly formal, which irritates Vollmer. He begins to spend much time looking at Earth, saying nothing. The narrator reflects that the view from space is, indeed, endlessly fascinating. He thinks this spectacle must embody all Vollmer's deepest and most complex longings and beliefs. Finally, Vollmer speaks, remarking on how interesting it is. "The colors and all."

Human Moments in World War III Analysis

The story "Human Moments in World War III" assumes an unusual perspective to examine the question of the dehumanization caused by war. Its two characters observe Earth from space, where the mystery and beauty of the planet are apparent but the actions of humankind are invisible. The narrator is a practical man who wants to concentrate on everyday tasks. He represents people who do not consider the deeper motivations or underpinnings of actions. Vollmer is the thinker, whose tendency is to analyze situations and seek explanations for events. The narrator realizes that Vollmer is brilliant and he often privately agrees with his young colleague's insights, but he tries to avoid any conversation that probes into the meanings of things. The staff at the Colorado command center is even more averse to such philosophizing than the narrator is. They insist that the old radio conversations the astronauts pick up are just noise, and their own talk is full of jargon that makes them sound almost robotic. Meanwhile, it appears that people on Earth are becoming bored with the young war, because they do not feel involved. In other words, their observation of the war from a distance deprives it of meaning for them. From the vantage of space, Vollmer regards Earth intently, as if trying to use this new perspective to help make sense of humans and of his own life. Yet even with his brilliance, he seems able to find only academic interest in the world at such distant remove. Its colors fascinate him, but colors reveal little. The Earth remains as unfathomable as the actions of its human inhabitants. It would seem that the only way to begin to understand anything or anyone is by close, personal involvement. And at the story's end, it appears that through close confinement on the spacecraft, the narrator has begun to understand and more fully appreciate Vollmer.

The Runner

The Runner Summary and Analysis

The Runner Summary

The first of three stories in Part Two of this collection is "The Runner." A young, unnamed man is running laps around a pond in a city park in late afternoon. He sees normal sights, such as a man and his daughter feeding ducks from a footbridge, a pigeon strutting and two women strolling, and then he notices a car that surprisingly drives onto the park grass. It stops near a woman and child sitting on a blanket. The runner rounds a bend in the path and has his back to the scene when he hears the car depart, its engine backfiring. A middle-aged woman he recognizes from his apartment building approaches and asks him if he saw what happened. He says no, and she explains that a man got out of the car, took the little boy, and drove away with him. The woman is passionately convinced that the man was the boy's father, who is divorced from the mother, lost custody, and has decided to steal his son. The runner asks why she believes this without proof, and she says because it happens all the time. He expresses doubt. She asks how old he is and when he says 23, she replies sharply that this is why he does not understand the situation. A police car arrives, and the runner takes advantage of this diversion to leave the woman and begin running again.

As he runs, he sees another police car arrive. The first car leaves with the mother, who is clearly agitated. The runner reflects that he should not have ended his conversation with the woman so suddenly. When he rounds a curve and approaches the second police car, he stops and asks the policeman if it was the father who took the child. The policeman asks what he saw, and the runner gives the few details he can provide. The policeman then responds that the mother said the abductor was a stranger. The runner finishes his laps and returns to his building, looking for the woman. He finds her sitting under a tree. She is apologetic about "ranting" to him, and he assures her that she was quite under control. The woman says she has been thinking about the abduction, and cannot put the pieces together. The events seem senseless and horrible to her. The runner says he spoke to the policeman, who confirmed that the abductor was the boy's father. The woman regards him closely. They say goodbye, he goes into the building, and takes the elevator to his apartment.

The Runner Analysis

The central event in "The Runner," the abduction of the little boy, is regarded by the young runner in an unemotional, detached way. He forms no hypothesis about why this happened and draws no conclusion. Indeed, he did not even see the abduction, because his back was turned when it happened. In contrast, the middle-aged woman is an eyewitness, and immediately forms a story about the event that takes into account a contemporary societal problem concerning broken families. Her response to the abduction is deeply emotional, disturbed. The young man's focus is on running and his

own body. He looks outward in a detached manner. In contrast, the woman is so engaged in the world around her that she feels compelled to create an explanation of what happened. After the young man dismisses her, he begins to worry that he was rude. His personal encounter with her has made a mark on his consciousness, as if his self-enclosed world had been invaded. When he sees her again, his intent is to make amends, but first she decries her own emotionalism. In admitting that she now does not know what to think, she shows that what the runner said earlier has made an impact on her. The runner's lie to her is meant to ease her suffering, but he cannot be sure that she believes him. The effects of the abduction have rolled outward, embracing these two people who do not even know each other's names. The runner, frequently on the move in this story, leaves the woman, but it is clear that the experience has brought him a little closer to the world around him.

The Ivory Acrobat

The Ivory Acrobat Summary and Analysis

The Ivory Acrobat Summary

Something extraordinary has happened at the start of "The Ivory Acrobat," as a young woman stands amid a frightened crowd on a city street. The woman's name is Kyle, and she has just experienced an earthquake. Back in her apartment, she puts on walking shoes, dresses warmly, and sleeps fitfully in a sitting position on her couch. Early in the morning, she notices an aftershock and hurries outside. Few people have bothered to follow suit, and until morning she walks the quiet streets of what proves to be Athens, Greece. The next day, she lunches with a colleague named Edmund at an international grade school where she teaches music. She questions him minutely about what he experienced, and is comforted to learn that his memories coincide with her own. She tells Edmund that she does not want to spend the coming night alone. For days afterward, Kyle is on edge, constantly worried that another earthquake will occur. The aftershocks, although diminishing, worsen her fears. A number of people died in the earthquake, and thousands have been rendered homeless. A plaster bust Kyle had at the school, depicting the ancient Greek god Hermes, was destroyed in the quake, and as they walk around the city during lunchtime, Edmund says he bought a present for her to replace the bust. They talk about how poor they are, and he says he found a deal at the flea market. He gives her a small reproduction in ivory of an ancient Minoan figure. It depicts a woman somersaulting, and Edmund says in the original, she is vaulting over the horns of a charging bull. He says his intent is to remind Kyle of how lithe she is.

Later, Kyle sits in pajamas in her apartment at midnight, when she hears the earthquake arriving as a distant roar. She gets to the door and opens it, but then must hang on as the earthquake hits. For days after that, she stays away from crowded places, feeling deprived of the city itself. Edmund leaves with friends to look at monasteries beyond the city. One day, Kyle finds the bull-vaulting figurine in a desk drawer at school, where she had forgotten she left it. Guiltily, she studies it, trying in vain to find anything in the acrobatic figure that Edmund saw as being like her. She knows almost nothing about the ancient Minoan culture that produced the original figure and feels completely divorced from it. Once she recognizes that who she is seems to stop where this ancient figure begins, she takes it with her everywhere she goes.

