Beatrice and Virgil Study Guide

Beatrice and Virgil by Yann Martel

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

The following version of the book was used to create this study guide: Beatrice and Virgil, by Yann Martel. Alfred A Knopf, Canada, 2010: Random House Publishing Group, New York, 2010.

The narrative unfolds without chapter breaks, but with integrated scenes, written in theatrical format, from a stage story written by one of the characters – in other words, a play within the novel.

The novel begins with a description of how protagonist Henry, a novelist whose most recent book was a world-wide success, had his next project rejected by those who would have published and sold it. This rejection sent him into an experience of writer's block and a decision to start a different life. He and his wife Sarah moved to a large city and adopted a dog and a cat. While Sarah obtained full time work, Henry became involved with a number of non-writing activities, such as music lessons, a part-time job in a café, and participating in an amateur theatre group. At the same time, he continued to respond to fan mail sent in response to his best-seller, with one letter in particular proving particularly interesting. He discovered that the sender lives in the same city, tracked him down, and was surprised and intrigued to learn that the man was a taxidermist; that they share the same first name; and that that they also share an interest in writing about animals, albeit with human characteristics and experiences.

As the main narrative line kicks in, and as the relationship between Henry and the taxidermist develops (hence the movement of this plot summary into the present tense), Henry becomes both intrigued and disturbed by the subject matter of the taxidermist's writing project: a play about a donkey and a howler monkey, Beatrice and Virgil respectively, and their struggle to come to terms with a series of horrific, torturous experiences through which they have both lived.

The taxidermist, who has asked for Henry's help in writing the play, proves to be difficult to work with, revealing little about himself and his project but giving Henry just enough information to eventually conclude that the taxidermist is writing a story inspired, at least in part, by the Holocaust. Henry finds himself increasingly intrigued by the taxidermist's approach and perspective, which have some similarity to his own, as Henry also has an interest in drawing upon the Holocaust for inspiration to explore and write fictional, imaginative work. Meanwhile, Henry's non-writing life goes on: his music lessons continue, his work in the café continues to be pleasant, and his roles in the theatre company become more significant. Sarah also becomes pregnant.

Eventually, the content of the taxidermist's story leads Henry to the suspicion that the taxidermist was, in fact, involved in the sorts of atrocities that he is writing about. At around the same time, Henry's dog acquires rabies and attacks his cat, with the result that both animals are put down. The juxtaposition of these events, with their associated intensities of emotion, leads Henry into a confrontation with the taxidermist, who offers Henry more scenes from his play to consider. These scenes confirm Henry's suspicions,

and the confrontation escalates to the point where the taxidermist stabs Henry. As Henry flees the taxidermist's shop, he sees the taxidermist watching him and smiling. Shortly afterwards, the shop bursts into flames and burns to the ground, with the taxidermist still inside.

As he recovers from his injuries, Henry struggles to recall and recreate the taxidermist's play. As part of that process, he does what the taxidermist had asked him to do: develop and complete a particular scene, with narration commenting that the work was the first piece of fiction he had written since having his book rejected, the novel concludes with a representation of the scene written by Henry.

Part 1

Summary

Pages 4 – 26. Narration describes the recent success experienced by protagonist Henry, a novelist. Henry's most recent book received public and critical acclaim, and as a result he became something of a celebrity. Narration describes how he enjoyed his meetings with those who liked his book, while at the same time feeling that his fame did not really change him. “… you are who you are,” narration comments, “and then people project onto you some notion they have” (5).

Narration then describes in some detail the process Henry went through in creating his next book. He decided to write a subject that had been particularly traumatizing for humanity from both a fictional and non-fictional perspective, publishing a novel and an essay in the form of a flip-book: that is, the two pieces of writing printed in the same book, but back-to-back, meaning that once the reader got to the end of one subject, the book had to be flipped over in order for the reader to read the second. This, Henry believed, was an appropriate and fitting way to explore his issue of choice: the Holocaust which, he believed, was worthy of being explored from a fictionalized point of view as well as a non-fictional one.

Henry had spent five years working on the project. He was then invited to a meeting in London with his editors, a historian, and a bookseller, in which Henry was informed that his book was considered both unpublishable and virtually unreadable. In spite of making intensive efforts to defend himself and his work from questions like “What is your play about?" (10), Henry emerged from the meeting defeated, feeling that he was no longer a writer. Narration describes how a walk through an expansive park in London, and an encounter with a large, beautiful tree, calmed him somewhat, but nevertheless left him feeling determined that it was time to change his perspective.

Henry returned to his home in Canada and convinced his supportive wife Sarah to move with him to start a new life. They packed up, got the necessary papers, and left, eventually settling in “one of those great cities of the world that is a world unto itself … perhaps it was New York. Perhaps it was Paris. Perhaps it was Berlin” (21). He and Sarah began to build a new life, Henry “filling the parts of his life that were now empty of writing” (21) with music lessons, work in a café with an atmosphere and food that he enjoys, and taking Spanish lessons. He found particular joy in joining an amateur theatre group (The Greenhouse Players), he and the other members “leaving their lives at the door and becoming, as best they could, someone else …” (23). He and Sarah adopted two pets, a dog named Erasmus and a cat named Mendelssohn and, following the comment that the narrative is jumping past the main story, also had a baby named Theo.

Throughout this period of his life, narration comments, Henry made occasional efforts to rewrite both parts of his book, but found himself becoming increasingly less interested,

and also less interested in engaging with his editors and publishers. Eventually, he left writing behind altogether: Sarah thought he might be depressed, but Henry did not feel that that was the case: instead, narration comments, he felt like raising a child could provide both the creative outlet and the creative joy he was missing. In that way, narration comments, Henry and Sarah set up a new life for themselves and, eventually, stopped thinking about when they might leave.

Analysis

This section of the book is essentially exposition – that is, setting up and defining the background of the novel's main action, which begins in the following section. This is the reason for the summary being written in the past tense: the use of present tense in the following section marks the beginning of the book's main narrative line, or plot.

Key elements to note here include the reference to Henry's interest in both the Holocaust and in ways in which it could be explored. Briefly, the Holocaust is the name given to the experience of Jews (and others) in World War II, millions of whom were imprisoned and killed as a result of the genocidal inclinations of Adolf Hitler and the Nazis who followed him. Henry's contention, supported by evidence presented in the narrative, is that while it is essential and valuable for non-fiction narratives to present the factual truth about what happened and why, fictionalized narratives can also be written in order to explore aspects of the Holocaust story that are not only about the facts of what happened.

