

# **Baltasar and Blimunda Study Guide**

## **Baltasar and Blimunda by José Saramago**

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# Plot Summary

In the novel of *Baltasar and Blimunda* by Jose Saramago, we see a young couple being thrown together by the vagaries of fate, and becoming complicit in the first invention of flight and the construction of the great convent of Mafra at Portugal. Surrounding this duo are other characters (notably the Padre Bartolomeu do Gusmao, one of the predecessors of aviation theory), the noble, and the criminal, as well as the persecutions of the Holy Inquisition. The story takes this strange couple on the journey through their lives as they tackle seeming impossibilities of their times, whilst attempting to answer some of the deepest questions of their life and love.

The story begins with the dismissal of Baltasar sete-Sois from the Portugese army for losing his hand in battle. He travels to Lisbon in the hopes of securing some sort of military pension or dispensation, only to become inextricably drawn to a mysterious girl called Blimunda. Blimunda is in fact a prophetess, and a daughter of a heretic who has the ability to see under the surface of things, divining where lost objects may be and what diseases lie under the flesh. They fall together under the patronage of the Padre Bartolomeu de Gusmao who takes them in to help him build his *Passarola* or the first ever flying airship.

During their task, the Padre has to leave and return to discover the secret of ether or the mysterious substance which powers the airship. He informs Blimunda that she must travel to the dying to extract their 'wills,' which is separate from their souls. Together they fill the globes that are used to power the *Passarola*.

Their first flight causes the Padre to almost lose his grip on reality, as he realizes that he will be burned for heresy and he abandons the *Passarola* and the young couple to their lives. Baltasar is then haunted by the wonder and possibility of flight as he serves as a laborer on the great convent at Mafra.

As the convent at Mafra takes a further twenty years to build and becomes in itself a monument to earthly ego and vanity, an accident occurs and Baltasar is stranded aboard the airship whilst Blimunda searches for him. Nine long years later, Blimunda finds her lover, just in time to accept his own will upon his death.



## Sections 1-3, pages 3 - 25

### Sections 1-3, pages 3 - 25 Summary

The very first section of *Baltasar & Blimunda*, by Jose Saramago introduces the background to the story; the pregnancy (or lack thereof) of Queen Maria Ana Josefa and King Joao the Fifth of Portugal, in the year 1711. What follows in a twisting series of events is the foundation of the monastery at Mafra, Portugal, in honour of the future child of the couple. These events provide the backdrop for the author to describe the love story between our protagonists Baltasar and Blimunda, and their unpredictable friendship with one of the fathers of aviation, Padre Bartolomeu do Gusmao.

The first three sections concerns the upcoming pregnancy of the Queen, the pact that the King makes with the monks of St Francis, and the atmosphere in Lisbon at the time.

In the first and untitled section, the Queen Maria Ana is getting ready for bed (a task which takes several hours as her attendants and ladies in waiting must help her undress, prepare and pray). The Queen is a very devout woman who is distraught by her inability to provide an heir to the throne of Portugal, and so prays incessantly for this gift. The King however, is about to finish his day. He has been up on the roof of the palace where he is recreating St Peter's Basilica (from Rome) in Portugal, and every finished piece of masonry and wooden sculpture must be finally placed by the King's own hands to preserve his and its sanctity. After finishing this, the King himself prepares for bed where he is disrobed by his attendants and then dressed again in his nightclothes when the head of the Holy Inquisition in Portugal asks to have an audience. The Head of the Holy Inquisition (the most senior church figure in the country) states that he has been approached by a Friar Antony who predicts that, if the King builds a new Franciscan monastery and convent at Mafra, then God will reward him with a child. The King questions him for a moment, and then gives his oath that if his wife were to become pregnant and a baby born, then he will build for the Franciscan's the grandest monastery in the entire realm. After that the King attends to the Queen's bedchamber's, before himself retiring to his own, separate royal chamber.

The next section moves on to show how, the Friar of St Antony himself had a strange and dubious past. Some years ago, whilst the Franciscan's were petitioning the king to build their convent at Mafra (unsuccessfully), a theft was made at the altar of St Antony; all of the silverware, which was promptly discovered the very next morning at a far away Franciscan monastery. Quite unsure of how it got there the monks proclaimed it a miracle, and the Friar's and Father's of St Antony came into the good graces of the Queen, to whom she confided when she became pregnant.

The third section in this part goes on to describe the season of Lent in Lisbon, a raucous and boisterous time where there are public flagellations and displays of penitence, alongside processions of the bishops and the relics of the church. The author reveals that underneath these acts of religious devotion there is also a subversive,



festive air as men vie for the attentions of their ladies as to who can be the most penitent or the most abased, brave and passionate. Just as the ladies of the town seem to enjoy the show, the Queen however can find no solace, as she is stuck in an endless round of prayer's and sacraments that take her from chapel to chapel endlessly.

## Sections 1-3, pages 3 - 25 Analysis

In the first three unnumbered and untitled sections of *Baltasar & Blimunda*, by Jose Saramago, the reader is introduced to some of the key features of Saramago's writing: These are, namely; his writing style (postmodern) and his shifting narrative perspective. The author also takes the advantage of these three sections to introduce to the reader the feeling of religious fervour in Portugal in the early 18th Century.

Saramago's writing can be said to be postmodern in the way that it is not structured like another book. It is split up into 'sections' or passages each about five to ten pages long, featuring a number of events around a theme. These first sections concentrate themselves on the background and the setting of the latter story. What is also unique about Saramago's writing is that his narrative holds no speech-punctuation at all (making it reminiscent of early eighteenth and seventeenth manuscripts itself, before the coda of novel writing held its own style and format). The sentences sometimes express the words of one character and then another, freely intermixed with historical asides and the narrator's descriptions. Whilst this can be confusing, it gives the impression of a story being told to one, rather than a 'factual' account. Another key feature is the switching of perspectives throughout these sections and the later book. In the same paragraph we will hear the feelings of one character and then equally the innermost thoughts of their fellow, without any preference played or division made. In this way the point of view could be said to be Third Person Personal (or subjective) - an unusual mixture not often seen in literature.

The bulk of these sections describes to the readers the state of Lisbon, Portugal, and the relationship between the monarchy and the Church. By using masses of details, lists of events and churches and rituals the author conjures up the baroque feel of the age; making the text itself resplendent and gaudy at the same time.

The actual mechanics of the story introduces to the reader the intensely paranoid and suspicious folk of the age; (the god-fearing Queen, and the prideful King, each of whom have their rituals which they must perform before they can be 'proper' and 'moral'). The author succeeds in allowing us to see that the culture and society of this time was intrinsically tied up with religious belief (every social event is actually religious event), but also how that religious customs are abused and subverted by the populous (Lent is used as a time for flirtation, and there is a strong indication that the Fria or St Antony knew about the Queen's pregnancy long enough to orchestrate his 'vision').



## Sections 4-5, pages 26 - 47

### Sections 4-5, pages 26 - 47 Summary

In the next two sections, we are finally introduced to the two main protagonists, that the book is named after; Baltasar and Blimunda. The first section concerns Baltasar and where he has travelled from, whereas the second in this part concerns his meeting with Blimunda.

Baltasar was a soldier of Portugal, where he was fighting in Spain in a semi-religious war. Having survived the battles but lost his left hand, he was retired from the army and had to find his way back home. On the journey he manages to find a blacksmith who helps him to craft two instruments to replace his severed hand; a hook and a spike, each of which he can strap with leather braces to the stump. After doing this he makes his way for Lisbon, in the hope of receiving some form of charity or soldiers pension from the crown. When he arrives in Lisbon we find Baltasar is unable to find the charity he wishes, and instead falls in with the company of rogues, pimps and petty criminals who beg at the many monasteries and churches that fill Lisbon. This he does whilst he awaits his chance to petition the king for some form of employment. He learns that the whole city is caught up in religiosity, and that the Holy Inquisition is about to hold an auto-da-fe (or a public burning of heretics). During the chaos that is ensuing he is unable to receive a noble audience, but instead is happily provided for by the many churches.

In the next section, he attends the auto-da-fe with his semi-criminal friends, and here he encounters the mysterious Blimunda, who asks him his name. It seems that the young woman suddenly captures his heart and his attention as she reveals that one of the woman who is about to be hanged is her own mother, hanged for being in part a Jewess but also for experiencing visions, prophesies and revelations. Blimunda has a friend who is a priest (a Padre), who seeks to help Baltasar and that night Baltasar accompanies Blimunda and her priest mentor after the burning, where they consecrate their love.

### Sections 4-5, pages 26 - 47 Analysis

These two sections present the start of the story proper, with the introduction of the two main protagonists and their immediate love for each other.

A number of themes and points are presented by the author in their meeting and the burning of the heretics. The first interesting point to note is the 'causal cruelty' of the times which the protagonists find themselves. Baltasar, after being wounded in battle is now effectively homeless and penniless, and can only survive thanks to charity or the chance meeting with some sort of employer. Also, we see the casual way that the author writes about the burning (the auto-da-fe), which is seen as a spectator sport by



the populous of Lisbon, even though one of the people about to die is Blimunda's own mother). This cruelty of life surrounds the two characters, to the extent that we immediately feel empathy for them, and feel that their love is threatened on all sides by poverty, the Inquisition and the state.

The next interesting points is the presentation of the characters themselves: Baltasar is shown to be a resourceful, practical man who falls head over heels for a woman he has never even talked to. This can be seen as a deliberate move on the part of the author as he explores the theme of 'Love' throughout the book. Love itself is presented as a mysterious force, quite like divinity and the miracles: it has as much of an unknown origin and a salvatory power.