The Ivory Acrobat Analysis

Kyle is in a strange and challenging situation in "The Ivory Acrobat." Not only has an earthquake struck, but she is alone in a foreign country. An earthquake is such a powerful act of Nature that the word is often used metaphorically to denote a shattering experience, and this earthquake has a profound impact on Kyle. At work, as soon as she is with a colleague who speaks English as a first language, her focus on questioning him closely about what he noticed during the earthquake is a way for her to

cope with its strange power. Someone else's description of the event that coincides with her observations helps her to parse or define what happened, to make sense of its frightful mystery. Her request that Edmund stay with her the night after the earthquake is not romantically driven, and the suggestion is that they merely huddled and talked throughout the night. It is significant that Edmund's present of the ivory acrobat does not depict the charging bull over whose horns the young woman is somersaulting, because an earthquake cannot be seen arriving and evaded with a leap. It could be said that Athens is in the grip of an act of the gods, and the deaths and damage wrought by the earthquake underscore the point that Kyle is not being paranoid. The reality of the threat is proven when a second earthquake strikes. This time, Kyle does not even have Edmund's presence to console her. She must face this terror alone, but there is no way for her to vault an earthquake. Unlike the figurine, Kyle cannot evade troubles merely by being lithe or acrobatic. Her life in a foreign country at a dangerous time does not present clear and simple challenges, like that of a charging bull. Her world tends to shake angrily and fall apart. Only after she recognizes the stark difference between the ancient myth and her contemporary life can the figurine give her comfort, because then she can accept it as a metaphor and a reminder to stay strong and quick in the face of her own challenges.

The Angel Esmeralda

The Angel Esmeralda Summary and Analysis

The Angel Esmeralda Summary

"The Angel Esmeralda" begins when an old nun named Sister Edgar, who still wears the conventional habit and is obsessed with cleanliness, rises one morning at the convent and is driven by Sister Grace, a young nun in secular dress, to a ruined inner city neighborhood nicknamed the Bird. On a free-standing brick wall near an abandoned tenement building the nuns see rows of spray-painted angels, each a memorial to a local child who has died. Sister Grace thinks the paintings and words that describe these often- violent deaths are in terrible taste, but Sister Edgar appreciates them, just as she does the boys who risk rappelling down the wall to produce the graffiti. The nuns work here, in the South Bronx, with a few friars, one of whom tells them to look for a twelve year-old girl he has seen rummaging alone among the ruins. The nuns, aided by children, locate wrecked cars and sell the details of their locations to young Ismael Munoz, who in turn sells the wrecks for scrap metal. Ismael, who operates from an abandoned tenement in the Bird, is the one who directs his young graffiti artists to make the angel paintings. At Ismael's office, Sister Edgar sees a feral-looking girl out the window and asks about her. Ismael's helpers say her name is Esmeralda, her parents are absent, and she stays away from everyone. The nuns leave, and with the aid of children, they distribute food among the poor, including the mentally ill, substance abusers and orphans.

From their van, the nuns see a bus full of foreign tourists stop in the Bird. People get out and take photos of the desolation, and Sister Grace yells at them that they are surreal. She spots Esmeralda, jumps from the van and gives chase, but cannot catch the fleet girl. Weeks later, Sister Grace tells Sister Edgar that she just learned someone raped Esmeralda and threw her off a rooftop. Ismael's boys paint an angel of her on the wall. Sister Edgar, normally capable of dealing with the sadness all around her, is hit hard by Esmeralda's death. Rumors begin to circulate of a strange occurrence, and Sister Edgar wants to see it, despite Sister Grace's argument that it is just the imaginings of poor, hopeless people. Sister Edgar and a young nun named Sister Jan go to a freeway overpass where people have congregated to look at a billboard advertising orange juice. When a train arrives, its headlights shine on the billboard, and it looks like Esmeralda's face is briefly visible. The following night, a thousand people have gathered, and the media are out in force. In the crush, two pedestrians are hit by moving vehicles, and a fight breaks out. Esmeralda's face seems to appear again in the train lights, and Sister Edgar is among those beside herself with joy and hope. By the next night, the advertisement has been removed and the billboard shows no sign of Esmeralda's face. But Sister Edgar clings prayerfully to her memory of the image.

The Angel Esmeralda Analysis

This is a story about the necessity of hope. The good work of the nuns and friars in "The Angel Esmeralda" is overwhelmed by the devastation of poverty, homelessness, drugs, crime, hunger, filth, and illness in the South Bronx. Sister Edgar, who has lived and worked for many years in the midst of such hopelessness, sustains herself emotionally by concentrating on one small task after another. She seems to have no illusions about transforming the world around her, whereas the younger Sister Grace remains full of optimism. Even so, when Esmeralda is killed, Sister Grace's reaction is anger, but she does not for a moment believe that the rumors of visions of Esmeralda amount to a true miracle. Grace is just as devout as Edgar, but she apparently has no need to embrace the hope of a direct message from God. Despite all the evil and sadness she has seen, Grace remains optimistic about the goodness in humankind. She has faith in the value of life here on Earth. Sister Edgar, on the other hand, has reached the end of hope. She sees no potential for improvement, either in her surroundings or in the hearts of bad people. The only way she can keep going in the face of such despair is by grasping onto the notion of a modern miracle wrought by God to provide hope. Only in this way can all that is wrong and hurtful in her debased environment be retrieved from meaninglessness. The miracle indicates there is a purpose in all this, however mysterious it is, including an ultimate reward proceeding from the otherwise senseless deaths of innocent children like Esmeralda.

Baader-Meinhof

Baader-Meinhof Summary and Analysis

Baader-Meinhof Summary

The first story in Part Three of this collection, "Baader-Meinhof," opens in an art museum. A young woman looking at paintings senses that someone else has entered the room. The paintings depict the deaths of Andreas Baader, Ulrike Gudrun and other members of the infamous German Baader-Meinhof terrorist gang of the 1970s. The newcomer in the room is a man, who strikes up a conversation with her about the paintings. She answers reluctantly, not looking at him. He says he knows she wants him to shut up and tells himself, "Shut up, Bob," but then adds that his name is not Bob. He displays little awareness of the paintings or the history behind them, and wants to know why she is there. She says this is the third straight day she has come to the museum, but will reveal only that she finds the paintings fascinating, although they make her feel helpless. She thinks she sees an indistinct crucifix in the corner of one painting that shows the terrorists' coffins, but she does not point it out to him. They go to the museum snack bar. He indicates that he works in the stock market but is unemployed, and will have a job interview in the afternoon. She does not tell him that she is also unemployed, not wanting to create a connection between them.