Meanwhile, in the midst of the exposition here, there are several important elements. The image of the flip book metaphorically reiterates Henry's point about the value of looking at the Holocaust from "two sides." The reference to projection in the quote, "… you are who you are, and then people project onto you some notion they have" (5) foreshadows later events in the narrative, in which Henry projects his interpretation of character, identity, and intention onto another character. The comment, "What is your play about?" foreshadows a moment later in the narrative in which Henry asks this same question of another writer, and immediately realizes the implications of what he has done, implications defined by his experience of being asked, and failing to answer, the same question.

Other important points to note include the lack of identification of the city in which Henry and Sarah settle and the references to Henry's involvement in the theatre company. First, the company's name suggests a certain kind of safety and growth process. Second, the comment that essentially suggests that such a company provides an experience for someone to become someone else introduces the idea of shifting identities, which plays an important role in later narrative developments. Then there are references to Henry and Sarah's pets, both of whom play similarly important roles later in the story. The names of the animals are worth noting: Erasmus the dog is named after the philosopher and theologian Erasmus, who was a Roman Catholic humanist and a key figure in the origins of the Reformation (which, among other things, saw the development of Protestantism and a less rigid Christianity). Mendelssohn the cat is

named after composer Felix Mendelssohn, whose first name is a variation on the Latin "felis," which means housecat and whose music was generally conservative, romantic, and melodious.

Finally, themes developed in this section include that related to the process of finding an artistic voice; questions about the function and practice of art (manifesting in the conflict between Henry's beliefs and the priorities of those publishing his work); and the related theme that explores the tension between reality and fiction. Henry's contention is that the dark and terrifying nature of the Holocaust's reality should not prevent its being used as a source for fictionalized art: the perspective of his publishers seems to be a thinly veiled argument that the opposite is the case. There are also developments in the book's thematic consideration of giving birth – not just the literal references to Sarah's pregnancy, but also Henry's comments about substituting the process of essentially creating and shaping a human life for the process of creating and shaping a work of (literary) art. This essentially sums up the book's thematic contention in this area: that giving life to both a human being and a work of art are, at their core, essentially the same process.

Discussion Question 1

In what way is the theme of finding an artistic voice developed in Part 1?

Discussion Question 2

Why is it significant, do you think, that the city in which Henry and Sarah settle is never specifically named?

Discussion Question 3

Given that a greenhouse, in gardening terms, is a place used to house and protect young or delicate plants as they grow into maturity, what would you say are the metaphoric values of the name of the theatre company with which Henry is involved?

Vocabulary

premature, eventual, devoid, rigorous, transcendent, synergy, precedence, exporatory, meritorious, inevitable, aesthetic, anecdotal, testimonial, archetypal, cataclysmic, jostle, beholden, factuality, encumbrance, exemplify, imperative, conceptual, tapenade, culinary, meander, incoherent, iteration, catastrophic, pretext, frivolity, tedious, symphony, consign, reverberation, genocide, intone, aphasia, riotous, intuitive, gyre, fluency, idiom, phonetic, bane, exploit, ecclesiastical, fraternity, thespian, priceless, resuscitate, rambunctious

Part 2

Summary

Pages 27 – 55. Narration describes how Henry, even in the new life he has built for himself, remains connected to his book, through mail from readers forwarded to him by his publishers. He writes responses to almost all of them, making a point of acknowledging his gratitude for the expressions of appreciation that came from people who enjoyed his creation. While he tends to avoid answering personal questions, he does enjoy answering questions about his book – specifically, about how and why he chose to write about animals rather than humans. In writing about people, their professions and their lives, he says, he is dealing with people's preconceptions about their fellow human beings: there are few, if any, such preconceptions about animals, particularly about wild animals, the sort he prefers to write about.

One day, a piece of mail arrives that seems more substantial than the others. When he opens it, Henry finds that he had been sent a copy of a short story, The Legend of Saint Julian Hospitator, written by Gustave Flaubert. Henry at first does not want to read it, but then curiosity gets the better of him and he starts to read, discovering that the person who sent it to him had highlighted sections of the story that focused on Julian's cruelty to animals. Julian even dreamed, the story contends, about killing and endless slaughter. The story of how Julian became saintly and redeemed was not, narration comments, highlighted in a similar way. Narration then describes how Henry's reading of the story is interrupted by his dog (Erasmus) barking to go for his walk.

Some time later, in the midst of his non-writing activities, Henry's attention is again drawn to the story of Saint Julian. He reads of how Julian became redeemed (after ministering to the Lord who came to him in the guise of a leper); how the Lord took Julian into heaven; and how there was no mention, in relation to Julian's redemption or ascension, of his mass killings of animals. Henry also discovers that the envelope in which the story was sent contains scenes from a play. At first he resists reading it, reluctant to get involved in the editing of his readers' submissions. But one day at rehearsal, he decides to read the scene. He discovers that it is between a pair of characters named Beatrice and Virgil, characters whose names he recognizes from Dante's Divine Comedy, and that their conversation is entirely about the nature of a pear. Specifically, Virgil goes into extensive, specific detail about a pear's shape, its texture, its skin, its color, and its taste, his description at times verging into the metaphoric. As he finishes the scene, Henry finds himself admiring of its craft, but unsure of its meaning, and also of how it relates to the story of Saint Julian.

Finally, Henry discovers that there is a note in the envelope as well, asking for his help with the play. He also notices that the return address on the envelope is in the city in which he is living, and that while the surname on the note's signature is unreadable, the first name could be deciphered - Henry, the same name as his own. Narration describes

how Henry prepares a note to send back, complementing the reader on the scene and expressing intrigue in relation to the story of Saint Julian.

Analysis

The main narrative of the book begins here in Section 2, hence the writing of the summary in the present tense. Henry's receipt and reading of the envelope's contents set the plot in motion, with the story, the scene from the play, and the note each triggering important moments of conflict and thematic exploration throughout the book.

A good deal of foreshadowing appears in this section. The commentary about writing about animals foreshadows later revelations about other writings about other protagonist animals, and also emerging commonalities between Henry and the taxidermist. The references to Saint Julian's cruelty foreshadows later narratives of other instances of animal cruelty. References to the idea of redemption foreshadows references later in the narrative to questions of redemption in the life and actions of the author of the excerpted play.

The characters Beatrice and Virgil and the play in which they appear are central elements in the relationship that develops between Henry and the play's author throughout the rest of the narrative, as well as the conflict that develops in that relationship.

Also worth noting is the revelation that the author of the envelope's contents and Henry himself share the same first name. This is the first of several commonalities that emerge, over the course of the narrative, between these two individuals. In addition, there is the reference to Dante's Divine Comedy, a historically significant piece of literature: specifically, an epic poem in which a character (who happens to be named after the author) is taken on a tour through the afterlife by characters named Beatrice and Virgil. The specific contributions of each character to the tour are outlined in the following section of the book.