The presentation of Blimunda's character immediately sets her character apart from the rest: as a strange, ethereal woman whose own mother experienced visions and whom herself, speaks in oddly prophetic tones. She naturally accepts Baltasar's love and confides that she knew that there was something important about their meeting, although she doesn't know why.



## Sections 6-7, pages 48 - 64

### Sections 6-7, pages 48 - 64 Summary

In the next two sections of the novel, the author reveals how Baltasar and Blimunda become ravelled in Padre Bartolomeu's obsession with flight, and how they both become employed in the creation of the Passarola.

Baltasar is now living with Blimunda and waiting to hear from the court if he can be received by the King and petition for a military pension when the father who is Blimunda's mentor (Padre Bartolomeu) approaches him and insists that he could employ the one handed man. They walk the streets of Lisbon, where the Padre tells the ex-soldier of his aims and wishes. Secretly, in a warehouse near an old church the Padre reveals that he has been commissioned by the King himself to build a flying machine, an airship. He has already made several inventions and investigations into that area, and the king has been impressed enough by his endeavours to award for him the task of completing it. Baltasar looks in wonder at all of the wooden work, the canvas sails and the metal supports that the priest has assembled, as he explains that he needs to purchase magnets which will help him 'attract' the creation into the air, away from the ground. Baltasar wonders if what he is doing is not heresy, but the padre replies that whilst this work must remain secret, it is not heretical to believe in the power of flight.

Baltasar then takes work in a local slaughterhouse whilst he helps the Padre construct different parts of the machine. Later, after the padre returns from some of his private experiments and reveals that he has been gifted with an Estate owned by an old duke, he informs Baltasar that he will now be moving the Passarola to the estate so that they can all work in secret. Blimunda agrees to help and go with them, as she and Baltasar are deeply in love.

In the second section of this part, the story continues with the events at court, as the Queen's pregnancy blooms and, soon enough (whilst Baltasar is working in the slaughterhouse), she gives birth to a baby girl, called the Dona. Although this is not the heir that King Joao the Fifth desires, he is still a king of his word, and he agrees to build the greatest monastery for the Franciscan's at Mafra.

### Sections 6-7, pages 48 - 64 Analysis

In these two sections, we find out about the plans of the Padre Bartolomeu, and the father is introduced as the third central character to the whole story.

Padre Bartolomeu is a historical figure (just as the King, the Queen and the musician also are). The author Saramago has cleverly pieced together accounts and records about the Passarola (which was a real invention) and melded them with his own form of science fiction. To this end, the story of Baltasar and Blimunda is definitely a fantastical





tale, but its choice of real-world characters and setting lends it an air of authenticity and believability.

When we finally hear about the Padre's invention, the author has already managed to suspend the disbelief of the reader by decorating the setting of Lisbon in the eighteenth century: already we have experienced miracles and rumours of miracles (although the only truly remarkable event, with a touch of purity, beauty and Grace is the falling in love of Baltasar and Blimunda). These environment and setting makes it easy to believe in such a thing as the Passarola, and that such a thong might indeed have flown.

The Padre is an eccentric and by all accounts, a heretic according to the Holy Inquisition. He espouses philosophies and ideas that are entirely revolutionary and nearly modern, setting him at odds with his time, but making him a sympathetic figure to the modern-day reader.



## Sections 8-9, pages 65 - 91

### Sections 8-9, pages 65 - 91 Summary

In the following two sections, Baltasar and Blimunda arrive at the Duke of Aveiro's estate where they begin to work on the Passarola, but difficulties arise within a few months as the Padre has to depart to discover the secret of ether.

In the first section, whilst they are back in Lisbon and before they depart, Baltasar sees his lover Blimunda eating bread once again before she opens her eyes. He considers the mystery why she does this every day that he has been with her, and, one morning he hides her bag of bread, and, when she awakens he holds her and asks her playfully why she does this. Blimunda however, is upset and become distressed, crying out and tearful - all without opening her eyes. She begs him to let her eat her bread if she will tell him the answer to this riddle.

After Blimunda has eaten and opens her eyes, Blimunda reveals that it wasn't just her mother who had psychic powers. Although she cannot see the future or experience revelation, she has the gift to be able to see into things (literally). If she has fasted or has not eaten for some time, she finds that she can see inside of peoples bodies, into their organs, through the floor, through buildings and under clothes. Baltasar is amazed at first, but, loving her, believes her and Blimunda agrees to show him the very next day. She doesn't eat for the rest of the day and eats no bread when she wakes up, and makes the only condition that Baltasar must never walk in front of her, because she doesn't want to see the insides of him, or know if he has a tumour or an illness or the gross physicality of his organs. Blimunda then leads Baltasar through the streets of Lisbon where she indicates where this man or that is seriously ill, or where one has a disease, and where a gold coin is buried underneath the dirt of the road. Blimunda reveals that the Padre came to learn from her mother and, taking pity on Blimunda agreed to tutor her and keep her safe as he went about his own mission to court.

In the next section, Baltasar and Blimunda have arrived with the Padre at the old Duke of Aveiro's estate, a run down and ramshackle estate that has been gifted to the Padre to act as his testing ground and workshop. Here they unpack and start assembling the Passarola, and Blimunda helps Baltasar to piece together the constructions. Suddenly, without warning the Padre reveals that he must go to Holland to discover there the secrets of Ether, which he will use to fill the amber globes. These amber globes will be attracted to the sun, which will in turn attract the magnets, which will attract the metal plates away from the earth and lift the vessel into the sky. The Padre entrusts the estate and the Passarola into the couple's hands whilst he is away.

Baltasar and Blimunda spend a happy season working on the Passarola, constructing their own forge and gigantic bellows for the airship before finally realising that he have to depart for Mafra where Baltasar's family is from. There he may be able to find work

so they will be able to return when the Padre has discovered the final ingredient of ether.

## **Sections 8-9, pages 65 - 91 Analysis**

In these two sections, the author starts to reveal the mysteries of the story; the nature and fate of Blimunda, and the secrets behind the airship. Each section contains within it another piece of the plot, which builds on the previous, so in the first section we learn about Blimunda's magical gift in a foreshadowing of what she will be asked to do in the future.

Blimunda's gift of being able to 'see into things' is both a fantastical plot device (turning this story into a work of magical realism), but is also a metaphor for love, womanhood and the nature of truth. In her ability to 'see into things' we can guess that the author is describing those feelings of truth and intimacy between friends and lovers, and it is interesting when Blimunda agrees that she will never see inside of her lover Baltasar. Whilst Blimunda can see all the grotesqueness of the world, we are reminded that sometimes it is best to not look too closely, and to allow for things, feelings and facts to remain hidden. We can surmise that the author is talking about real love and 'real' grace: the facility to be able to reach out to another human being whilst allowing them to retain their mystery.



## Sections 10-11, pages 92 - 117

### Sections 10-11, pages 92 - 117 Summary

In the next two sections of *Baltasar and Blimunda* by Jose Saramago, we see the young couple travel to Baltasar's parent's house in Mafra, where work is beginning on the new convent for King Joao the fifth.

Beginning at the moment that Baltasar knock on the door of his childhood home, he surprises his ageing mother and father; both with relief and shock. His parents are relieved that he is alive and that he is well, but also shocked to discover that he has lost a hand to the war and also, now has a wife. Baltasar's mother, Marta Maria in particular is a little suspicious of Blimunda (as her name is typically Jewish), and that there seems to be something ethereal about the young girl. Baltasar's parents ask them if they are indeed married before God and Baltasar's father tests the young girl to eat salted pork when they sit down for their evening meal. Despite these acts of suspicion, they are both pleased to have their son home and immediately start telling him all of the happenings since he has been away.

Baltasar's father, Joao Francisco, tells the young couple that he has sold a good parcel of his land to the new Franciscan convent, and already workers are beginning to flood into the area to begin on what will be one of Portugal's most ambitious projects. The next day Baltasar helps his father on their smallholding before his sister and her husband the stonemason pay their returned brother a visit, and discuss where Baltasar is to find work. Alvaro Diogo (Baltasar's brother-in-law) takes Baltasar to the site where he is working, in an attempt to secure him some employment on the massive convent.

Elsewhere in Lisbon, the narrative jumps to the sudden illness of the King Dom Joao the fifth and the state of his Queen, who herself is fantasizing about the King's brother (a younger, roguish man who tries to tempt the Queen whenever he gets the chance).

The next section begins with the arrival of the Padre Batolomeu de Gusmao to Mafra. He has spent three long years studying in Holland about the mysterious substance known as Ether, and has received his doctorate in theological studies. He first goes to the estate where he left the Passaroloa, and then on to Mafra to rediscover his helpers, Baltasar and Blimunda. When he arrives it is Blimunda who first greets him, and he tells her of all the activity he has seen as he came into the village, the gunpowder being used to bring up more rocks and earth for the great convent and thousands and thousands of workers moving the rock and soil. They wait until Baltasar gets home from his labours, and the Padre agrees with the couple that they should meet him the next evening where they can walk and talk secretly. When they do meet the next evening, padre reveals that he now knows the secret of flight, and that, as soon as they are able they must return to the estate and the Passarola and help him finish his creation, but first he must be going away and return to see the King. The Padre reveals that the secret of ether is that it is made up of the Wills of humanity, but not their souls. Their



souls ascend to heaven to descend to hell upon death, but their wills disperse after death. Because he knows that Blimunda has the power of sight, he asks her to travel with Baltasar and collect as many souls as she can in a special glass phial, first seeing them inside the body and then capturing them. These wills they will use to fill the amber globes that will give the whole airship flight.