Nevertheless, in the next scene, they are in her small studio apartment, drinking seltzer water. She mentions a divorce, and he says he has never married. He asks if she would like to have a child one day, and she says yes. He finds the prospect of such responsibility daunting. He then asks what she wants him to do. This makes her nervous, and she asks him to leave. He does not move. He says he canceled his interview appointment while she was in the bathroom. He asks her to be friends, and keeps repeating the request, sounding completely insincere. He says he senses her melancholy. When she tries to move away, he stands and holds her. He then releases her and takes off his jacket. She goes into the bathroom but is afraid to lock the door, because it might enrage him. She hears him undressing and sitting on the bed in the studio room. After a while, she hears him get up and approach the bathroom door, which she locks. He apologizes through the door. After she hears him leave, she emerges, but finds that her apartment does not feel the same to her anymore, which angers her. The next morning, she returns to the museum and sees him seated, his back to her, looking at the largest of the Baader-Meinhof series, the painting with the coffins and cross, which is titled, "Funeral."

Baader-Meinhof Analysis

It is appropriate that a story about the nature of terrorism should begin with images of the corpses of terrorists who certainly were among the most deadly and ruthless of their time. The only clue given to why the unnamed woman is so fascinated by these images is that they evoke a feeling of helplessness in her, but that is enough to suggest that she

would be unlikely to mount an effective resistance to anyone who might terrorize her. Her perception of what she thinks is a cross in the painting of the caskets represents her belief in forgiveness and hope of salvation, which, in turn, implies that she may have endured a traumatic experience. The author makes it clear that the woman has no interest in getting to know the man in the museum, yet she ends up at the snack bar with him, and even takes him to her apartment. At first, their chat seems to be pleasant enough, but the man soon turns the encounter into a sexual threat. True to character, the woman is meek in her request that he leave, and hurries to hide in the bathroom. She is fortunate that he does not turn out to be utterly evil, but her sense of violation is strong even in his absence. And yet, she returns to the museum the next day, only to find him waiting. The woman has participated in putting herself in danger by refusing to actively avoid the man's dubious attentions. While this does not excuse his terrorism of her, it casts a revealing light on one response to such domination, which is to be thrilled by fear, and to court danger for the perverse excitement of feeling helpless. In this story, the author is not merely exploring the evils of terrorism, but is looking at the dynamic between terrorist and victim. Without ascribing blame, his story suggests that a complex mental and emotional interplay of motives and signaling can exist in such a relationship, particularly when it develops between just two people.

Midnight in Dostoevsky

Midnight in Dostoevsky Summary and Analysis

Midnight in Dostoevsky Summary

Two college friends in a rural upstate town have an imaginative, bantering relationship in "Midnight in Dostoevsky." They concoct stories about the lives of people in the town, and become particularly interested in an old man wearing a hooded coat. The two young men, Todd and the narrator, Robby, argue about all their imagined details of the man's life, even including whether the hooded coat they have seen from a distance is an anorak or a parka. They take a logic class from a professor named Ilgauskas who speaks in brief, apparently unconnected statements that he does not explain. All 13 students in the class try valiantly to follow his line of thought, but they suspect he has a neurological disorder. Robby is interested in a wan girl who sometimes sits across the seminar table from him, but she avoids his steady gaze. In the street, Robby spots the hooded man. Two days later, he and Todd follow the man to a street in town, but they do not see which house he enters. They choose a gray, wooden house, and construct a life for him there with his daughter and her family. They decide he is probably from eastern Europe, but cannot agree on the country. In class, Ilgauskas says, "Logic ends where the world ends," but does not elaborate. After class, Robby talks to the girl, whose name is Jenna. She says she encountered Ilgauskas at the café in town and spoke to him while he ate dinner, which astonishes Robby. He had a book and when she asked what he was reading, he replied that he read Dostoevsky constantly. Jenna told Ilgauskas she had read a poem recently that had a line she liked, "Like midnight in Dostoevsky." Jenna then tells Robby she is quitting school. He does not respond.

During winter break, Robby stays on campus. His parents are divorced and preoccupied elsewhere. He reads Dostoevsky in the town library, leaving the book open on a table overnight and finding it untouched the next day. Late one night, as he lies in bed, he gets an idea. When Todd returns to campus, Robby tells him his idea that the hooded man is Russian, and is the father of Ilgauskas. They argue over whether "Ilgauskas" is a Russian name, but Robby reveals that the professor reads Dostoevsky. In class, Ilgauskas says the laws of thought are the only meaningful laws. For days, the friends lose sight of the hooded man, and worry that he might have died. They begin to consider making him dead in their story, but then they see him again. He walks by, they get a close look at him, and then Todd wants to take the next step, which is speaking to him. This outrages Robby, who says it would destroy everything. A fistfight develops over the issue. After Todd runs away in pursuit of the hooded man, Robby wonders how this happened, when Todd only wanted to talk to the man.

Midnight in Dostoevsky Analysis

In the isolated world of their rural college, the two friends in "Midnight in Dostoevsky" are enveloped in ideas and imaginative thinking. Their relationship is stimulating but

competitive. Their interest in the hooded man and in Ilgauskas is essentially a good thing, a healthy connection to the people around them. If they did not care about their society, they would not bother to make up stories about the people in it. Even so, as their narrative about the hooded man develops, Robby in particular becomes possessive of the fictional bloodline he creates between the old man and Ilgauskas. Todd threatens that connection with his insistence that they speak to the hooded man, which drives Robby to violence in defense of his story. Their narrative about the hooded man has taken on a life of its own. To Robby, threatening that narrative is almost like threatening a life. The importance of ideas and of story-making is underscored by the comment in class of Ilgauskas about the rules of thought being the only rules that matter. His idea that logic ends with the world could be taken as an endorsement of imaginative or magical thinking beyond the realm of the commonplace. Dostoevsky, famed for the fevered imagination and intense emotionalism of his writing, is the perfect symbol in a story about the power of storytelling. And midnight, when dark things happen, symbolizes the unpredictable sway of stories that arise from deep in the unconscious. Stories always have helped people to make sense of the manifold mysteries of life, and this short story demonstrates how indispensable that tool can be.

Hammer and Sickle

Hammer and Sickle Summary and Analysis

Hammer and Sickle Summary

At the start of "Hammer and Sickle," inmates are being shepherded by guards across a busy highway overpass to an athletics field where a prison soccer game will be played. The narrator walks alongside a tall inmate named Sylvan Telfair, whose criminal offense involved international finance. This interests the narrator, who introduces himself as Jerold and tries to strike up a conversation, but Telfair is uncommunicative. Jerold reflects that his life feels unreal here among the convicts, who bet on football or have other obsessions, such as Biblical studies or running. Back in prison after the game, Jerold watches a children's television program in which two young girls read the news, including the stock market report. The girls are Jerold's daughters, Laurie and Kate, who were selected, their mother tells him on the phone, without providing details. In his cell, Jerold talks to his bunk mate, Norman, who reveals that he used to collect famous artwork. He misses the pictures, but Jerold knows that Norman is content in jail, away from the demands of life and his own acquisitive nature. The children's TV stock market report becomes popular in the prison. Jerold wonders how he got here, with four more years to go, and cannot remember his crime. The stock market reports are all about imminent financial collapses and the ruin of nations. Feliks Zuber, the eldest inmate, whose spectacular fraud in high finance brought down companies and nations, loves the show. Jerold keeps going to watch the prison soccer games, although the weather is colder and few others attend.