Finally, there is development of one of the book's primary theme: the question and practice of finding an artistic voice. The request for help can be seen as a request for Henry's help in finding and developing such a voice.

Discussion Question 1

In what way might the package received by Henry be perceived as an evocation of the book's thematic interest in the experiences of fear and/or courage?

Discussion Question 2

What do you think are the metaphoric, thematic, or narrative values associated with the juxtaposition of the animal-related content of the Saint Julian story and Henry's perspectives on the animal-related content of his own writing?

Discussion Question 3

Dante's Divine Comedy is a narrative poem about a character taken on a tour through hell. In what ways might this aspect of the narrative echo previous events?

Vocabulary

expedite, sublime, solicitous, discursive, legible, glyph, figurative, zoology, shaman, rampart, tumultuous, caricature, behavioral, triumphal, carnage, mercenary, prophecy, conjugal, javelin, abnegation, mercenary, implicit, loathsome, culpable, troglodyte, enormity, hagiography, tangential, forlorn, stupendous, carnage, lethargy, equator, approximation, translucent, leprosy, olfactory, aromatic, incandescent, cadence, elusive, proficient, syntactical, cultivate, elliptical, proximity, endeavor

Part 3

Summary

Pages 55 – 75. One day, while Sarah is still pregnant, Henry takes Erasmus and makes his way to the return address on the envelope that contained the play and the Saint Julian story. After a long walk through the city and making his way through a commercial area, Henry and Erasmus arrive in a small, dark street where there is only one shop: Okapi Taxidermy, which has a stuffed okapi in the window. Henry realizes this is the place he is looking for, and goes in.

Henry sees that the front part of the shop is filled with a wide variety of stuffed animals; that the animals have been remarkably well preserved and effectively posed, and that there is no particular order, form, or grouping to define how the animals are arranged. His attention is particularly taken by a trio of tigers, their physical beauty and accuracy of their postures leaving him more than a little unnerved. His thoughts are interrupted by the arrival of the shop's owner and taxidermist, who appears briefly, seems to recognize Henry, and leaves. After a few moments, during which Henry has explored the shop further, the taxidermist returns with Henry's book. Henry offers to sign it, and the taxidermist hands it to him. Henry gives the taxidermist the card he wrote but never mailed. Narration describes the taxidermist's appearance (tall, gaunt, dark hair), his apparent social and physical awkwardness, and his way of speaking as though everything he says has been previously prepared. When asked by Henry, the taxidermist goes into great detail about the work that gets done at Okapi Taxidermy, and speaks about how no one seems to want stuffed animals anymore. People, he says, are more interested in domesticated animals. Henry finds the man increasingly odd, and even more so when he (Henry) thinks about the kind of easy, chatty dialogue that was in the scene from the play.

Eventually, the taxidermist repeats his desire to have Henry help him, and invites him into the workshop area of the business. Becoming aware of the tools of the taxidermist's trade surrounding him, and of the relative age of the taxidermist's typewriter and other equipment, Henry is surprised when the taxidermist pulls out an old-fashioned cassette tape recorder and plays a loud, strong, somewhat unnatural sound that sets Erasmus barking with agitation. After Henry calms him, the taxidermist explains that the sound was made by Virgil, a stuffed howler monkey who inspired one the characters in the play. The other character, Beatrice, was inspired by another stuffed animal – in this case, a donkey. As the taxidermist shows Henry the stuffed Beatrice and Virgil (Virgil sitting on Beatrice's back), he explains how they both came to be in his shop, and how he refers to them as his "guides through hell" (75). This leads Henry to understand the connection with Dante's Divine Comedy, in which "Dante is guided through inferno and purgatory by Virgil and then through paradise by Beatrice" (75). He also realizes that it makes sense for the taxidermist to write a play with animal characters: "… what would be more natural for a taxidermist with literary aspirations than to fashion his characters out of what he worked with every day?" (75).

Analysis

This section introduces, and begins to develop, the narrative's central relationship between Henry and the protagonist, and also the conflict between the two of them. At first, that conflict seems relatively mild: the suggestion here is that it seems to be more about styles of conversation and personality than about any significant issues. Nonetheless, the conflict here foreshadows more significant conflict between the two characters later in the story. Meanwhile, it is important to note how the narrative not only introduces conflict, but also introduces similarities between the two characters. The most noteworthy of these is their apparent shared interest in writing about animals – or more specifically, about animals with human characteristics (i.e. the ability to have human-esque conversations about human-esque issues, as Beatrice and Virgil do). This is an embodiment of the concept of anthropomorphism – seeing or portraying animals as having human characteristics. Further instances of this sort of approach to character and story development appear throughout the narrative.

A themes developed in this section includes an intriguing aspect of the book's interest in the function and practice of art – in this case, the idea that one such function is the preservation of what is no longer in existence, or even more specifically, that which is no longer alive. The taxidermist offers a lengthy commentary on the function of taxidermy in general (i.e. to preserve, in as lifelike a way as possible, an animal's body) and, by implication, on the function of his work in particular (i.e. that through preservation of the physical, there is also preservation of the animal's spirit, or identity). In short, the speech and its content, as well as the implied passion with which the taxidermist makes the speech, all suggest that at least for the taxidermist, and perhaps for the novel in general, the preservation of an animal through taxidermy is, in fact, a kind of art – creating the impression of action and life in stillness and death.

Finally, there is the reference to the okapi. The okapi, as the description suggests, appears to be a kind of hybrid, one that has resemblances, in its various parts, to various animals. As the narrative unfolds, the reference to the okapi (and the fact that the shop has "okapi" as part of its name) can be seen as having a metaphoric reference to the kind of writing that both Henry and the taxidermist are doing – that is, creating a kind of hybrid between fiction and non-fiction.

Discussion Question 1

How might the descriptions of taxidermy in Part 3, and the taxidermist's commentary on the subject, evoke the novel's thematic interest in the tension between reality and fiction? In what ways is an animal preserved through taxidermy (i.e. stuffed) a representation of reality? A work of fiction?

Discussion Question 2

What is ironic about the juxtaposition of the content of the Saint Julian story and the nature of the taxidermist's trade?

Discussion Question 3

At this point in the story, what do you think are the possibilities for the "hell" that the taxidermist seems to be referring to?