## Sections 10-11, pages 92 - 117 Analysis

These two sections see our protagonists, Baltasar and Blimunda returning to Mafra, and as this happens the author is weaving together the fates and the divergent story lines within the book. The building of the convent, as an activity, signifies the coming together of a great endeavour: a symbol for the Padre's building of his Passarola, and the couple's building of their relationship (all of these things can be seen as great works which must be built from the foundation up).

When the author brings the maimed soldier back to his place of birth, Baltasar has to confront his family as a new man, one who now has a wife and has also lost a hand. This change marks, for Baltasar and his parents, a new era in their relationship and is one of the turning points for Baltasar's character. He has to decide to lie to his parents about his wife Blimunda, and in doing this he is setting out, emotionally, on his own and diverging from their view of the world. These actions further reinforce the isolation and the strangeness of the couple, as, even surrounded by family and the prospect of employment they are still intrinsically odd (Baltasar for his hook for a hand, Blimunda for her magical gifts and the both together for their involvement with the invention of flight). In it perhaps a statement on the part of the author that all great loves must be set apart and be 'alone' in the world, as lovers are always a world for each other.

When the Padre arrives in Mafra to discuss the next stage of their invention, the author starts to introduce more magical elements (the capturing of the Wills of people) and thus creates an air of a fairytale for the whole book, similar to that of a hagiography. In the author's use of imagery (the Padre returning at night, and having his secret discussions with the couple), we can sense a foreboding in what Blimunda is about to attempt: is it really good or moral to collect the Wills of people? Isn't it somehow sacrilegious?



## Sections 12-13, pages 118 - 147

### Sections 12-13, pages 118 - 147 Summary

In the next sections, we see our protagonist couple setting out from Mafra to remake the Passarola, at the same time that the foundations of the convent is blessed by the king himself.

In the first section of this part, the parents of Baltasar are worried that Baltasar is about to leave them once more, especially so when they have not seen him for so long, and now there will be a great amount of work available to everyone in Mafra. But they say nothing. Before they depart, Blimunda decides to fast and then take Holy Communion, because she wishes to see the Host and the Will of God. After taking communion she cries and sobs, for she saw in the host a Will like a dark cloud, but could not tell if it came from people or from God.

Before they leave, a storm sweeps into Mafra, with such force that it blows away the simple wooden structure that was to form the temporary convent; and this is taken as a miracle by the people. The monks decide that it must be a sign from god to begin the work on the stone building immediately, and send word to the king. King Dom Joao arrives with his counsellors and Bishops, Priests and Ambassadors and proceeds to splendour to be the first to lay the very first foundation stone of the new building, and a ceremony ensues in which the first line of stones is blessed with holy water and sealed with lime held in silver buckets. After this ceremony, Baltasar and Blimunda leave Mafra. That night Blimunda is still troubled by her vision of the will of God at the Holy Communion, and is troubled by her new mission to collect the Wills of people. She confides in Baltasar that she does not understand that if she will be stealing Wills destined to be returned to God, or if what she saw was only the Will of man, and that God (or the Holy Spirit) is unreachable. Baltasar comforts her with his own confusion.

Back in Lisbon where they are travelling between their estate and the city, Baltasar and Blimunda find the Passarola in disrepair and set about remaking it. They remake the giant bellows with which to give the aiship life, and Blimunda helps Baltasar remake the canes and the metal plates. Padre de Gusmao is now heavily busy with ecclesiastical duties, but attends their workshoOp when he can, giving the couple detailed drawings of what they are trying to achieve. The Padre is worried that they must keep their work deadly secret, as the religious climate is now changing in Portugal. This year there will be no floats and processions on one of the holy days, but instead a vast 'Body of Christ' communion feats will be paraded through the city, indicating a change from the frivolous atmosphere of the years before. The Padre is convinced that flying is not heretical, but is worried that nowhere in the bible does it say 'You Will Fly'.

The Body of Christ procession starts and Baltasar and Blimunda watch the festivities as Blimunda again is worried about seeing the Will of Christ or that of God in the holy



communion feast. Luckily however, she sees nothing as this is a new moon and her powers are absent at this time.

## Sections 12-13, pages 118 - 147 Analysis

These two sections contain some interesting elements, mainly the strengthening relationship between Baltasar and Blimunda, and the contrast between the overtly gaudy ceremonies of the King and the metaphysical musings of Blimunda.

The relationship between Baltasar and Blimunda becomes stronger as Baltasar has to tell his parents that they are leaving Mafra again, even against their wishes. Baltasar and Blimunda's fate are now entwined in a way that feels completely natural; as if one could not live without the other and they both, unquestioningly support the other. As Blimunda becomes distressed at what she is about to do and starts to question her gift and religion itself, Baltasar does not seek to impose his will upon her or to tell her what advice she should take, but rather simply comforts her with his own empathy, placing himself alongside her in their shared fate.

The other interesting element that we see in these two sections is the contrast that the author Jose Saramago describes between the public rituals of the convent and Lisbon, and that of the couples own spiritual thoughts. The highly regimented, baroque and indulgent ceremonies mentioned here appear to be somewhat tacky, and the actors can all be seen as less virtuous than what their actions imply. This regimented, spectacular affair is measured against the personal feelings, doubts, fears and even wonders of Blimunda as she struggles with the concept of the Will, the Holy Ghost and the nature of God. Even though there is foreboding and almost a note of Horror in what Blimunda does and is about to do (the harvesting of Wills), her investigations, and her anguish over these issues still is presented as remarkably more 'honest' than the grand ceremonies of state.



## Sections 14-15, pages 148 - 175

### Sections 14-15, pages 148 - 175 Summary

The next two sections deal with the arrival of another character to the trio involved in the building of the Passarola, the great musician Scarletti.

The first section in this part begins with the Padre Bartolomeu at court, after having returned from ecclesiastical studies. Here he encounters the harpsichordist Scarletti (who is attempting to teach the Infanta, the child of the Queen and King), how to play the harpsichord. The Padre and Scarletti strike up a conversation after everyone has left, in which the Padre praises the musician for his ability, and the two start a tentative friendship. Later that night, as the Padre works on his next sermon he starts to conceive of the idea that all things are mystically one; that God is in fact everywhere and everything and that would mean that he himself, and everyone is a 'version' of God.

The next day the Padre meets the musician Scarletti again and the harpsichordist asks him if it is true that some years ago, the Padre invented a flying balloon. The Padre agrees to take Scarletti to his estate to see his latest invention, but only on an oath of secrecy.

At the estate, the young couple Baltasar and Blimunda are busy working on the flying machine when they hear the arrival of the musician and the Padre. They are at first frightened by this stranger (who for them could mean an agent of the Inquisition), but instead find themselves taking an immediate liking to him. Scarletti is in awe of the Passarola, and the author describes how it looks like a giant bird with sails affixed above and rudders and bellows below. The musician begs to be able to help the trio in the endeavour (in any way) and agrees that he will transport his harpsichord to the estate and simply play them music whilst they work, anything to be involved in such a grand endeavour.

The next section of this part immediately concerns itself with the reaction of the Holy Inquisition to the Padre Bartolomeu's sermon of the mystical unity of all things and God. They deem it non-heretical at the moment, but it is passed on to other scholars of the Bible to study. Whilst this is happening behind the scenes the Padre is growing more weary and worried about whether or not he is doing the right thing, but realises that he must do the actions that are most important to him (building the Passarola and preaching mysticism).

Scarletti continues to play his music for the working couple, before they hear that a plague has beset a local town outside of Lisbon. Seeing this as Blimunda's opportunity, the couple set out to the afflicted town where Blimunda starts to harvest Wills with her magical gift of sight and the glass phial. When she comes back she falls deeply ill, as if she had either contracted the plague herself or that her effort had been too much for her, and the Padre is terrified for her health and for the sanity of Baltasar. However,





Blimunda awakens and recovers, even if she is still traumatized by having to harvest the Wills of the dying souls.

## Sections 14-15, pages 148 - 175 Analysis

In these two sections, we see the author develop the character's of the Padre (introducing Scarletti as a counterpoint to the Priest), and leads the couple Blimunda and Baltasar to their first great challenge. The characters actions are set against the mounting pressure of the Holy Inquisition as Padre Bartolomeu continues his investigations into the mystical unity of God and all things. We can detect that, whilst the Padre's ideas are not shocking to us in our time, they are surrounded by uncertainty and heresy for the people of the early eighteenth century; and this shadow of doubt looms large over the Padre and his endeavour, making every action they undertake more perilous and fraught.

The character of Scarletti is introduced in these two sections almost as a welcome release from the intense isolation of the trio from everyday society; he figuratively and literally brings music into their lives and affirms their actions. Previous to this the endeavours of the trio Padre Bartolomeu, Baltasar and Blimunda were always somewhat chaotic and threatened as the trio split apart and met many months later with the next stage of the plan. Now Scarletti arrives and plays music for them, he adds an air of blessing to their work and acceptance.

The most disturbing scene so far in the book is that of Blimunda and Baltasar harvesting Will's from a plague-racked town. As the narrative is dressed in darkness, corruption, shadow and despair we are forced to ask whether what Blimunda is doing is in any wise, if not indeed wrong. When Blimunda falls ill after her harvest we can almost see a moralistic theme to the novel of Baltasar & Blimunda as, just as in any fairytale a wrong deed is rewarded by an affliction.