Norman, whose surname is Bloch, is in jail for never paying his income taxes, which he describes as a kind of lazy oversight. Jerold reveals the secret to Norman that the girls on TV are his daughters. Norman praises them, and insists he can tell that Jerold still loves his wife, from whom he is legally separated. Jerold thinks about the defeated nature of the inmates. The grim stock market reports become more theatrical in delivery, like a performance. Norman thinks Jerold's wife, who writes the reports, is making a statement. The children interject the phrase "hammer and sickle." Norman asks why Jerold is in jail, and he says for insider trading for his boss, who was his father. The TV reports become so popular that Jerold can hardly find a empty chair. The report ends with a list of communist leaders, past and present, delivered in singsong fashion. The inmates, all white collar criminals, are thrilled. This disturbs Jerold, who wonders if his girls are undermining capitalism. After the report, the camera does not go dark, and Kate sits stubbornly staring at it for a long time. Early in the morning, Jerold rises, slips through the wire fence and climbs to the overpass, where he watches the cars, wondering about the lives of their passengers. He knows he will soon return to minimum security, where he belongs, but for the moment, he will inhale the exhaust of free enterprise.

Hammer and Sickle Analysis

Perhaps the most important characteristic of a sporting contest is its rules, which make it a microcosm of society and therefore a poignant place to start the story of lawbreakers in "Hammer and Sickle." Jerold and the other white-collar criminals have breached the capitalistic system's rules of fair play. As such, they represent a kind of anarchy, yet Jerold does not consider himself to be a revolutionary. He believes in free enterprise, and he thinks the other inmates do, too, with the possible exception of Feliks Zuber, who appears to revel in the prospect of financial and governmental collapse. When Jerold's two young daughters begin reading the news on TV, their stock market segment quickly becomes favored by the inmates, who enjoy its doom-and-gloom atmosphere. These men, former warriors of free enterprise, have been vanquished by their own failure to obey the rules, and they now prefer bad news to good. Looking behind the reports to their authorship by the girls' mother, Norman sees that she is predicting the collapse of the global financial system and the revival of communism. Symbolically, Jerold's estranged wife is lamenting the breakdown of rules of conduct as applied individually, otherwise known as morality. In predicting the resurgence of communism, she is suggesting that its totalitarian phase is necessary to impose harsh controls over a society that has become so corrupt that free will can no longer be allowed. Even family life has become corrupt, as the manipulation of Jerold by his father indicates. Ironically, the girls' mother manipulates them in calling for harsh controls over society, which amounts to an endorsement of Jerold's imprisonment. Jerold objects to the idea that his incarceration is helpful, or that, by extension, totalitarianism would help society. He demonstrates this opposition by leaving the prison and watching the cars, engines of progress, which encase passengers in the small prisons of their own lives. He will return to the relative security of jail, where he realizes that he belongs for now, but some day he intends to return to free enterprise and to free will.

The Starveling

The Starveling Summary and Analysis

The Starveling Summary

"The Starveling" has a complex beginning, in which a man is thinking about a time long before he encountered a particular woman. He was living alone, in poor circumstances, and apparently without ambition. Faulty wiring caused a lamp in his room to catch fire and he watched it impassively. The story then moves forward to his life with a woman named Flory, who is not the woman he mentioned at the start. They also live in poor circumstances, in her apartment. They were married but have been divorced for several years. She is an actor, currently reading radio news. He goes to cinemas, one after another, watching three or four films every day. His name is Leo Zhelezniak. Flory originally admired his devotion to the movies, and concocted various explanations for his behavior, ranging from fanaticism to the after-effects of childhood trauma. One day, Leo sees a younger woman in a cinema who he has noticed recently, among the several others who drift from one theater to another in New York City. He always has ignored the others, but he begins watching her. In the apartment, he sleeps on the cot. Flory has a boyfriend, but occasionally she invites Leo to have sex with her. She works out, meditates, and eats carefully. She has never appeared in a film, and he thinks she secretly blames him for this. He daydreams about being a foreigner, and Flory creates a story that he used to be a schoolteacher who had a conversation with colleagues about alternative lives, and then enacted the one he had proposed to them, which is his current life. But they both know their relationship has become safe and passionless.

On the subway, he follows the woman, and makes up a story about how she lives, and with whom. His imagines his body pressed against hers. She goes to a film and he follows, sitting directly behind her, but he is uncomfortable, because this is her movie, not his. She's very thin, and imagining her naked, he decides to call her the Starveling. He thinks about the death thirty years ago of his father, who left him an inheritance upon which he has lived ever since quitting his post office job. This reminds him of the many notebooks he subsequently filled with thoughts on the films he saw. Flory liked this, but he stopped after the notes started to become more important to him than the movies. Now he has begun to feel like the days are blending into each other. He follows the woman on the subway and bus to her home, a row house in the Bronx. He waits until she reappears and follows her to a cinema in the suburbs. After the film, which he already had seen recently, he follows her to the women's restroom. He goes in, sees her at the washbasin, and washes his own hands, saying the men's faucets do not work. She looks nervous. Another woman enters, and the Starveling scuttles away. Leo goes home, where he sees Flory standing in a pose with her hands clasped above her head. They stare at each other, wordlessly, and he cannot tell if she even sees him. He does not move, fearing that if he blinks, she will be gone.

The Starveling Analysis

In "The Starveling," a story about vicarious living, Leo's obsession with the movies takes the place of interactions with real humans. He still lives with Flory, but their marriage is dissolved, both in law and in spirit. They share the same space and treat each other with civility, but are emotionally unconnected. Flory preoccupies herself with the health and fitness of her own body, still hoping for an acting breakthrough that clearly will not occur, while Leo absorbs himself in the fictional lives of characters on screen. Leo's obsession with the Starveling is his attempt to return from a living death, in which one day blurs into the next, but all he can do is follow and watch her. It is as though he has lost the ability to engage in normal interactions with other people. He has reduced himself to an observer who can construct a fictional life about someone he sees but cannot find a natural way to actually meet and speak with her. Instead, he ends up following her into forbidden territory, a women's restroom, where the unexpected presence of a man signals danger. He makes up a lame excuse about the dysfunctional faucets in the men's room, but otherwise cannot talk to her. When he returns to his apartment and sees Flory in one of her meditative poses, their lack of connection is so extreme that he cannot even tell if she sees him. She may as well be a character on a screen. And yet, unreal as she is to him, Flory also is all he has, which is why he is afraid that if he closes her eyes, she will be gone, like the ending of a film. Why Leo has come to this pass in his life is not explained. Flory offers a few suggestions, but the reason is not important. This somber story is about emotional withdrawal and the substitutions people can make for a life fully lived. The young woman is not the only starveling in this bleak tale of emaciated spirits.