Vocabulary

okapi, diorama, sultry, trompe l'oeil, incongruous, superlative, vitality, escutcheon, taxidermy, pandemonium, palpable, plumage, osteology, habitat, mannequin, banter, robust, timbre, purgatory

Part 4

Summary

Pages 75 – 101. As conversation between Henry and the taxidermist continues, Henry notices some posters that have been put up on the shop's wall proclaiming Virgil to be a danger and a menace. The taxidermist explains that they are part of the play: specifically, that they will be projected as images onto the wall while Beatrice is describing Virgil. He then pulls out another scene from the play and, to Henry's surprise, reads it out loud. The scene begins with Beatrice and Virgil separating in a search for food, and then continues with Beatrice, in response to the presence of the posters, tries to convince an unseen stranger that the posters are wrong, and that Virgil is a good and decent animal.

The taxidermist abruptly stops reading and asks Henry to describe Virgil. Henry realizes that this kind of description is the kind of help that the taxidermist was asking for in his note, and looks closely at the figures of Beatrice and Virgil, who seem to have been arranged so carefully that there was a clear suggestion that "[Virgil] was saying something and [Beatrice] was listening …" (81). Henry then goes into a detailed description of Virgil, about halfway through beginning to speak in what he believes to be the voice of Beatrice. The taxidermist takes notes as Henry / Beatrice describes Virgil's fur, his limbs and hands, his face, and his tail. When the taxidermist expresses his pleasure with what Henry has said, Henry feels some pride in himself. "It had been such a long time since he had made this kind of effort" (83). However, when the taxidermist restarts the tape recorder and asks Henry to describe Virgil's howl, Henry is unable to do so, as he is distracted by Erasmus' increasingly disturbed reaction. Eventually, Henry leaves with Erasmus. The taxidermist, however, tells him to take the tape recorder, so he can listen to the recording as he works on describing it. Before Henry goes, he gets the taxidermist to agree to write something about taxidermy in exchange for the description of the howl.

When Henry leaves, he takes with him a skull he has purchased and stops at a nearby shop to get some water for Erasmus. He asks the shop owner about the taxidermist, and the owner refers to him as crazy and confrontational. Back at home, Henry tells Sarah about the encounter and about his belief that he is being asked to help write the taxidermist's play, but avoiding discussing what the characters and their situation remind him of (which the narrative, at this point, does not identify). Sarah comments that he seems excited to be working on this project: narration describes how Henry's mind is "racing" (87).

The next day, Henry goes to the library to do some research on howler monkeys. He then prepares a lengthy description of Virgil's howl, once again writing in Beatrice's voice. When he revisits the shop and presents what he wrote, the taxidermist likes some of what he said and dismisses the rest. Henry then asks what the taxidermist wrote about his work, and the taxidermist reads from several pieces of paper, going into

specifics about the process of preparing a body for taxidermy and why he believes taxidermy in general and his work in particular are important ("I am a historian, dealing with an animal's past; the zookeeper is a politician, dealing with an animal's present; and everyone else is a citizen who must decide on that animal's future" (97).) He concludes by explaining that he was inspired by two things: the story of Saint Julian, and the desire to preserve what has been destroyed. "I wanted to see if something could be saved once the irreparable had been done. That is why I became a taxidermist: to bear witness" (98).

After the taxidermist has finished, Henry compliments him and offers some constructive criticism, all of which the taxidermist listens to in silence. Henry again tries to engage the taxidermist on conversation, this time about his play, but the taxidermist says the play does not work, and then goes back to what he had been doing – preparing a rabbit skeleton. Further conversation reveals that the taxidermist had finished several first drafts, and had been working on the play, as he says, all his life. As he works on the skeleton, Henry looks closely at him, reconsidering his perceptions and realizing the connection between the two of them: they are both struggling to find their way to the right words.

Analysis

The key points to note about Part 4 are mostly defined by ongoing developments in the relationship between Henry and the taxidermist. On one level, there is a sense that they are beginning to trust each other, relate to each other effectively, and understand each other. Perhaps Henry is understanding more about the taxidermist than the other way around, but on the other hand, it is important to keep in mind that the taxidermist is, essentially, getting Henry to write again, a situation that seems to suggest that the taxidermist has at least some intuitive understanding of where Henry is at in his life and career. On another level, the deepening of the relationship between Henry and the taxidermist also suggests, to both Henry and the reader, that there are deeper meanings, or implications, to what is going on in both the taxidermist's play and in the relationship. This sense emerges primarily in the comments made in narration about Henry's emerging suspicions about what the taxidermist is really doing: here it is important to note that at this point, narration does not explicitly reveal what his suspicions are: that comes later, meaning that the references here are a fairly overt form of foreshadowing.

Another important piece of foreshadowing comes in the comment by the taxidermist that closes Part 4: specifically, his reference to wanting to bear witness. The reference foreshadows comments later in the narrative that reveal what, exactly, his writing seems to be bearing witness to, an aspect of the book as a whole and of this moment in particular that ties in with the previous comment about Henry's suspicions, and will tie in even more closely as the story progresses. On another level, the comment also continues to develop the book's thematic exploration of the function and practice of art, reiterating its earlier suggestion that one of the functions of taxidermy in particular, and art in general, is to preserve that which has been lost. One last piece of foreshadowing:

the taxidermist's reference to having worked on the play all his life, which suggests he had started either writing the play or living the experiences it dramatizes when he was very young, an aspect of the comment that, in turn, foreshadows references later in the story to who the taxidermist's youthful identity.

Discussion Question 1

In what ways do the developments of Part 4 explore the theme of finding an artistic voice?

Discussion Question 2

What incidents or situations from earlier in the narrative are connected to Henry's statement that it had been a long time since he had worked in such away as he does here?

Discussion Question 3

What are some of the reasons why Henry might seem "excited" to be working on the taxidermist's play?

Vocabulary

taxonomic, gibberish, interlocutor, prehensile, filigree, whorl, dexterous, bulbous, lustrous, matrilineal, colossal, dither, obsolete, assent, quagga, attrition, subcutaneous, barbarism, parse, retention, discourse, mundane

Part 5

Summary

Pages 101 – 130. As the conversation between Henry and the taxidermist continues, the taxidermist reveals that he chose these two particular animals for work on his play because of their characteristics and resourcefulness, and he reads Henry a few more excerpts. The first excerpt is the list of characters, which includes a reference to “a boy and his two friends” (104). The second excerpt explores the question of faith (which, Virgil suggests in the scene, cannot exist without doubt). The third excerpt explores the play’s setting, which Henry is surprised to learn is a country called The Shirt. As the taxidermist explains that The Shirt, which is lined with blue and gray stripes, is symbolic, Henry finds himself reminded of something, but not entirely sure what. Then the taxidermist reads the third scene, one in which Beatrice encourages Virgil to pray, in spite of his experience of having several “godless days” (109). Just as Henry is about to ask why The Shirt has stripes, someone arrives in the front part of the shop (Henry never sees who it is) and the taxidermist firmly ushers him out. Henry tries to keep the conversation going with a reference to their next meeting and suggesting they go to the zoo. The taxidermist reacts angrily to that idea, saying that “zoos are bastard patches of wilderness” (114).