## Sections 16-17, pages 176- 211

### Sections 16-17, pages 176- 211 Summary

The next two sections see the story take a surprising twist as the Padre Bartolomeu coaxes his machine to fly in fear of it being captured by the Inquisition, and Baltasar and Blimunda are again left alone in the world.

In the first of these sections, we see the Padre Bartolomeu do Gusmao retreating more and more into apparent despair as he realises that the eyes of the Holy Inquisition are upon him. He fearfully speeds up the work and demands that Blimunda retrieve more and more Wills as his sermons provoke debate and speculation for heresy.

Suddenly, one day he announces that they must fly the machine away, they must flee before the Inquisition capture it and have them all burned. So Baltasar and Blimunda set about taking apart the roof of the estate hall that they are using, and, a few days later the Padre orders them to fill the globes with the collected wills that Blimunda has harvested.

The Passarola shoots into the air with all three on board, who just manage to unfold the baffles to slow down its ascent and so begin its maiden flight. The Padre realises that he actually has no idea how to fly the airship, but Baltasar uses the rudders and the sails to navigate the wind as the airship speeds over Mafra and the sight of the new convent. This sight is not understood at the time, and the workers flee their posts in fear, but the vision of the flying object quickly descends into myth as the appearance of the Holy Spirit over the building site, and interpreted as a favourable sign by the Franciscan order.

As the airship travels south into the day, the sun starts to set and with it the Passarola starts to lose its power. Thinking that they will all imminently die, Blimunda throws herself around one of the amber globes and Baltasar does the same, adding their Will to those collected and keeping the airship aloft long enough to allow their descent to the wilderness below.

That night the Padre Bartolomeu takes leave of his senses as the trio start to wonder what they are going to do now, being refugees from the Holy Inquisition but with an airship at their disposal. Baltasar wakes up in the middle of the night to find the Padre attempting to set fire to the airship and himself with it, and Baltasar stops him, angrily saying that it is their airship as well. At this the Padre flees into the wilderness in northern Spain.

In the next section the pair discover that they are only two days out of Mafra, and they decide to hide the airship and travel back to their parent's house. Here Baltasar then takes on work at the new convent with his brother-in-law Alvero Diogo, who is now a stonemason at the building site. Over the next few months Baltasar refashions his own



handcart so he can pull it loaded with rocks and stone, whilst Blimunda brings him food and lunch as they see the convent being built. They are both distressed at their sudden adventure and the loss of their friend the Padre, but strive to make for themselves a future. During their time there Blimunda hears that the musician Scarletti has arrived at Mafra in a ceremony to celebrate the building of the convent, and she travels to the court houses in secret to try and meet him. When they are alone, the musician sadly reveals that Padre Bartolomeu has died of natural causes far away in Northern Spain, and some say that the great storm that recently happened marked his death, as if he were a saint.

## **Sections 16-17, pages 176- 211 Analysis**

In these sections, we see the climatic events that make up the bulk of the action so far of the story. The fate of the Padre Bartolomeu is surprising, but almost expected as we saw that his beliefs and that of the Holy Inquisition were completely at odds with each other. We can see the sanity of the Padre being shaken further and further as he realises that there will be no going back once he has completed the Passarola, and he will probably be killed in an auto-da-fe. This realisation strived the priest to try and destroy his own invention and, when he is thwarted in that attempt, flee and never return to Portugal again.

As for Baltasar and Blimunda, there is an air of futility to their actions in the next section as, once more, Baltasar retruns to work at the great convent being built for the Franciscan's. We are reminded that, even though have achieved great things (the first manned flight), they are still very much alone and isolated in the world. The power of their love is contrasted against the dreams and the pride of the Padre Bartolomeu, in the way that the Padre wanted to be the first inventor of flight, and for this sin he was punished. Baltasar and Blimunda on the other hand did not wish to recreate the world, but merely to continue with their love for each other and cannot understand why the Passaroloa - a thing of flight and dreams (just like their love) could bring anyone any harm.



## Sections 18-19, pages 212- 249

### Sections 18-19, pages 212- 249 Summary

In these two sections of the novel, the narrative concerns itself with the building of the great convent at Mafra, where Baltasar finds his employment.

The first section concerns itself with the 'glory' of Portugal, with the thoughts of the King Dom Joao the Fifth as he strives to make his little kingdom one of the brightest stars in Europe, knowing that the great endeavour of his building works will further increase his own fame and his legacy for the rest of history. Portugal is presented as a country that can outshine any of its neighbours, and the narrative switches to that of Baltasar as he continues his work on the convent at Mafra.

Baltasar takes to drinking on hearing of the Padre Bartolomeu de Gusmao's death, but never to excess as Blimunda always serves as a balm to his spirit during these dark times. Baltasar makes the acquaintance of a number of friends, whose own narrative forms the bulk of the first section as each tells their story of how they came to be working on the convent at Mafra. Each member of his little company are outsiders just like Baltasar, who are poor rural folk who have left their homes and their families to come to Mafra for employment. The myriad of stories tells those who had fled their homes for fear of plague or because of a lack of loved ones, and those who have a wife and many children but came to the building site for the hope of bettering their life. Baltasar tells his own story, stating that he has flown and that he is equal to God because God has no left hand just as Baltasar does not, but falls silent when they ask him what he means.

In the next section, we see that Baltasar manages to garner a promotion at the insistence of his diminutive, hunchback friend who is a drover. Previously it was considered that Baltasar could not be a drover because of his missing hand, but his new confidence inspired by his new found friends assures him and his employers that he is able to meet the task. It is then that Baltasar is asked to drive a team of oxen along with hundreds of others to the nearby village of Pero Pinheiro to help drag back a singular large stone (which will become the marble balcony of Mafra).

The rest of the section concerns the expedition as a team of nearly a thousand men travel on foot to the quarry where they have to erect a platform to carry the stone on a gigantic wheeled jig. They venture is monolithic for its times, and becomes the stuff of legend for the surrounding populous. For Baltasar he spends his nights dreaming of the Passarola and hearing the stories of his friends as they attempt to move the gigantic stone. During the transport, one of his friends is crushed and dies, but, by skill and effort the stone is finally transported back to Mafra to much rejoicing. Upon his return, Baltasar sees the gigantic stone and the gigantic complex of the foundations and thinks about how small it really is compared to the grand vistas that he saw while he was aboard the Passarola.



## Sections 18-19, pages 212- 249 Analysis

These two sections have a number of interesting elements. they mark a shift in the narrative from the previous events of the book (the pursuit of the invention of flight) to the building of the great convent at Mafra, and what that means for the characters Baltasar, Blimunda, the King and Baltasar's co-workers.

Since the Padre Bartolomeu de Gusmao is dead, Baltasar and Blimunda must find a new way of being in the world, a new project to sustain themselves and their goal is met by the building of the convent. We can sense a degree of lost-ness in the character of Baltasar, both at the start and at the end of this section as he tries to rediscover that sense of wonder and come to terms with the idea that he may never experience the wonder of flight again. The building of the convent and in particular the dragging of the great stone, with all of its earthly, gravitational and weighty associations contrasts with the wonder of flight and perspective that Baltasar once experienced. It almost appears that his fate has now swung to its complete opposite as he busies himself with matter, rock and bound to the world. It is for this reason that, at the end of this section he looks down on the building site of the convent and sees it as so small (another feature that sets him and Blimunda apart from their times is their ability to stand outside of the general perception of their age, and see in the building of the convent not a wonder, but a vanity).

Another interesting element of these sections is the use of different voices. This is evident in the stories of Baltasar's co-workers as they each take a part in describing their history, their feelings, their past and their motivations. The author is using these co workers deliberately to examine the idea that 'history' and the wonders of the historical world (such as the convent) actually involves a great deal of people from a great deal of backgrounds, each of whom contribute but whose own personal tragedies and victories are mostly forgotten. When Baltasar's co-worker dies we take it as a personal disaster because we have met and understand the man, highlighting the idea that the convent is a vanity on behalf of the King.

Another feature worth noting is the strange, never-ending story that Manuel Milho tells alongside their journey to and from the quarry. The story is about a Queen, a King and a Hermit each discussing what it means to be a 'real' and authentic human being, not merely a role or a job such as a Queen or a Monarch or a Hermit. The story does not provide an answer for the trio of fictional characters, but the question can be applied itself to the characters of our novel itself. Baltasar is wondering who or what he really is, is he a drover, a common labourer or a man who once flew? Even more so, Baltasar is wondering whether he can be defined or should be defined at all and in this way becomes an intensely real character for our empathies and sympathies.



## Sections 20-21, pages 250- 282

### Sections 20-21, pages 250- 282 Summary

In these two sections, we see the annual return of Baltasar and Blimunda to the resting place of the Passarola, where they conduct their repairs, and also the inner court of the monarch of Portugal, King Dom Joao the fifth as he contemplates the convent at Mafra.

Baltasar and Blimunda leave the town of Mafra for a few days, even though it means the loss of work for Baltasar at the convent. They travel southwards, out to the high sierra's that border Spain and eventually come to the resting place of the Passarola, where they begin work. Here they find the airship in a state of some disrepair, as they need to brush and scrape the rust from the metal plates and repair the sails. Baltasar and Blimunda enjoy themselves, remembering their adventure of a few years before and wonder what use they will ever put the airship to in the future. Baltasar and Blimunda wonder whether they should set the Wills in the amber globes free, but in doing that they would lose the possibility of flight.