Characters

The Narrator

The only character that could be said to recur in this book is the narrator, particularly in the four short stories that are presented in first person. In those stories, the narrator could be regarded as representative of aspects of the author's personality. This is not to suggest that protagonists presented in third person in the other stories do not also derive from the author's experience of life, but the first-person male narrators have characteristics in common that unite them, at least loosely. In "Creation," the first-person narrator is an apparently well-to-do and rather jaded man who enjoys drifting in the netherworld of a tropical island on which he is temporarily stranded, first with one woman and then with another. In "Human Moments in World War III," an astronaut who wants to focus on the commonplace practicalities of his job is annoyed by the philosophizing of his colleague. In "Midnight in Dostoevsky," a college student becomes angered when his friend wants to discover the truth about a stranger for whom the two students have created a fictional life story. In "Hammer and Sickle," a prisoner resigned to his sentence for financial crimes still strongly supports free enterprise. In each of these cases, the first-person narrator is intelligent and thoughtful, with definite opinions about issues explored in the story. He is surrounded by characters who are, at best, indecisive and, at worst, confused and defeated.Far from holding indisputably correct notions, the narrator has opinions that are subject to challenge in each story. Indeed, one of the narrator's principal roles seems to be to establish a position that is open to debate, so the debate can begin.

Jill

Jill is the narrator's girlfriend or wife in "Creation." She has the capacity to shut out the world when absorbed in reading, even to the point of ignoring the beauty of a tropical island or the crowd in a busy airport. Her anxiety about missed and cancelled flights that delay the couple's departure is explained by an upcoming business meeting on a nearby island, but the underlying cause seems to be simply that Jill becomes upset when things do not go the way she planned them. She pledges not to leave the narrator if only one seat on a plane becomes available, but when that happens, she takes the seat without much fuss. She leads a privileged life, and has developed an accompanying sense of entitlement that is not attractive.

Christa Landauer

Christa Landauer is a young German woman in "Creation" who has an affair with the narrator after Jill leaves the island on a business trip. She drifts into the arms of the narrator almost as if the liaison were preordained. Her nonchalance has an air of aimless need about it. Christa is even more agitated than Jill had been about not being

able to get on a flight leaving the island, although she reveals only that people are expecting her elsewhere. At one point, when she learns that a flight has been cancelled, she runs outside the airport, where the narrator finds her quaking in the bushes.

Vollmer

Vollmer is a 23-year-old astronaut from Minnesota on his first mission in space who accompanies the more seasoned narrator as they orbit the earth. He is extremely intelligent, a gifted engineer who specializes in communications and weaponry. He has a deep voice that the narrator considers to be toneless and stupid-sounding, although Vollmer never says anything stupid. He is fascinated by the view of Earth from space, which sparks much rumination by him on topics such as the place of humans on the planet, world war, the place of Earth in the universe, and prospects of other intelligent life elsewhere. Eventually, however, Vollmer's colorful and provocative observations recede into silent contemplation of the planet. In the end, his only comment is that the colors and everything are very interesting, as if the enormity of it all has reduced his brilliance to tongue-tied wonderment.

The Runner

The runner is a 23 year-old man who does laps around an inner-city park throughout most of the story titled, "The Runner." His focus is primarily on aspects of his physical self, such as his breathing and the condition of his body as he runs, but he notices events that occur around him in the park. He is not much interested in becoming involved with the surrounding world, but when a woman he recognizes stops him to talk, he obliges. After he leaves her rather abruptly, he feels guilty about his rudeness and when he finishes his run, he seeks her out. During their discussion, he tells a small lie whose objective is to make the woman feel better. In this story, the runner represents the self-involvement of healthy youthfulness, and the dawning awareness that the essence of civility is willingness to accept the inconvenience of helping others in distress.

Kyle

Kyle is a young American woman teaching music at an international grammar school in Athens, Greece, in the story, "The Ivory Acrobat." At this time of freedom and adventure in her life, the city experiences two earthquakes that shatter Kyle's self-confidence. She relies on a male colleague for temporary comfort, but eventually must endure on her own. The trauma of the earthquakes forces a reconfiguration of Kyle's self-image, from that of a lithe spirit to a stolid, cautious soul.

Edmund

Edmund is a 36-year-old colleague of Kyle at the international school in "The Ivory Acrobat." Kyle thinks of him as "the English Boy," although he is not a boy and not even English. After the first earthquake, Edmund gives Kyle his impressions of the event, which she finds comforting because they coincide closely with her own recollections. Edmund gives her a present of an ivory figurine, a reproduction of an ancient statute that depicts a female acrobat leaping over the horns of a bull. Edmund also agrees to spend the night after the earthquake at Kyle's apartment, where they huddle on the sofa and talk. He is a kind figure in the story, yet he leaves Athens on a sightseeing tour, essentially abandoning Kyle before the second earthquake hits.

Sister Edgar

Sister Edgar is an old nun in "The Angel Esmeralda." She feels that she belongs in the ruined slums of the Bronx, where her order does charity work. As a younger nun, she was a teacher with the reputation of a tough disciplinarian, who used a ruler to slap proper grammar into her students' heads, but she stopped that practice when the students from the neighborhood became poorer and darker in complexion. She is obsessed with cleanliness, and still would like to drill good grammar into the poverty-stricken youth she sees, if she had the opportunity. When rumors arise that a miracle sighting of a dead girl is occurring nearby, Sister Edgar hurries to the site. Hardened though she is, she remains devout, and wants desperately to believe in signs from Heaven.

Grace Fahey

Grace Fahey, generally called Sister Grace, is the young colleague of Sister Edgar in "The Angel Esmeralda." She describes herself as a confirmed optimist, and has faith that goodness will prevail, even in the dire circumstances of life in the slums. But when young Esmeralda is raped and murdered, Sister Grace's response is to wish she could find the culprit, to kill him in retaliation. She strongly urges Sister Edgar to ignore rumors of the miracle, arguing that it is driven by hysteria and media hype, and she refuses to accompany Sister Edgar to the site.

Esmeralda

Esmeralda, the title character in "The Angel Esmeralda," is a 12 year-old girl who apparently lives in an abandoned car in the slums of the Bronx. Her parents are unavailable to her, and she has become almost feral, running from anyone who approaches. Sister Edgar and Sister Grace try to help her, but cannot get close enough to do so. After someone rapes Esmeralda and throws her off a building, people begin seeing her image flashing on a billboard at an overpass, which the crowds herald as a miracle.

Ilgauskas

Ilgauskas is a professor of logic at an upstate college in "Midnight in Dostoevsky." He speaks to his class in short, ambiguous sentences, followed by long moments of staring at the wall. The statements he makes seem as though they could be profound, but they are disconnected from each other, and the students strain futilely to understand him. They suspect he has a neurological disorder, but they like him. Two of his students make up a story, as a kind of game, in which Ilgauskas is the son of a old man they see in the street. When they discover that Ilgauskas reads Dostoevsky, they decide he and his "father" are Russian.