As they arrange to meet at a nearby café in a few days, Henry resolves to get the taxidermist to become less angry and forceful, trying to get him to open up about why he spent so much time describing a common fruit like a pear. As he opens the shop’s front door, the taxidermist says that “reality escapes us. It’s beyond description, even a simple pear. Time eats everything” (115). With that, the taxidermist closes the door, and Henry goes home. He tells the still-pregnant Sarah about the conversation, saying that some of the things the taxidermist said reminded him of the Holocaust. Sarah comments that almost everything reminds him, on some level, of the Holocaust, a comment that irritates Henry somewhat.

A few days later, Henry and Sarah go shopping for baby clothes, an expedition that goes well until Henry suggests that, since they are in the neighborhood, they stop in at the taxidermy shop. There is immediately tension between Sarah and the taxidermist, tension that erupts into a full blown argument as soon as they get home. Sarah refers to the taxidermist as a “creep” (118), calls the shop a “funeral parlor” (118), and mocks Henry when he says that the taxidermist is helping him with his writing.

The next day is the one scheduled for Henry’s meeting with the taxidermist at the café. Henry arrives first, with Erasmus, and finds a table partly in the sun. The taxidermist arrives, “as punctual as a soldier” (119) and clearly uncomfortable being out in public. Henry notices how the taxidermist and the waiter barely interact, and also notices how, when the taxidermist starts talking about his play and reading its scenes, he becomes paranoid of both being heard and of the scenes he brought being read by anyone else.

Henry begins the conversation by suggesting that as much attention should be paid to a description of Beatrice's physical appearance as has been paid to Virgil's. He gives the taxidermist suggestions, some of which are taken and some of which are not. As he reads more scenes, the taxidermist reveals that Virgil has several soliloquies in the play, usually while Beatrice is sleeping, and that Virgil cannot sleep because he is so anxious. The taxidermist says that this is because "he's a howler monkey in a world that doesn't want howler monkeys." (126) The taxidermist narrates a couple of Virgil's soliloquies: one in which he talks about the different qualities of physical pain, and one in which he tells the story of how, while reading his morning paper in a café, he realized he was in a new category of government-defined non-citizens. As Henry makes note of this, the taxidermist speaks at length of how Virgil's world changed as a result of his realization. With that, Henry pays the bill and they leave the café.

Analysis

In Part 5, Henry finally names, or identifies, what various elements of the taxidermist's play have reminded him of: the Holocaust. Given what the narrative has previously revealed about Henry's preoccupation with the Holocaust and the way it is represented or explored in art, the reader might be justified in agreeing with Sarah's comments about Henry's perceptions (that everything reminds him of the Holocaust). On the other hand, previous references to the taxidermist's play, and also several references here (both before and after Henry's realization) tend to reinforce the point.

In terms of new references that suggest or evoke the Holocaust, the key point is the description of The Shirt, with its blue and gray stripes. Historically, prisoners in Nazi internment camps (Jews and others) were clothed in uniforms that were made from fabric that had blue and gray stripes: the description of the (clearly symbolic) country called The Shirt is an inescapable echo of this. The image of the characters and story living on The Shirt tend to develop the metaphor of the struggle to live within the context of the horrors represented by The Shirt. This, in turn, is an echo of the struggle of Beatrice and Virgil to find a way to live with, and speak of, the horrors that have happened to them. In terms of references in Part 5 that come after Henry's realization, both the reference to Virgil's soliloquy on types of physical pain and the reference to discovering he is in a category of non-citizens can be seen as further support for Henry's theory.

Other important elements in Part 5 include the taxidermist's comments about zoos (which suggest that he sees his work as more accurately representative of an animal's life, even in its death, than life in a zoo), and the references to the taxidermist's reasoning for writing such a detailed description of a pear. The implication of these comments is that words are inevitably going to fall short when it comes to describing reality, a development of the book's thematic interests in the relationship between reality and fiction, and in the function and practice of art.

Then there are some key elements of foreshadowing: the reference in the character listing to a boy and his friends (the boy playing a key role in later elements of the play);

the references to the negative reactions of people (i.e. Sarah, the waiter) who encounter the taxidermist (which foreshadows Henry's eventual insight into the reasons why people reacted the way they did); and the reference to the taxidermist's punctuality being like a soldier, which foreshadows Henry's later realization of the taxidermist's probable previous life.

Finally, there are intriguing elements in Part 5 of the book's exploration of the theme of giving birth. As previously discussed, the book's thematic contention seems to be that the process of giving birth to a work of art can be equivalent to the process of giving birth to a child. This idea is developed in the juxtaposition between the description of Henry and Sarah going shopping for supplies for the baby and the descriptions of Henry and the taxidermist defining and shaping ways in which the taxidermist's play, and the characters therein, are being brought to life.

Discussion Question 1

How do the events of the taxidermist's play evoke the book's thematic interest in aspects of fear and courage?

Discussion Question 2

In Part 5, the taxidermist's play raises the question of the relationship between faith and doubt. What do you think is the relationship between the two? How do the two interact? How does the reference to godless days relate to this question?

Discussion Question 3

How does Virgil's soliloquy about his realization that he is in a new category of non-citizens relate to the idea of the Holocaust? What aspect of the Holocaust does his contention echo, or evoke?

Vocabulary

analogy, arbitrary, fragrant, cavernous, corduroy, undulation, crestfallen, augment, imperative, oblivion, surly, bassinet, cower, elicit, glower, monstrosity, dejection, exasperation, pagan, vanquish, terrestrial, proportion, fatalist, expulsion, transmogrify, bipedal

Part 6

Summary

Pages 130 – 157. As Henry, Erasmus, and the taxidermist walk back to the shop, Henry comments on how the taxidermist does not seem to like people. When the taxidermist reacts with apparent resentment, “animal-like in its intensity” (130), Henry revises his comment to suggest that the taxidermist simply finds animals more reliable. The taxidermist does not respond, resuming conversation only when they return to the back room of the shop and he, as Henry notices, has become visibly more comfortable in the presence of the animals there.

The taxidermist speaks of how the range of most of Virgil’s feelings shrank as a result of his realizations, leaving fear dominant; how he feels that if it were not for Beatrice in his life, he would feel nothing positive at all; and how his joy at realizing he has got something left in life leads him to playing, somewhat gymnastically. His noisy happiness wakes up Beatrice, which leads the taxidermist to read a different scene: in this one, he says, Beatrice refers to a question that Virgil asked before and which is the most important one in the play: “How are we going to talk about what happened to us one day when it’s over?” (133). This leads Henry even more strongly to the conclusion that the taxidermist is writing about the Holocaust, but he resolves to let the taxidermist say it himself, asking “What is your play about?” (134) As soon as he says it, he realizes it is exactly the same question he was asked, and reacted badly to, in his conversation with his editors.