The next day they finish their repairs and heartened by their trip but somewhat saddened they depart, taking an alternate route home for fear of provoking suspicion and interest by anyone who has seen their comings and goings. When they finally reach Mafra again they discover the work continuing in earnest as more workers are arriving in Mafra to continue the great building work of the convent.

At the end of the chapter Baltasar's father, Joao Francisco finally dies. He had been an ageing man up until this point, but he waits until he sees his son come home from his travels before giving his blessing and passing away. This comes as no great surprise, but is still a deep shock for the whole family and upon his deathbed Baltasar tells him that he has flown and his father neither disagrees nor agrees, merely gives his son his blessing before passing away. In the end the fields that he had spent his life clearing and making fertile that he was forced to sell to the King of Portugal are now once more filled with rubble from the works of the building and the narrator wonders just how much the efforts of man can amount to.

The next section is in stark contrast to the previous narrative and occurs in the court of the King who is attempting to teach his children how to build the replica model of St Peter's Basilica. The whole court admires and is suitably awed at the religious instruction and afterwards, the King summons his chief architect and wonders if Portugal will be able to build an exact replica of the Basilica. The architect is dumbfounded, realising that the adventure would take hundreds of years and bankrupt the country, and tactfully tells the king so. Instead, the King decides to increase the size of the convent at Mafra to some four hundred monks, and demands that every able bodied person in Portugal not currently engaged in important employment be sent to the site. The King's troops then rounds up every vagabond, homeless or idler, separating men from their families and, in chains, sends them to Mafra, where has ordered that the



surrounding mountain be razed to the ground to accommodate for the enlarged convent. The Viscount and overseer at the convent is shocked and worried, realising that the task they are about to complete will easily take another twenty or thirty years more.

## Sections 20-21, pages 250- 282 Analysis

These two sections stand in contrast to each other as opposite visions of life in the story. One side is the journey and the life of Baltasar and Blimunda, who take their journey in simplicity, poverty and perform their work merely out of a joy for their endeavours. On the other hand we see the court of the King, who first decides to build a scale replica of one of the Greatest Religious Buildings of the World, but, when he realises that he cannot do that before his death decides instead to raze a mountain to the ground for the glory of his kingdom and his own prestige. Each endeavour (the Passarola and the Convent) can be examined in light of the other, one symbolising Love and lightness of spirit (the airship), and the other symbolising the theme of vanity and pride.

Another interesting element to these sections is its allusions to the shadow of death, seen directly in the final moment and the works of Baltasar's father Joao Francisco, and in the fears of the King Joao the Fifth. Here the author is alluding to the topic of death and asking the reader to consider what death means for any human endeavour. Is it the final end which means everything else that the individual has achieved is now worthless? Or can we infer, through the sympathies of the narrator, that Baltasar's father actually led a good and meaningful life (making the ground fertile), even if the final effect was robbed from him at the end?





## Sections 22-23, pages 283- 322

### Sections 22-23, pages 283- 322 Summary

The next two sections switch between the lives of the noble court of Portugal (King Joao and his children, the Infanta's), and that of the simpler lives of Baltasar and Blimunda in Mafra.

The first section begins with the procession of the Infanta, the Princess Dona Maria to Northern Spain to be wed to a Prince of that realm. The Procession of the Dona is a grand affair with many fine carriages each carrying wardrobes, retainers, gifts and stewards as it progresses past Mafra and on to the neighbour's realm. Whilst on that journey we discover that Joao Elvas, the one time pimp and vagrant whom had befriended Baltasar when he first came to Lisbon is now a worker for the procession of the Princess.

Joao Elvas had been hiding in the surrounding countryside of Lisbon, avoiding the draft of all itinerants to Mafra when the Society of Jesus, a religious order managed to find him and press gang him into work. Instead of sending him as a worker to the convent (for he was older than Baltasar back then, and now was approaching his older age), he was instead sent with the procession of the Princess to help repair and work the roads to Northern Spain, to make the passage of the carriages easier. Whilst on his journey Joao Elvas considers the fates of the poor who suddenly can find themselves transported many miles away and involved in tasks not of their choosing at the mere whims of the royalty. He encounters another labourer on his crew who is heading towards Mafra, and one night as they stop on their journey they both ask each other their stories. Joao reveals that he once knew a man from Mafra who will probably be employed in the building of the convent now, Baltasar Setes-Sois, who had one hand. The worker replies that he actually knew him well, and that Baltasar has also claimed to have flown, an idea that Joao Elvas supports as he indicates that Baltasar used to hang around with the infamous Flying Man, the disgraced Padre Bartolomeu de Gusmao, so who knows? Perhaps he did.

This section ends as Joao Elvas settles in Northern Spain at the end of his labour, and unknowingly, he listens to the music of Domenico Scarlatti the great harpsichordist who accompanies the princess.

In the next section the narrative switches to the arrival of the reliquaries to the Mafra convent, as the King sends ahead all of the statues of the main Saint's recognised by Portugal. They arrive and are immediately presented to the town in a grand procession to herald the imminent completion of the convent (we now understand that many years have passed). Baltasar and Blimunda attend the procession, but seem to not take notice of the many years that have passed for them, as they are still as deeply in love as they have ever been. Baltasar takes Blimunda that night to see the statues as they stand around the square of the almost completed convent and all Blimunda sees are





dark, shadowy shapes as if they are half alive ghosts come to see the convent. Baltasar then reveals to his wife that he will have to be going to visit the Passarola again the next day, perhaps missing the grand ceremony of the King, but that he would rather be working on the airship anyway.

Baltasar makes his way to the high sierra where they have left the flying ship and, steadily begins to work on the rotten wood and rust that are overcoming the machine. Suddenly, as he is working he unexpectedly slips through some rotten planking and he flails out with his one good hand, catching at the sail overhead. As he falls the sail is pulled aside, allowing the sun to reach into the machine and fill the globes. At that, the Passarola ascends into the air.

## **Sections 22-23, pages 283- 322 Analysis**

In these final sections, we see the tension building as the author weaves the story towards a resolution. We can see different elements such as the foreboding of death, and the musing on what a person's life's works can really amount to. With the gathering tension of the imminent completion of the convent the author has filled these sections with a expectation of a grand event, giving the reader the sense that something great and terrible is about to happen.

In the first part, as we examine the life of Baltasar's old friend, we see that the author has included Joao Elvas as a means to bring the story full circle to nearly the place where Baltasar started right at the start of the story. Baltasar is remembered as a comrade of 'The Flying Man' and his role as that, one if the very first aviators is remembered and reaffirmed. It now appears that the intervening years of Baltasar as a laborer are really a sham and are 'not the real character' at all.



## Sections 24, pages 323- 343

### Sections 24, pages 323- 343 Summary

In the last few sections of the novel, Blimunda gets worried when three days pass and Baltasar misses the sanctification and opening of the convent. She decides to travel to try and find Baltasar, and goes along out into the high serra where she attempts to avoid the dangers of other travellers and wild beasts.

When she finally finds the resting place of the Passarola she sees Baltasar's things thrown onto the ground, and the space that the airship made in the canopy as it ascended its last flight. Suddenly terrified, she searches the landscape around to see if Baltasar has crashed somewhere nearby and is injured. Unfortunately, she comes across a Dominican Friar as night falls, who tells her that no such man or flying bird has been seen, but that a ruined convent is nearby to his own convent where she may stay the night. Blimunda accepts, and during the night is attacked by the Friar (whom she manages to stab with Baltasar's spike and flee into the countryside.

What follows for Blimunda is nine long years of searching. First she returns to Mafra, but no one has seen Baltasar or heard of any flying objects. Then she travels the length and breadth of Portugal and into Spain, where she becomes known as 'The Flying Woman' for she always asks after her one-handed husband and a great flying bird. Occasionally the Inquisition ask her to come into the churches and receive confession for her heresies, and she attracts a reputation of being able to divine where water lies and perform minor miracles of finding.

At the very end of the story, now a woman in her middling years Blimunda makes her way through Lisbon once more, where she attends an auto-de-fe like the one where she saw her own mother burned for heresy. She sees that one of the men, now transfigured into a glorious, flaming figure, has one hand and one hook. As he dies his Will does not ascend to heaven, but rather, travels to Blimunda.

### Sections 24, pages 323- 343 Analysis

The final sections of the book have an air of finality, even of fate as the two main protagonists meet their expected end and certain foreshadowing's are played out. These last two section s are about the inevitable facts of their existence, the events that are implied to happen throughout the story.

One of these implications is the attack on Blimunda. Blimunda has always been a frail figure, and the author has presented her as a figure who is vulnerable to the world and here, right at the very end of the story she is tested by the attack of the Dominican Friar (thankfully she passes the test, and shows how much courage she has).



Another implication of the story has been Baltasar's sense of 'not belonging' to his role as a laborer, of having witnessed magnificent things and feeling like the building of the convent an unworthy, even vain task. Here at the end of the story Baltasar has his wish and similarly his curse; he flies for one last time, but in so doing loses his wife for nine years.

The final conclusion, the auto-de-fe is a tragic fact that now appears inevitable as both characters were so at odds with the religious belief of the time. However, the author manages to transform this occasion into a metaphor for the couple's love and although we can despise the act, we can understand the mortality of the characters as an ennobling feature rather than a meaningless one.



# Characters

## Baltasar

The character of Baltasar, one of the two main protagonists that the book is named after, is son to Joao Francisco and Marta Maria, a simple peasant couple in the village of Mafra, Portugal.