Robby

Robby is one of the two college students in "Midnight in Dostoevsky" who create a life story about an old man they sometimes see walking around town. Robby's parents are so involved in their own lives that neither one of them is available to him during the holiday break, which forces him to remain on campus. During this break, Robby decides that the old man is the father of one of his professors. When Robby's student friend wants to investigate the true facts of the old man, Robby starts a fistfight with him, which demonstrates the intensity of the loyalty he has developed to the fictional life story.

Todd

Todd is Robby's student friend in "Midnight in Dostoevsky." He is a bright young man, who delights in questioning and challenging Robby's ideas. This confrontational but friendly relationship turns sour when Todd wants to speak to the man in the street, to discover if his real life is anything like the fictional life he and Robby have created for the man. After Robby starts a fight in an attempt to prevent Todd from speaking to the man, Todd runs away, apparently intending to catch the man and question him.

Jerold Bradway

Jerold Bradway is an inmate in a minimum-security prison in "Hammer and Sickle." He claims to be unable to remember what he did to be imprisoned, but later tells his cellmate he was convicted of insider trading, at the behest of his father, for whom he worked. Jerold is 39, separated from his wife, and resigned to his incarceration for four more years. He spends much time thinking about his life and wondering about the lives of his fellow inmates. He believes in the capitalist system, and becomes alarmed when the other inmates are thrilled by anti-capitalist rhetoric delivered on a children's TV program by two girls who happen to be Jerold's daughters. At the end of the story, he sneaks out of the prison, but accepts that within moments he will return.

Norman Bloch

Norman Bloch is Jerold's cellmate in "Hammer and Sickle." In civilian life, he was wealthy, and collected fine art. He was imprisoned for not paying taxes, which he describes to Jerold as a character flaw related to laziness. Norman is satisfied in prison, where he no longer must deal with the consequences of his own avaricious nature or with all the attendant pressures of life in a consumer society. After Jerold tells him that the girls on television are his daughters, Norman makes insightful guesses and observations about the girls and Jerold's wife. He is a likeable man, and friend to Jerold.

Leo Zhelezniak

Leo Zhelezniak is a former postal worker in "The Starveling" who inherited money from his father, quit his job, and devoted his life to going to the movies. He lives with his ex-wife in a small apartment his owns. His daily routine is to travel from one cinema to another in Manhattan, to watch three or four movies. He used to take copious notes on the films, but stopped doing that after the notes threatened to become more important than the movies. Leo's days blend into each other, which is partly why he becomes fascinated with a woman who also travels from one film to another. He follows her, but chooses to enter a women's restroom to speak to her, and succeeds only in frightening her away. He is the quintessential example of a person emotionally isolated from the world around him.

Flory

Flory is Leo's ex-wife in "The Starveling." A slender, graying woman, she is sporadically employed as an actress. Her current, temporary job is reading short reports on a radio station. Flory is a devotee of meditation and exercise who keeps a close eye on her diet. She has a boyfriend, but occasionally invites Leo into her bed from the cot where he sleeps in her apartment. Flory approves of Leo's obsession with going to the movies, although she was disappointed when he stopped taking notes on the films. She seems to blame him for her own failure to ever get acting part in a movie. She says their occasional sex life is passionless, but she tolerates and even appreciates him as something safe and unchanging in her existence.

The Starveling

The Starveling, the title character of that story, is a young woman addicted to going to the movies, as is Leo. He spots her making the rounds of New York City's cinemas, and begins following her. She is a thin and solitary figure who does not speak throughout the short story. The only time Leo confronts her, she hurries away wordlessly at the first opportunity.

Objects/Places

The Caribbean

The Caribbean is where the characters in "Creation" are temporarily stranded. The unnamed island is near Barbados, where they would like to go next.

Space

Space is where the two astronauts are in "Human Moments in World War III." They spend much of their time in the capsule looking at Earth as they orbit it.

The Park

The park in "The Runner" is an inner-city park that contains a pond. The runner does laps around the pond throughout most of the story, as the kidnapping of a child unfolds on a grassy part of the park.

Athens

Athens, the main metropolis in Greece, is where Kyle lives in "The Ivory Acrobat." She and Edmund walk its streets together, and she also stands on the streets with crowds in the aftermaths of two earthquakes.

Earthquakes

The earthquakes in "The Ivory Acrobat" symbolize the potentially transformative power of unexpected events in life, in this case dangerous events brought about by the agency of Nature.

The Ivory Acrobat

The ivory acrobat in the story of the same name is a small reproductive of a Minoan sculpture that depicts a young woman somersaulting over the horns of a bull. The reproduction is only of the girl, not the bull, and it represents the lithe and independent figure Kyle would like to be, but feels she is not.

The Bird

The Bird is an area of the Bronx in "The Angela Esmeralda" where the nuns go to help impoverished people. Its nickname is a joking shorthand from the local police force for

"bird sanctuary," because weeds and trees that have grown amid rubble in vacant lots occasionally attract owls and other birds. The main feature of the Bird is a freestanding wall upon which graffiti artists have drawn portraits as angels of children who have died.

The Art Museum

The art museum in "Baader-Meinhof" is where the young woman repeatedly goes to look at an exhibition of paintings that depict dead members of the 1970s terrorist group, the Baader-Meinhof Gang.

The Studio Apartment

The studio apartment is where the young woman in "Baader-Meinhof" takes the man she meets at the museum. Her apartment, only a few blocks from the museum, has a bed in the living room, a small bathroom, and a coffee table in front of a couch.

The Cellblock

The Cellblock is the nickname students give to a concrete classrooms at the college in "Midnight in Dostoevsky." Cellblock 2 contains the room where Robby and Todd attend a logic class conducted by Ilgauskas.

The Prison Camp

The prison camp is where Jerold is incarcerated in "Hammer and Sickle." A minimum-security facility, it is contained only by an easily breached wire fence. Some of the story's action occurs in Jerold's cell, and other scenes are set in the common television room.

The Soccer Field

The soccer field in "Hammer and Sickle" is reached by the inmates via a walkway on a freeway overpass. It is a primitive facility, with a few ramshackle outbuildings.

Cinemas

Cinemas of various descriptions are principal settings in "The Starveling." They are all in the New York City metropolitan area, around which Leo travels in his daily attendance at one film after another.

The Bronx

The Bronx contains the row house home of a woman whom Leo calls the Starveling in the story of the same name. The Bronx is also where the nuns do their charity work in "The Angel Esmeralda."