The taxidermist, however, is able to respond: he speaks intensely of his belief that the play is about the “irreparable abomination” (135) done to animals. He reads a scene in which Beatrice and Virgil struggle to come up with a name for what they have experienced, and eventually come up with “The Horrors” (136) and describes how Beatrice and Virgil come up with a list of ways to talk about The Horrors. The animals call the list their “Sewing Kit” (to rhyme with “knowing kit”) (137) because they live in The Shirt. The taxidermist also describes how Virgil writes the list on Beatrice’s back, showing Henry on the back of the actual stuffed Beatrice, and then reads a scene in which Beatrice and Virgil try to listen not for words and their meanings, but to the meanings in silence. At first, their attempts result in their hearing all the noises around them (wind, birds, animals), but then Virgil makes a great deal of noise pretending to be a train conductor. In that moment’s aftermath, Beatrice describes what she heard in the silence as “thousands of shadows pressing on [her]” (141), adding that she does not have the words for what the shadows said. The taxidermist then explains that Beatrice and Virgil explore other ways of talking about the Holocaust: these, he adds, include gestures, one of which he demonstrates. All these things, the taxidermist says, are part of the growing list. He reads the list to Henry, who finds that two elements in particular sound familiar: the word “aukitz” and the address “68 Nowolipki Street” (145).

Narration describes Henry's realization that as far as he can tell, the play consists almost entirely of talking and conversation, and his belief that for a play to work, there has to be more action, more of a story. He then decides to come at his discussion with the taxidermist another way, to try and get him to talk more about the action of the play, and asks how Beatrice and Virgil change over the course of the story. The taxidermist responds firmly that they do not change. The taxidermist states that they remain absolutely the same, in the way that animals have remained true to their essential natures over eons of evolution. Henry senses that there is no way he is going to change the taxidermist's way of thinking, and leaves that topic of conversation. The taxidermist then says, quietly but intensely, that only one thing counts: he then shows Henry where Virgil's tail was cut off, and where the taxidermist re-attached it.

As Henry considers how "utterly barbarous" it was, "to cut Virgil's splendid tail off" (155), the taxidermist goes back to work. He ignores Henry's request that he (Henry) be allowed to read the play in its entirety, instead focusing on taking the skin and head off the body of a fox, a process that narration describes in detail. The taxidermist says that he is preparing the head as a mounted gift for Henry, but Henry, who had initially been fascinated by what the taxidermist was doing, finds himself repulsed and has to leave. Narration describes how the taxidermist barely notices his departure.

Analysis

The question that the taxidermist says is the most important one in the play is also one of the most important in the book, since it goes to the heart of one of its main themes: the tension between reality and fiction. Essentially, Beatrice asks the same question that Henry asks in the first part of the story: why is it not acceptable to use the Holocaust as inspiration for fictional art as well as for non-fictional art? Or, to explore the central metaphor of the book and the play more literally: how will the characters, and the writers (i.e. Henry and the taxidermist) talk about the Holocaust? How CAN they talk about the Holocaust? What is permissible and what isn't? Who decides what is permissible and what is not? Is fiction inspired by the factual experiences associated with the Holocaust somehow disrespectful? Or is it a valuable exploration of meaning? These are the questions posed by the book.

Meanwhile, all these questions also relate to several of the book's other themes: the process of finding an artistic voice (in terms of the taxidermist finding the "voice" to say what he seems to want to say about the Holocaust, in the way he seems to want to say it) and the function and practice of art – specifically, the process of, and motivation for, using art to explore truths about reality that non-fiction might not be able to. This theme is also evoked in the search, by Beatrice and Virgil, to find the right name for what they have experienced. In Beatrice and Virgil's conversation, the narrative vividly enacts the exact question that is being asked. Beatrice and Virgil actually do define how they are going to talk about what happened to them, interpreting the event (i.e. fictionalizing it) and not just representing it (i.e. portraying it in a non-fiction way). At the same time, the book's thematic consideration of fear and courage is also developed in this section: specifically, in the description of Virgil's feelings in reaction to the newspaper article.

From this point on, the fear – courage relationship becomes one of the most important, and vividly developed, themes in the narrative.

Part 6 also contains several important pieces of foreshadowing. The reference to 68 Nowolipki Street plays a key role in the next section in Henry's realization of the taxidermist's probable identity. The reference to Virgil's tail being cut off foreshadows a moment in the taxidermist's play when the tail of the character Virgil is cut off. Finally, there is the word "aukitz" which resembles, both on the page and in pronunciation the name of one of the most notorious of the Nazi's internment camps: Auschwitz, in Poland. The meaning of this barely fictionalized term is never revealed in the narrative, but the similarities and echoes can hardly be missed, once again reinforcing Henry's belief, and inevitably the reader's, that the taxidermist is, indeed, writing about the Holocaust.

Discussion Question 1

How are the more metaphoric aspects of the book's thematic exploration of giving birth developed in Part 6?

Discussion Question 2

How does the taxidermist's description of what the play is about (i.e. the "irreparable abomination" done to animals) relate to Henry's belief that the play is about the Holocaust? At this point in the story, do you agree or disagree with Henry's belief? Explain your answer.

Discussion Question 3

What do you think is behind the taxidermist's intention to give Henry the gift of a preserved fox's head? What is the taxidermist saying, or suggesting, with such a gift?

Vocabulary

vehemence, vigilance, conspicuous, perforate, arbitrary, erroneous, adverse, placate, barbarous, bereft, sentient, granular

Part 7

Summary

Pages 157 – 185. Narration describes how Henry's next few weeks are complicated and chaotic, but that he nevertheless continues to have the taxidermist and the play on his mind. Narration then describes how Henry plays the lead in a difficult play put on by The Greenhouse Players (narration describing how the Players had, in recent years, worked towards doing more difficult and challenging plays), and how Erasmus, having somehow contracted rabies, attacks Mendelssohn. Both animals ultimately have to be put down. Mendelssohn is killed by an injection, while Erasmus dies in a small gas chamber. As a precaution to make sure that rabies is not passed on to the yet-unborn baby, Henry gets a series of rabies shots.

Narration then describes how, one day at rehearsal, two things happen: Henry realizes that the other members of the company have discovered who he is (Henry having kept his writer identity secret); and he learns that the taxidermist had recognized him from an article in the paper publicizing the play, and some time before had come looking for him. He also discovers that on his visit, the taxidermist had left him another scene in from the play involving a conversation between Beatrice and Virgil about suffering, and another relating to a different item on their list. Finally, Henry discovers that the taxidermist had included a note: "My story has no story. It rests on the fact of murder" (167). Henry becomes determined to visit the taxidermist again and find out what he means by both.