As a young man, Baltasar goes to war on behalf of the Portugese Inquisition in Northern Spain, where he loses a hand in battle and is retired from the army. His story starts as he makes his way back from the battlefields and attempts to find recompense in the form of a military pension from the Holy Court of the King in Lisbon. Here he encounters his future wife Blimunda, and falls helplessly in love. Whilst his love ties him to the strange girl, he meets her mentor and friend Padre Bartolomeu de Gusmao and is enlisted in his service to help build the first manned airship; the Passarola. Their subsequent adventures as they attempt to build the Passarola and what happens after their first flight occupies the majority of the novel.

Baltasar is presented as a practical and somewhat straightforward kind of a man, whose observances of those around him (particularly Blimunda), and the nature of God, Death and Fate are always simplistic, immediate, and honest. The character of Baltasar can be seen a little like an 'everyman' type figure in that he freely encounters and reacts to the world around him (from the displeasure of his parents, to the humiliations of living disabled and poor, to meetings with great men such as Scarletti). His love for Blimunda is unquestioning and unswerving; it defines him as a character and, interestingly is not over-examined in the novel (we can understand this as the authors assertion that 'true' or strong loves are simple facts of nature, and are as unchangeable as the will of God). Baltasar's disability (his lack of a hand and his use of a hook and a spike instead) appears to not trouble him overly, and we get the sense from this that he is a well-rounded, emotionally mature figure. The central question posed by the figure of Baltasar is 'what would a simple man do?' When faced with the strange, the terrifying or the distressing, Baltasar reacts with honesty and faithfulness, perhaps a product of his having seen the horrors of war. Baltasar grows as a character through his strengthening love for Blimunda, and especially when he has to act upon his own against the implied will of his parents.

## Blimunda

Blimunda is a young woman (nineteen at the start of the story) who is the daughter of a confirmed heretic (Sebastiana), whose mother dies in an auto-da-fe (a burning) at the start of the book. The question of her father is never answered, and when we meet her at the trial of her mother, she is in the care of Padre Bartolomeu de Gusmao, who was himself a researcher of her mother's prophesies and visions. It is clear from the very start that she shares some of the gift of her mother, with her magical ability to see the



inner workings of any object, flesh or what lies hidden under the ground. This gift causes her great distress however, because if she does not eat, she will be able to see all of the macabre physical defects, organs and fleshy workings of the people around her. Blimunda meets Baltasar at the auto-da-fe and is moved to ask him his name by her mother's dying wish. This starts an intense love affair and the subsequent book is really about her love for the ex-soldier and the trials that they go through jointly. Blimunda works with her lover and husband Baltasar as they work on the creation of the Passarola, the Padre Bartolomeu's flying airship, and accompanies him as their fortunes wax and wane.

The figure of Blimunda is painted as a strange and ethereal one, capable of strange sights and powers (her magical gift). She also makes sudden, immediate cryptic prophecies which show off more her uncanny intuition as she confides in Baltasar her fears and observances. Blimunda is a fearful and yet a hopeful figure, a naïve, who has an air of innocence about her, even when she has to harvest the Wills of the dying under the Padre's direction. Blimunda's great challenge is maintaining her innocence in the face of her the events that surround her, as her magical gift forces her to confront the heretical questions of her age: What really is God? Does the Church speak for God? What is the Will of humans, and how is it different from their soul (and), does it belong to God or to humans themselves? These questions are naturally unanswerable, and Blimunda is stricken with distress as she is forced to consider them.

Naturally faithful, Blimunda is a constant ease to her lover Baltasar during the early parts of the book, but her ethereal ways lead her away from him at the end. The character of Blimunda is symbolic of the poetic woman; the intuitive, the mysterious, the fey and 'other' whose enigmas are set against the practicalities of Baltasar and the vanities of the Padre.

## **Padre Bartolomeu de Gusmao**

Padre Bartolomeu de Gusmao (birth name of Lorencio) is the energetic, wilful genius of the book Baltasar and Blimunda by Jose Saramago. An historical figure, the Padre is considered to be one of the ancient fathers of the theory of flight, creating as he did one of the first balloon's for the king of Portugal before the events of this book. His obsession in this novel is with the creation of his Passarola, a historical fancy that in real life we are not sure whether it was actually built, as he fled Portugal to die in a Northern Spanish convent away from the horror's of the Holy Inquisition.

The Padre is a native of the colony of Brazil before he came to Portugal to study to be a priest, and at the start of his context in the novel he is the warden of Blimunda as they attend the final moments of her mother's death. Here he enlists the young man (Baltasar) that becomes Blimunda's lover in the creation of his Passarola for the King Dom Joao of Portugal. During the novel his sermons verge on the heretical as he starts to preach mysticisms, and he becomes more and more convinced that the accepted Church doctrine is wrong. This revelation allows him to forge a friendship with another forward-thinker of his age, the musician Scarletti, but ultimately his fears of being caught



by the Inquisition from the unmaking of him as he attempts to destroy the Passarola and flees to Northern Spain when he is unsuccessful.

The Padre is presented in a mostly historical fashion, painted in the same light as Leonardo da Vinci and Michaelangelo (i.e: an eccentric polymath who was a genius before his time). However he seems to suffer from nervousness, to the point of madness as he often spends whole nights 'murmuring at the stars' and goes off on strange quests with little warning. His desires to build the first airship and his obsessions with flight overtake him, to the extent that he appears to forget the cost to his human helpers around him (particularly Blimunda), and in this way he is seen as a flawed character (although not necessarily his fault).

## **Domenico Scarletti**

Domenico Scarletti is the famous historical musician who was one of the great classical composers of the early eighteenth century, and figures here in this novel as a friend of the Padre Bartolomeu and a support to his project of flight. Scarletti enters the novel by attempting to teach the child of the King and the Queen, (the Infanta) the harpsichord at the royal court, and there meeting the Padre as Bartolomeu is presenting his discoveries to the King. Domenico Scarletti then agrees to visit the Passarola and has his harpsichord transported to their workshop so he can play music for the couple Baltasar and Blimunda whilst they work.

Domenico Scarletti appears in the novel as one of the few sources of support for the trio and their invention, and as such signifies grace and hope in the novel. He is saddened by the sudden escape of his friends and sadder still when he learns of the Padre's death whilst at court. Scarletti plays, in the novel, a figure of the oncoming modern age.

## **Dona Maria Ana (the Queen)**

The Dona Maria Ana is the wife to King Joao of Portugal who, during the course of the novel bears for him a daughter. She is presented as a seemingly neurotic and obsessive woman, who is stricken with religious doubts and anxieties as her emotions cannot be satisfied with the highly regimented life that she leads.

The Dona is one of the first characters that we meet in Baltasar and Blimunda, and immediately we understand her to be conservative, and worried. She prays constantly for the ability to give the King an heir, and confides in the Friar of St Antony when she finally suspects that she might be pregnant. Previous to this it was being speculated that the Dona could even be barren as their union had not produced any heirs for years.

The Dona is a youngish woman of Austrian descent who was married off to Portugal at an early age, and looks trapped by the constant rituals, observances and ceremonies of state. This highly regimented life (everything ordained from the order she puts on her clothes to how many religious services she must attend during the day) can be understood as a large part of the reason why she hasn't borne children. During the



course of the novel we suspect that she is in a loveless marriage (her husband the king is a helpless adulterer), and she fantasises about the King's brother the more dangerous and adventurous Duke. The Dona plays, in the novel, the picture of a woman strangled by her culture and society, who has little or no freedom and whose emotions have turned their cruelties inwards as she struggles with half-repressed feelings of guilt, desire, and shame.

## **King Dom Joao the Fifth of Portugal**

The King of Portugal forms a constant character throughout the book, as his actions set into place a series of events that almost dictate the lives of our protagonists as they struggle on their own journey.

Marries to the Dona, Queen Maria Anna, Dom Joao is presented as a typical monarch of this era; stunned by his own wealth and power and unquestioning of either. During the course of the story it is revealed that he is about to have a child with the Queen, and agrees that, upon the birth of the Infanta he will build the biggest, best and most glorious monastery convent for the Franciscan Order in thanks for their prayers for his successful heir. This decision is not an unusual one for the king, as he has already embarked on making a complete replica of St Peter's Basilica here in Portugal. We can sense that these decisions are hardly to do with religion, belief or the Divine as the King himself is not pious or chaste, and revels in taking the centre stage when he has to lay the very first stone of the foundations of the new convent.

The character of the King is depicted as the typical counterpoint to Baltasar and the poorer characters of the novel. King Joao represents the spirit of the age (the decadent, the glorious and the venal) and also acts as a study of the complete opposite motivations then that of our protagonists.

## **Marta Maria**

Marta Maria is Baltasar's mother, a simple peasant woman who is married to Joao Francisco and lives on their smallholding in the village of Mafra.

Marta Maria is encountered in the book when Baltasar takes his new wife Blimunda back to Mafra to start their life afresh, and Marta Maria is instantly suspicious of the young girl with her strange ways. Never uncivil or unkind, Marta Maria is merely a woman of her time and station, god-fearing and honest if somewhat small-minded. During the course of the novel she accepts the couple into her house as they try to make their way in the world, before herself dying of what we can assume is a tumour.

## **Joao Francisco**

Joao Francisco is Baltasar's father who lives in the district of the village of Mafra with his wife and Baltasar's mother Marta Maria. He is a farmer.