Themes

Souls in Isolation

Many of the characters in these stories are cut off somehow from society. Often, their isolation takes the form of an inability to emotionally or spiritually connect with others. For example, new lovers on vacation seem to be going through the motions of their affair. Two astronauts in space have trouble interacting meaningfully in conversation. A jogger focuses into himself at the expense of looking outward, a man almost rapes a woman, another man stalks a woman, two students come to blows over an ideal, and a wife speaks angrily to her estranged husband through a performance she scripts for their two daughters. Even when people do connect, such as when two colleagues working in Greece share the same reactions to an earthquake, or when two nuns work in tandem in a depressed part of New York City, the characters are sufficiently different that their moments of communion are fleeting. In these stories, Don DeLillo repeatedly demonstrates the difficulty of truly knowing another person. If such knowledge is even possible, it must begin with empathy, his stories suggest. People not only must look beyond their own concerns, but must address one another with honesty and compassion. This is very hard for his characters to achieve, even when they are good people, because the cares of their lives and the difficulties presented by contemporary society often thwart and diminish them. In these stories, isolation can be physically imposed, for example on an island, in prison, or in space, but emotional or spiritual isolation is always the true challenge faced by the characters. Over and over, these stories address the question of how to achieve spiritual integration with the world and with other people in a society fragmented by personal needs and desires.

The Vicarious Life

Time and again, the characters in these stories indulge in diversions or obsessions that imitate or are meant to replace aspects of their everyday lives. The luxury hotel in "Creation" is described by the narrator as a place designed to provide the illusion of escape from the world, and he has no other desire than to linger there with a woman who is a temporary replacement for Jill, his mate. "Human Moments in World War III," demonstrates the shortcomings of vicarious living, when the American public quickly grows bored with the war, because it has failed to make them feel part of something big. The two friends in "Midnight in Dostoevsky" create an elaborate life story of a man in the street that becomes so important to them, they come to blows over the question of whether to investigate the man's true story. The prisoners in "Hammer and Sickle" develop a fascination for the dire stock market reports delivered by the two girls on a children's television program, because the show feeds their fantasies of chaos in the world outside their own defeated existence. And in "The Starveling," a man who spends every day at the movies, absorbed in the lives of fictional characters, begins to stalk a woman who likewise has devoted her life to the darkness and unreality of cinema. At its root, vicarious living is a failure to embrace the real. Often, such failure is deliberate

avoidance of other people and of conditions that are disappointing or otherwise too difficult to face for the person who is living vicariously. Such escapism is a form of cowardice, but Don DeLillo presents his weak characters with compassion, showing that their choices in coping with difficult situations are unwise, yet also are human and forgivable.

Underlying Causes

After Sigmund Freud revolutionized psychology with his theories on the unconscious and on childhood traumas that can exert profound effects on adult behavior, fiction often provided deep-seated motives for the actions of its characters. Nowadays, authors sometimes forgo such explanations, concentrating instead on the life of the character in the moment. Frequently, Don DeLillo's approach in these stories is to hint at reasons for the often emotionally crippled condition of his characters, and let the reader make inferences. The nonchalance with which the narrator in "Creation" drifts from his partner to a new lover, and his desire to linger indefinitely in the artificial world of the hotel strongly suggests something is bothering him, which the author merely implies is related to the ennui that a life of indolent luxury can promote. In "The Ivory Acrobat," Kyle is deathly afraid of the earthquake and worried that the lithe statuette expresses nothing of who she is, which suggests that the reason she lives in Greece, far from her American home, concerns more than mere adventure. Similarly, the young woman in "Baader-Meinhof" is drawn to the paintings of terrorists because they make her feel helpless, and she allows a dangerous man to enter her life despite her better judgment, but the only hint given of why she might be this way is her mention of a broken marriage. In "Midnight in Dostoevsky," some light is cast on Robby's fascination with the hooded man's life when Robby stays on campus during the holiday break, because both his parents are unavailable to him. In "Hammer and Sickle," Jerold is in prison because he did the bidding of his father, yet this crucial relationship is not explored. And in "the Starveling," the relationship between Leo and Flory has deteriorated to mere tolerance of one another, the reason for which appears to be related to disappointed ambitions. DeLillo's strategy of acknowledging underlying causes by hinting at them while avoiding overt exploration of them invites the reader to look deeper into the characters, and in that sense, to participate in development of the stories.

Style

Perspective

Point of View

In five of these nine stories, the point of view is third person, and in the other four the viewpoint is first person. In all of the first-person stories, the narrator is a man, while in three of the third-person stories, the protagonist is a woman. This suggests that the author followed a general rule of choosing first-person when the main character was someone with whom he felt enough personal affinity or comfortableness to observe the story's action through that character's eyes. This might not have been the case for him in the three stories that feature female main characters, but the two remaining third-person stories, "The Runner" and "The Starveling," are interesting for their choice of viewpoint. Both stories feature male protagonists, yet in each case, that person is deeply self-involved. The unnamed runner is a young man intently focused on his body during the running he does through most of the story. He does notice other people and events, and the character change he goes through is a movement from self-involvement to the beginnings of concern about others. The story produces a strong sense that the author himself went through such a development in his younger years, which perhaps explains why he chose to tell it through the more distant viewpoint of third person. "The Starveling," on the other hand, is about a man mired in the pretend world of movies. Leo has become so divorced from reality that is incapable of interacting normally with anyone except Flory. Such a psychological condition might have seemed too extreme for DeLillo to approach with first-person, either because it was too foreign or too familiar to him. In any case, his choice of third-person or first-person in these stories appears to be driven by the artistic consideration of which viewpoint was better suited to creation of a psychologically credible main character.

Tone

Language and Meaning

The inside cover notes of this volume describe the language of DeLillo's earlier short stories as "rich, startling, jazz-infused rhythms," compared to the "distilled, monastic language" of his more recent stories. Such a difference is difficult to detect. Throughout the collection, the author exhibits a preoccupation with using the right word in the right place, particularly in terms of mood-evocative descriptors such as adjectives and action verbs. His style is not so much startling as precise, which is a skill that carries its own beauty, but the words are very much in service to the storyline. Rather than choosing words for their attention-capturing capabilities, his prose is like a fine instrument, doing exactly the job for which it was designed. Such attention to detail and a penchant for finding exactly the right word have been hallmarks of great writing throughout history, and they are central to DeLillo's stature as one of the leading contemporary writers in

English. Perhaps one development in his language over the years is a slightly more honed prose, but for the few examples that might be presented to bolster this argument, other examples could be offered that show how remarkably consistent his writing has been. Indeed, it could be maintained that DeLillo's authorial voice appeared early in his career and has been strong and consistent throughout it. His dialogue often consists of short sentences exchanged between two characters, in a rhythmic cadence that mesmerizes, even as the conversation turns in a surprising direction. His descriptions put characters in settings or situations that speak for themselves, without need for the author to elaborate. Similarly, the thoughts or convictions of his characters often go to the heart of an issue without belaboring it. DeLillo's genius seems to lie in creating situations rich with nuance and possibility, and then leaving them tantalizingly open-ended, a technique that encourages the reader to think about what has happened.