Shortly after all this happens, Sarah gives birth to Theo. Narration describes how, through it all, Henry kept the taxidermist and his play in his mind, with narration suggesting that "one night, his suspicions about the real subject matter of the play were confirmed" (169). Henry awakes one night with a realization of why 68 Nowolipki Street (the item from the taxidermist's list) is so familiar; he had encountered the name of someone connected to that address as part of his research into the Holocaust.

The next day, Henry visits the taxidermist to confront him with what he has realized, taking with him the few scenes of the play that he has. The taxidermist is even more difficult to communicate with than usual, seemingly unhappy that Henry kept the secret of his real name (Henry L'Hote) a secret. Henry apologizes, explaining that he wrote under a pseudonym (without explaining why), and then asks what he came to ask: what did the taxidermist know about 68 Nowolipki Street? After the taxidermist says it was just an address he made up, narration describes Henry's realization, and what his research discovered: that 68 Nowolipki Street was an address in Poland where Jews hidden from the Nazis kept records of what had happened to them and other Jews. Narration then describes Henry's other realization: "Fate had brought Henry into contact with a writer … who was doing exactly what Henry had argued should be done in his rejected book three years earlier: he was representing the Holocaust differently" (174).

Henry asks the taxidermist to read another scene from his play. The taxidermist reads a long speech by Beatrice in which she describes being imprisoned and tortured. Henry notices that one of the men she describes bears a certain resemblance to the taxidermist. Henry then asks about the boy referred to in the cast list (Part 5), commenting on the surprise of there being a human in the taxidermist's story of animals. The taxidermist says that the boy finds Beatrice and Virgil in the woods; that they recognize him from the day before; and that he had been involved in some horrible deeds. The taxidermist then reads a scene in which the boy confronts the terrified Beatrice and Virgil, eventually killing them in spite of their fearful, desperate calling on one of the items on their list: "empty good cheer expressed in extremis" (182). The boy notices the markings on Beatrice's back, and then cuts Virgil's tail off, eventually throwing it away. That, the taxidermist says, is the end of the play.

Analysis

Narrative momentum begins to build in Part 7 towards the book's climax, which takes place in the following (and final) section. As part of that build, truths and realizations and confrontations intensify; the meaning of previously glimpsed elements is revealed; and Henry, in some ways, catches up to the reader who has, in all likelihood, realized things about the taxidermist that, to Henry, come as something of a surprise. Primarily, this is the sense that the taxidermist is, or has been, doing exactly what Henry had tried to do with his rejected book. Interestingly, the question of how Henry reacts is not actually explored. Instead, Henry continues on his somewhat relentless quest to get the taxidermist to explicitly admit what he (Henry) has come to believe he is doing: writing about his own experiences of being a Nazi. This belief is directly supported by what Henry perceives is the resemblance between the taxidermist and Beatrice's story of torture (which can be seen as evocative of the sorts of tortures experienced by Jews and others during the Holocaust), and further supported by the taxidermist's description of events in in the play in the following section.

There is another apparent resemblance between a piece of seemingly fictionalized writing and the events of the Holocaust. This is the description of the deaths of Erasmus and Mendelssohn, each of whom dies in a way that echoes the way in which many Jews and others died in the Holocaust. Erasmus' death, in what amounts to a gas chamber, is a vivid echo of how thousands, if not millions, of people were gassed in the war: Mendelssohn's death is an echo of how fewer, but no less agonized, people died as a result of vicious attacks, injections and/or medical experiments. In Part 7, the book's author is doing what his characters set out to do: in his work, he is exploring his own thematic question about the tension between reality and fiction, and the specific question of whether it is possible to use the Holocaust and its events as a springboard for imagined, fictionalized work.

The dramatization around events related to the revelation of Henry's true identity foreshadows events later in Part 7 and in Part 8 in which he seems to realize the truth of the taxidermist's identity. Both the meaning and the actual location of 68 Nowolipki Street exist in history, as opposed to being inventions of the author, and are yet another

way in which reality is being fictionalized in this book. The content of the taxidermist's note, with its reference to murder, can be seen as referring to the murder of Beatrice and Virgil by the boy, or the act of murder described by the taxidermist in Part 8.

Finally, there is the idea of empty good cheer expressed in extremis. Being "in extremis" generally means being in a desperate, potentially dangerous situation: the resemblance between "extremis" and "extreme" is worth noting. Empty good cheer essentially refers to the idea of being positive, or trying to feel positive, in a situation where there is little or no reason to actually feel that way: the entire phrase, then, can be seen as referring to an act of courageous defiance, or defiant courage in the face of fear. This means that the phrase can be seen as an evocation of the book's thematic interest in the relationship between fear and courage.

Discussion Question 1

How is the book's exploration of the tension between reality and fiction explored and developed in Part 7?

Discussion Question 2

In the light of the deaths of Erasmus and Mendelssohn, what metaphoric values to their names and contributions to the story can be seen at this point in the story?

Discussion Question 3

Given what the book is saying now about the taxidermist, what do you think are the connections between the description of what happens to Virgil's tail here and the descriptions of the same event in Part 6? Is it a matter of the taxidermist, as a writer and artist, using real / remembered incidents as material for his story? Or is there something else going on?

Vocabulary

acme, purveyor, facile, conventional, relevant, authentic, exalted, fraternity, excrete, smithy, stupor, duplicitous, irrefutable, incessant, gruesome, intrusion, instigate, vigor

Part 8

Summary

Pages 185 – 213. In the aftermath of his telling of the story of the boy's killing of Beatrice and Virgil, the taxidermist tells Henry that he has been working on a new scene – about a character named Gustav, a dead naked body discovered by Beatrice and Virgil that Virgil decides to dignify with a name. The taxidermist comments that rather than burying Gustav, Beatrice and Virgil decide to play games near the body, imagining that Gustav would enjoy them if he were still alive: “playing games is a way of celebrating life,” he says (186). He then adds that he wants Henry’s help in coming up with the games.

Henry then changes the subject, asking what the horrible deeds were that Beatrice and Virgil had seen the boy involved in. The taxidermist speaks at length (on his own: this not an excerpt from the play) of how the boy was one of a group of men chasing and mocking a pair of young women who killed their babies and then themselves in a pond rather than be captured by the men. He says that the boy (who had been one of the most excited of the spectators) disappeared with the men in the aftermath of the incident; that Beatrice and Virgil ran away as soon as they could, each troubled by their memories. The boy, the taxidermist says, then found them the next day and killed them. He adds that his play stays focused on the animals and does not follow the boy.