Joao Francisco is, similar to his wife a man of his times. Simple and honest, straightforward he shares in his wife's joys and suspicions over his son's strange wife, but is happy to accept their love for each other. He starts to protest their actions however when Baltasar moves away to Lisbon (to work on the airship), but knows that he is helpless to stop his son. After losing his wife he becomes a smaller, more feeble man and a figure who encourages sympathy from the reader.

## **Alvaro Diogo**

Alvaro Diogo is Baltasar's brother-in law (married to his sister Ines Antonia) who is one of Baltasar's childhood friends and is also a stonemason. Alvaro Diogo immediately takes Baltasar under his wing and finds for him employment at the building of the convent of Mafra when Baltasar and Blimunda return to Mafra, and from there stands as a constant form of support for the young couple.

The character of Alvaro Diogo plays the part of the simple, unquestioning worker to contrast against the strangeness of Baltasar and Blimunda. He is hardworking and the world is simple for him, and we are tempted to feel that he is happier even than Baltasar in the fact that he does not suffer from the spiritual questions that trouble the young couple.

## **Sebastiana Maria de Jesus**

Sebastiana Maria de Jesus is Blimunda's mother, a visionary and a heretic who plays a role primarily at the beginning of the novel but also occasionally throughout as one of other character's reflect upon her.

Sebastiana is burned at an auto-da-fe by the Holy Inquisition for being a prophetess, (but also we suspect merely for being Jewish), who preaches a mystical unity with God (a view that the Padre later adopts before he flees Portugal). Sebastiana's last words to her daughter were to ask the man next to her his name, who turns out to Baltasar and thus sets into motion the love affair and all of the events of the book that follow.





# Objects/Places

## Baltasar's Hook

Baltasar's Hook is one of the most constant of objects in the novel of Baltasar and Blimunda. The hook and its companion, the spike, were made for the ex-soldier as he returned from battle in Northern Spain to replace his lost hand. A constant feature of the character of Baltasar, and one of the elements that sets him apart from his brethren, the hook marks his otherness and his ability to overcome his problems.

## Blimunda's Bread

Through the course of the story we find out that Blimunda carries with her a bag of bread to eat a piece every morning, without fail. We discover that Blimunda has the magical gift of be able to see into the inner workings of things, bodies, and objects, unless she eats (so the protagonist chooses to eat every morning to avoid her ability). Apart from being used as a plot device, Blimunda's Bread also serves as a metaphor for the Holy Communion wafer, and reminiscent of the christian Adage 'man cannot live by bread alone'. Blimunda's bread is, for her, her own sort of holy communion which she uses to avoid the hellish sights of her gift.

## The Glass Phial

The glass phial, given to Blimunda by the Padre Bartolomeu is a small vial capable of containing thousands of human wills, which the young woman uses to harvest the wills from the plague town that she and Blathasar visits.

## The Passarola

The Passarola is the Padre Bartolomeu de Gusmao's invention, capable of flight (later to be called an airship). Actually a historical invention but believed to never be constructed, the Passarola is historically existent only in a drawing but here the author weaves a fantasatical element in how it has been constructed and what gives it the magical power of flight. The Passarola occupies a symbolically meaningful role in the novel as Baltasar's and Blimunda's own outward symbol of divine grace, and helps them achieve a very real and an emotional perspective on their world and the times that they are living in. As a thematic device the Passarola can be seen as 'hope' and possibility of love, and is contrasted against all of the heavy, earthly things of the world such as the convent at Mafra.



## **Mafra**

The small town of Mafra is the home of Baltasar, to where he returns with his new wife Blimunda to stay with his ageing parents Joao Francisco and Marta Anna. It is also the town that occupies the majority of the novel as it is the site chosen by King Dom Joao the Fifth for the new convent of the Franciscan Order. Whilst the narrative unfolds, we see that Baltasar finds employment there at Mafra on the building site of the convent, and the image of the building forms an earthly counterpart to the aerial, divine theme of the Passarola and the couples love. In a sense, the creation of the convent at Mafra signifies the epitome of human vanity and opulence.

## **Lisbon**

Lisbon, the capital city of Portugal is the city to which Baltasar travels to beseech the King for his military pension after losing his hand in the war. It is also the place where Blimunda and the Padre Bartolomeu are residing (the Padre's achievements being a fascination of the King's). It is the setting for some of the most extravagant excesses of the book as the King attempts to recreate the Basilica of Rome, and conducts vast ceremonies and processions with the assent of the Holy Inquisition and the Roman Catholic Church.

As a place, Lisbon can be contrasted against the small town of Mafra and the travels of Baltasar and Blimunda as the full glory and opulence of the city versus the simplicity and poverty of rural life in the early eighteenth century. It comes to exemplify all of the decadent tendencies and the extremities of human desires and wants.

## **The Duke of Aveiro's Estate**

The Duke of Aveiro's estate is the plot of land with workhouses and barns that is gifted to Padre Bartolomeu de Gusmao by the King, for the furtherance of his work in aviation. Here the Padre, Baltasar and Blimunda work in secret to construct the Passarola and here they invite the musician Scarletti to come and play his harpsichord for them whilst they work. The trio have to flee the duke of Aveiro's estate when the Padre becomes paranoid about the Holy Inquisition, using the Passarola to fly away.

## **The Marble Balcony of Pera Pinheiro**

Occupying a couple of sections towards the end of the novel, the Marble Balcony starts life as a gigantic slab of cut stone (we are told it is seven by five metres in scale), and is dragged to Mafra from a distant village by Baltasar and a crew of workmen. Actually a real-world historical artefact, the giant stone forms a balcony in the convent of Mafra and is one of the wonders of the early modern age.



In the story, the stone and its transport forms a thematic device similar to that of the Passarola. The stone can be seen to represent all of the heavy, earth-bound works of humanity, which although nominally used in the service of the Divine are actually a greater testament to the workers who shifted it, and used for the glorification of the King. We are subtly asked during these passages which is the greater achievement and which was the greater purpose. Is it the airship of the Padre Bartolomeu de Gusmao or the marble balcony of Mafra?



# Themes

## Love

One of the major themes of the book *Baltasar and Blimunda* by Jose Saramago is that of human love, presented primarily through the main protagonists of the story, although different kinds of love are also depicted.

The love of the main characters, Baltasar and Blimunda is examined in an oblique way by the author; in that it is not directly questioned or analysed, but rather shown in relief through their actions when together and apart, and in contrast to the other characters of the book. This makes an interesting distinction, as other important themes are directly questioned and even ridiculed (the nature of religiosity, human vanity for example), whereas Baltasar and Blimunda's feelings for each other are not treated in the same manner by the narrator. This allows their feelings to be accepted as 'fact' by the reader (and not under question) and also gives their love the air of something intangible, divine, and glorious. We can find interesting similarities here in the depiction of their love with the Divine, or what we imagine the Divine to be like.

The love of the main characters is contrasted against the other human relationships; particularly that of the Queen Dona Maria and King Joao; whose affections are inconsistent and have no real warmth. Indeed the feelings of the Queen wavers between her duty and her desire for the King's brother, whilst the King seems to have no particular warmth towards his Queen other than that of a bearer of his future heir. Similarly too, the main protagonists are surrounded by people of inconsistent affection: pimps, rogues, lustful young courtiers and even the obsessions of the Padre. All of the other characters (save perhaps Scarletti in his love for his music and through that, Beauty itself), are seen as sometimes tortured by their obligations, their feelings and their desires in an era when desires were strictly governed by religious doctrine. Not so for Baltasar and Blimunda, whose attraction and companionship appears to be unquestioning and natural. These features of their relationship help to give the story the mood of a fairytale or an early religious hagiography, where some facts are unquestioned and beatific.

## Human Pride & Vanity

The theme of human pride and vanity is a constant backdrop to the events of the story, as all of the characters are surrounded and caught up in a baroque, decadent world of the Early Modern Era.

From the very start of the story the theme of human pride is best shown in the writing style of the narrator as his language is effusive and overflowing, with many lists of fine objects, ceremonies, religious figures, materials and places. In particular the religious ceremonies that occur are described in great detail reminiscent of the literature of that



age, often superfluous and give us, the reader of feeling of gaudy wealth and even 'tackiness'. Best expressed in the figure of King Dom Joao the Fifth of Portugal, the theme of vanity shows itself in the way that he insists on being the last and the first person to build the religious buildings that decorate Portugal; that he attempts to recreate the entirety of St Peter's Basilica for his own glory, and in his decision to ceremonially lay the first stone of the greatest monastic building ever conceived in Europe.

The effects of Human Pride stand in direct contrast to the religious messages presented in the novel; in the fact that Christianity, a religion of the meek and originally the disenfranchised is now used to justify the greatest inequalities and expenditure of wealth ever seen in the age. This theme reverberates down through the events of the novel, as the building of the convent at Mafra has direct impact on the lives of Baltasar and his family (sometimes providing employment, but also forcing Baltasar's father to sell a parcel of his land under the King's orders). When Baltasar and Blimunda attend the feast of the Body of Christ they it is obvious that they are spectators to an event which is hardly divine, but is more a celebration of humanity than religion.

Finally, the vanity of Padre Bartolomeu de Gusmao is placed in contrast with the 'pure' love of Baltasar and Blimunda. As a natural obsessive, the Padre is caught up with his work and apparently loses his mind when it comes to pass that he will not be able to present his Passarola to the world.