Setting

The settings of these nine stories range widely. "Creation" is set on an unnamed island in the Caribbean, near Tobago and Barbados. The action occurs at an airport, in a luxury hotel, or on the road between the two destinations, creating a sense of life in the interim. "Human Moments in World War III" is set in outer space, where the astronauts view the world as a whole. Again, their lives in the capsule are temporary, before their eventual return to Earth. "The Runner" is set in a park in an unnamed city, where the protagonist runs around a pond before going back to his apartment building. "The Ivory Acrobat" takes place in Athens, Greece. The city streets, Kyle's apartment, and the international school are all specific settings in the story, but the otherness of Greece to an American protagonist is the principal effect of the story's setting. "The Angel Esmeralda" is set in the blasted landscape of a Bronx slum. "Baader-Meinhof" occurs mostly in an art museum and in the studio apartment of the woman who keeps going to the exhibition. "Midnight in Dostoevsky" takes place at a college and in the northern, rural community where it is located. "Hammer and Sickle" is set in a minimum security prison and the fields and highways near it. The setting of the "The Starveling" wanders throughout New York City, yet is principally confined to darkened cinemas and the cramped apartment of Leo and Flory. Consistently in these stories, setting is a symbol of lives in transition, abeyance, danger, or development. The settings are never settled, never permanent or secure, just as the emotional and spiritual states of the author's characters are under pressure or in flux. Each setting is carefully selected, not so much for what it reveals about a character, but for what it implies.

Structure

"The Angel Esmerald: Nine Stories" originally were published in six magazines over a span of more than thirty years. Obviously, the structure of this volume, published in 2011, derives principally from the internal arrangements of its various stories, but another important aspect of the book's structure is the order in which those stories are presented. That order is chronological. The volume is subdivided into three parts. Part One contains only two stories, the first of which originally appeared in 1979 and the second in 1983. Two of the three stories in Part Two were first published in 1988, and

the third in 1994. The four stories in Part Three originally appeared in 2002, 2009, 2010, and 2011, respectively. Looking at the decision to group the stories in three parts based on chronology, the only piece that would have presented a problem is "The Angel Esmeralda," published in 1994, six years after the other two stories in Part Two and eight years before the first story in Part Three. All of the stories in Part Three, however, were published in the 21st century, which makes the 1994 story more suitable for Part Two. Such groupings could help to underscore the author's stylistic changes over time in his short stories, but if they exist, those changes are hard to notice. His thematic interests have remained constant over the decades, and there is no obvious difference in his choice of plot devices, settings, or character development. Even the language has remained consistent, although perhaps becoming marginally more deliberate and less given to rhetorical tics or tricks as the author grows older. At any rate, the chronological structure is useful in allowing readers to note whatever differences or likenesses in DeLillo's stories they might perceive over the course of his career.

Quotes

"It was special, yes. The dream of Creation that glows at the edge of the serious traveler's search." Creation, page 9.ation?

"Vollmer has never said a stupid thing in my presence. It is just his voice that is stupid, a grave and naked bass, a voice without inflection or breath." Human Moments in World War III, page 28.

"As men in war, we can be certain, dying, that we will arouse uncomplicated sorrows, the open and dependable feelings that grateful nations count on to embellish the simplest ceremony." Human Moments in World War III, page 41.

"She thought she'd read somewhere that people in California habitually check the personal columns in newspapers to see if the number of lost dogs has increased noticeably. Or are we dealing with a myth here?" The Ivory Acrobat, page 60.

"The pitiless thing was time, threat of advancing time." The Ivory Acrobat, page 69.

"Prayer is a practical strategy, the gaining of temporal advantage in the capital markets of Sin and Redemption." The Angel Esmeralda, page 73.

"If you know you're worth nothing, only a gamble with death can gratify your vanity." The Angel Esmeralda, page 80.

"Or does the power of transcendence linger, the sense of an event that violates natural forces, something holy that throbs on the hot horizon, the vision you crave because you need a sign to stand against your doubt?" The Angel Esmeralda, page 101.

"He was free of the swollen needs and demands of others but mostly disentangled from his personal drives, his grabbiness, the lifelong mandate to accrue, expand, construct himself, to buy a hotel chain, make a name. He was at peace here, he said." Hammer and Sickle, page 153.

"He watched her and thought of something he'd heard or read years earlier, in philosophy class. All human existence is a trick of light." The Starveling, page 195.

"He'd known from the beginning that he was advancing toward a future without paydays, holidays, birthdays, new moons, full moons, real meals or very much in the way of world news. He wanted the native act, clean, free of extraneous sensation." The Starveling, page 201.

"The world was up there, framed, on the screen, edited and corrected and bound tight, and they were here, where they belonged, in the isolated dark, being what they were, being safe." The Starveling, page 206.

Topics for Discussion

In the story, "Creation," the author gives no warning that the narrator and Christa will begin an affair immediately after Jill leaves the island. Why is this transition so nonchalantly presented, as if it were a given? What point is being made about the characters and their situation?

In "Human Moments in World War III," why do you think the narrator becomes annoyed at what he calls Vollmer's stupid-sounding voice, when he admits that Vollmer never says anything stupid? How would you characterize the role in the story of speaking and conversation between the two characters, and how does it evolve?

In "The Runner," the woman who lives in the same apartment building as the runner is convinced that the father of the child in the park kidnapped the boy, and she explains why she believes this. What can you postulate that her explanation says about her own life, and her reaction to the world around her?

In "The Ivory Acrobat," Edmund gives Kyle the figurine as a present and stays with her the night after the earthquake, both of which are acts of kindness. Before the second earthquake hits, he has left town with friends. Why do you think the author has Edmund leave Kyle on her own? What are the reasons for this plot development?

In "The Angel Esmeralda," Sister Grace strongly objects to Sister Edgar's desire to witness the supposed miracle of Esmeralda's face appearing on the billboard. Based on what is known about the personalities of these two characters, why does it make sense that one nun wants to believe in the miracle and the other does not?

In "Baader-Meinhof," why do you think the woman lets the man into her apartment, even though she shows no particular romantic interest in him? What does this decision have to do with her interest in the art museum exhibition?

In "Midnight in Dostoevsky," one evening at midnight, Robby gets an idea that excites him, which is to link the hooded man and Ilgauskas as father and son. How is this connection related to the title, and what is its importance to the story's theme?

In "Hammer and Sickle," when the television camera fails to stop filming at the end of a broadcast, young Kate stubbornly sits and stares into the lens, long after her sister has left the stage. Transfixed, Jerold looks at his daughter, looking out from the TV at him. What does this scene signify, in terms of Jerold's position in the world, his view of life, and his relationship with his family?

In "The Starveling," Flory offers ideas concerning why Leo decided to stop work after receiving an inheritance and devote his life to watching one movie after another in cinemas. Leo neither gives a reason for this decision nor indicates that he understands why he made it. What is your guess? What happened to Leo that drove him to this strange, disconnected life?