## The Unknown Nature of the Divine

One of the most difficult and subtle themes of the novel of Baltasar and Blimunda is that of the Unknown Nature of the Divine. This theme is entwined with the other themes, as the nature of the divine is contrasted with human vanity and with that of love in the shifting narrative. Each theme can be seen as providing a complementary criticism of the other.

Using his setting of the eighteenth century, the Early Modern Era, the author has chosen to set his story at a time when religiosity was of world importance and the politics, cultural and social customs were all defined by religious institutions (in our case in Europe, that of the Holy Roman Church from the Vatican City in Rome). This is expressed everywhere in the book as religious ceremonies, processions, blessings and religious belief pervade the events of the novel and dictate the different seasons that the characters are passing through.

This excessive presence of religion (or the physical ornaments of religion anyway) can be contrasted with the nature of the Divine itself, and the nature of Love. This is mostly shown in the questioning of Blimunda, and also that of the Padre Bartolomeu de Gusmao as they both start to reject the accepted view of God, of Christ and the nature of the Holy Communion ritual. Their questioning are essentially lonely exercises, as these three characters have no external authority to turn to for validation. Blimunda discusses the nature of the Will, the Host and that of God with Baltasar but they both

remain concerned and confused by what they feel and what Blimunda sees with her magical gift. One of the messages of these passages could be that, in the end, the characters have to come to terms with their own doubts and may never know 'the truth' of the divine (but merely know that the questioning is valuable in and of itself, rather than the indulgent ceremonies of the Portuguese Church).

The Divine that Blimunda experiences and the Padre Bartolomeu investigates shares these qualities with the love shown by the young couple of the book's title, and we are forced to question where 'true' or 'divine' things are naturally inexpressible, unquestionable, and need no ornamentation.

# Style

## Point of View

The Point of View of the novel of Baltasar and Blimunda by Jose Saramago is one of the most intriguing elements of the work. In this novel, the author chooses to use a very unconventional technique of mixing third-person and first-person subjection freely, so at one and same time we can be listening to a character's voice and feelings, whilst hearing a historical narrative from an 'outside' voice. This technique gives a clear and a strong sense of the narrator's voice, tone and character (which we must assume is the author's own voice and not another character).

This style of narration allows the author to utilise the voices of any of the characters of the book as he reveals their thoughts, with the greater depth being given to the main trio of protagonists Baltasar, Blimunda and the Padre Bartolomeu as they occupy the most of the plot. It creates a feeling of liberal egalitarianism; any character (no matter how small or passing, as we see in the passages concerning the hauliers of the stone of Pero Pinheiro) can add their voice and recollections to the story, translated through the voice of the narrator. This use of a multiplicity of voices creates a sense that the story is not 'owned' by any particular hero or heroine, and serves to push the story into the spaces 'between' the characters; i.e: the events that they all take part in or are affected by.

With a post-modern perspective, the shifting narration can cause confusion as to whom is doing the narration and to what character we are referring, until we come to consider the story as a piece of historical fantasy. That is to say that all of the events are presented as a series of events that have already happened (the narrator sometimes alludes to the future and to our present day) and so we can see that the whole document can be examined from a variety of angles: that of each character and their motivations, or 'over-all' examined from a multiplicity of perspectives. The continual presence of the authors own voice serves as a reminder that any story, novel or document is a created artefact itself (it does not pretend to be 'fact' and neither does it proclaim the 'truth' to the reader).

## Setting

The Setting of the novel of Baltasar and Blimunda is that of Portugal starting from the year 1711 (the Early Modern Era). Historically, this is the time when medieval ideas and sympathies were gradually giving away to the birth of Science and is known as the Renaissance of the European Arts and Sciences. Because of this setting it would be usual to see a mixture of superstition and proto-scientific belief mingled with religiosity and early analytic philosophy. We can see in the investigations and experiments of the Padre Bartolomeu de Gusmao the beginnings of a theory of flight (and his studies later



influenced the Montgolfier's in their construction of the first hot-air balloon some a hundred years later).

For the book, the settings of Maфра and Lisbon predominate, although the surrounding villages, towns and sierras also feature as the couple make their adventures across the landscape of Portugal. Lisbon is the capitol city of Portugal at this time, and thematically presents the ideas of human vanity, opulence and decadence whilst Maфра (Baltasar's home town) is a rural village which becomes a hive of activity and is transformed by the King's construction of the grandest convent ever seen in Portugal. The story shifts between the rural and the bucolic, the simple and the 'honesty' of the sierra's to the decadence of city living, and we can see here the 'weight' and the heaviness of human endeavour contrasted against the naturalness and the 'lightness of the divine.

## Language and Meaning

The language used in the novel of Baltasar and Blimunda is highly evocative of the language of its age, with the overflowing and long sentences full of descriptions similar to those found in early religious tracts and memoirs of the time. The singular words used are also evocative, with a preference set on Portugese and Spanish terminologies, slang, and names to better evoke that era.

The choice of descriptive words by the narrator is tending towards the poetic and the effusive; rarely does the author use simple statements or simple descriptions when a grander, more evocative tone with a lot of adjectives will do. This again reinforces the setting of the book.

As linguistic devices, words relating to heaviness, matter, earth, the body, and the flesh are used predominantly to indicate human endeavours, its sinfulness and vanity; whilst light, air and flight indicate moments of grace, emotion, hope and love. These two 'sets' of words are used in contrast to each other (particularly in any passage relating to Blimunda and the Passarola). They serve to highlight the themes of love, vanity, and divinity and also help evoke the mood of the highly religious-minded Renaissance.

## Structure

The structure of the novel of Baltasar and Blimunda is that of twenty four, fairly short passages (each anout twenty to forty pages in length). These could be called the 'chapters' of the book, although no numbering or title is given to any of them. The use of these unnumbered or titles passages reflects the Point's of View and the stylistic nature of Saramago's work: he is essentially suggesting that this not a fictional fantasy in the classic sense, where each 'chapter' has a name and is easily definable and is about this particular subject. Rather, each section is more open ended and forms a story in and of itself which leads and follows into the next, full of a multiplicity of human voices from which multiple threads of meaning can be drawn. The author is using this technique to make a comment about literature and about human life in general - that both are not clearly definable, and the truth in any event cannot be easily catalogued and classified.





Each of these sections serves to advance the plot, but not in a linear fashion. Some sections may solely concern the actions of the couple Baltasar and Blimunda (our protagonists), or they might diverge into the habits and customs of Lisbon society, or the superstitions of the people of Pinheiro. This confusing mixture of tales and scenes evokes the spirit of the times obliquely for the reader, and in the end works to construct a mood and backdrop of an event before the event actually takes place. For example; several times sections delve into the habits of King Dom Joao the Fifth (both his religious and carnal), his attendance of the bullfight, the planning of the Procession of the Body of Christ, and the moods of the Lisbon crowds. Whilst not directly relevant to the characters of Baltasar and Blimunda, these scenes serve to describe the backdrop in front of which they play their part, explaining why such and such a thing is happening (such as the building of the convent), and all of the contrasting experiences of any event (the monastery is a foible of the King, a manipulation by the Franciscan friars, a source of employment for the workers, which is sometimes an annoyance and a modern marvel).



## Quotes

"I promise, by my royal word that I shall build a Franciscan convent in the town of Mafra if the Queen gives me an heir within a year of this day" (King Joao, p. 6).

"Baltasar Mateus, alias Sete-Sois, makes no attempt to speak but gazes upon Blimunda. Each time she returns his gaze, he feels a knot in his stomach" (Baltasar, p. 45).

"...and just as man, who inhabits the earth, found it necessary to become a sailor, so he will find it necessary to become a sailor" (Padre Bartolomeu, p. 53).

"The King became so gravely ill...but the King will eventually recover his health while the Queen's dreams will never be revived" (p. 106).

"...ether is to be found inside men and women, ...it is constituted, note carefully, from the wills of living souls" (Padre Bartolomeu, p. 116).

"There was a lull, during which the crickets went on screeching and then the priests voice cried out once more, God is one in essence and triune in person" (Padre Bartolomeu, p. 160).

"No sooner had it risen above the walls of the coach house than it recovered its balance, raised its head like a seagull, and soared like an arrow straight up into the sky" (p. 183).

"Everyone was astounded at the dimensions of the stone, its so huge. But looking up at the basilica, Baltasar murmured, its so small" (p. 249).

"It is a perfect day to inspect the flying machine...and they muse how pleasant it would be to fly just once more in the passarola, to soar into the sky and circle..." (p. 253).

"You are a shadow of your former self, Baltasar, but surely that is a question of our failing eyesight, because it is a woman, in fact, who is coming towards you and where we see an old man, she sees a young man" (p. 313).

"The will of Baltasar sete-Sois broke free from his body, but did not ascend to the stars, for it belonged to the earth and to Blimunda" (p. 343).



## Topics for Discussion

Discuss the theme of Vanity in the book 'Baltasar and Blimunda' by Jose Saramago. What scenes and characters exemplify it the most?

How could it be said that the characters in the book are entrapped by the state religion of their times?

How does the author Jose Saramago use his own writing style to highlight the themes of the book?

What are the major themes of the novel 'Baltasar and Blimunda' by Jose Saramago. Give examples, using the text.

How could the marble stone transported from Pinheiro be contrasted with the Passarola? What does this tell us about the text?

Why does the author use so many 'voices' in the text, detailing personal stories, anecdotes or passing characters? What effect does it have? Do you think this device is helpful?

Why is Blimunda shocked when she realises what she has to do to fill the amber globes?

Why does Blimunda eat bread every morning before opening her eyes?