At that point, Henry remembers the story of Saint Julian (Part 2) who “slaughters quantities of innocent animals, but it doesn’t affect his salvation … that would be an attraction to a man who had something to hide” (189). This thought leads Henry to conclude that the taxidermist is, and has been, trying to redeem himself by trying to save, and promote the salvation of, animals: he was, Henry believes, a Nazi, perhaps even the boy in the play. As Henry prepares to leave, the taxidermist tries to give him the play, actually stuffing pages into his pockets. Henry gives the play back. The taxidermist then offers him an exchange, and then stabs him. Henry runs out, thinking of Sarah and Theo as he goes, still pursued by the taxidermist. Henry stumbles into the street, where he startles several passers-by and causes several cars to stop. He looks back momentarily, and sees the taxidermist in the door of the shop, smiling “a full smile that lit up his face” (193). The taxidermist then disappears.

As an ambulance arrives, and Okapi Taxidermy catches fire and burns quickly and intensely - “With the taxidermist in it” (193).

Narration then describes how, in the aftermath of the attack and during the process of his recovery, Henry resolves to leave the city with his family. He becomes somewhat obsessed with memories of Beatrice and Virgil, and he becomes determined not only to remember everything that had happened to him, but recreate the play the taxidermist had written. Henry conducts research into animals and taxidermy, and he puts the pieces together of what he remembers about the taxidermist and what happened in the

shop. A piece of the taxidermist's play, found in his pocket, inspires Henry to write "Games for Gustav … the first piece of fiction Henry had written in years" (197). With that, the prose section of the book ends.

The final section of the book is introduced with the title "Games for Gustav", and continues with 12 pages of questions, one question on each page, each question posing a painful dilemma. The final page, headed Game Number 13, is blank.

Analysis

This section contains the book's climax: specifically, the confrontation between Henry and the taxidermist that results in Henry being stabbed and in the taxidermist's death. This is the high point of the action, the point of conflict at which Henry's shock and disgust collide with the taxidermist's desperation for something - perhaps privacy, redemption, or affirmation - resulting in a near-death experience for the former and an actual death for the latter.

In the aftermath of the event itself, the narrative leaves a great many questions unanswered: why does the taxidermist smile? Why does he stab Henry? Did he write the play, and / or become a taxidermist, for the reasons that Henry imagines, an attempt to redeem himself for what he did in the war – or rather, PERHAPS did in the war? Here it is important to note that despite the compelling evidence of the story about the pond (which, it must be noted, is told by the taxidermist and NOT by one of the characters in his play), the narrative only offers Henry's beliefs and a series of circumstances as evidence of who the taxidermist is, or was. The conclusion is left up to the reader, as are the answers to those previously identified questions: was he a Nazi? Was he the boy by the lake? Is the character of the boy in the play in fact a version of a self-portrait? Or, to look at it in the phrasing of the book's themes, how much of what is revealed, or suspected, in this section a representation of reality? Or is it fictionalized? Has art reshaped reality? Or has art merely reported it?

These questions are all reiterated in what amounts to the book's epilogue, the questions posed under the heading "Games for Gustav." There is the very clear sense that most of the questions are variations, if not actual reportings, of situations experienced by Jews and others before, during, and after the Holocaust. Here again, the question book raises the question of where the line is, or should be, between reality and fiction, between truth and art. In any case, whatever the answer, the questions posed in the Epilogue are truly harrowing, and virtually impossible to answer – except for the fact that, in the actual Holocaust, people DID answer these questions, or questions similar to them.

Other thematically significant elements in Part 8 can be found in the story of the women and their babies (which blurs the line between actions defined by fear and those defined by courage), and in the story of Henry's struggle to recreate the play (which can be seen as an evocation of the theme related to experiences of finding an artistic voice). Then there is the final tying-in of the Beatrice-and-Virgil story with that of Saint Julian (which once again asks questions about the nature and value of redemption), as well as

the idea of games being a celebration of life. In the context of “Games for Gustav,” this idea can be seen as darkly and bleakly ironic: it can also be seen as a variation on the idea behind “empty good cheer expressed in extremis,” which in turn is a manifestation of the book’s thematic interest in the tension between fear and courage. Ultimately, though, the idea of “Games for Gustav” and the epilogue in which the games are introduced, if not actually played, can be seen as one final evocation of the book’s central thematic issue, one introduced in its first pages and developed again in its last. This is the question of how reality can be, or could be, or whether it SHOULD be, shaped in a way that simultaneously fictionalizes it (i.e. gives the reader a degree of distance) and gives it meaning (i.e. triggers, in the reader, a degree of feeling or insight).

Discussion Question 1

In what way is the book’s thematic interest in giving birth developed, literally and / or metaphorically, in Part 8?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think Henry decides to recreate the taxidermist’s play? What is he trying to accomplish? What is his motivation?

Discussion Question 3

What do you think is being suggested by the last page of “Games for Gustav” being left blank? What do you think the author is asking the reader to do, or think, or feel?

Vocabulary

intrusion, extremis, porcelain, instigate, redemption, taint (v.), piecemeal, marionette, improbable, commotion, flammable, elusive, reconstruct, factual

Characters

Henry (The Writer)

Henry is the novel's central character and protagonist. His last name is eventually revealed to be L'Hote, which translates as "the host." He is intelligent, well-read, imaginative, and seems to be somewhere on the spectrum between individualistic and quirky. His age is never explicitly defined, but there is the sense that he is in his mid-thirties or early forties. As the novel begins, he is married but with no children; is in the early stages of a successful career as a professional novelist; and is free enough of commitments that, when his second novel proves to be unpublishable, he is able to pack up his life and his wife and move.

The incident with the unpublished novel proves to be something of a trauma for him, as he finds himself unable (or unwilling) to write. Instead, he fills his time after he moves with other activities, some of which are more creatively satisfying than others. Part of Henry's struggle throughout the novel, but especially in its beginnings, is that he is interested in writing in ways, and about subjects, that his editors and publishers seem to think would make his work unmarketable: he feels he has his creative voice taken away from him. The story of the novel is, on one level, how he reconnects with that voice and, on another level, with his sense of identity and purpose. In this way, his journey parallels that of the taxidermist, who is also struggling to find, or at least reconnect with, his artistic voice.

Among a number of intriguing aspects to Henry's character (including his interest in animals, which takes a number of different forms), there is the issue of his name. He writes under a pseudonym (which is never given), which on some level suggests he wants to keep his identity secret. On the other hand, he writes at some length of how much he enjoys having his writing recognized and praised: his ego is boosted by people who not only like his work, but as he discovers, who seek his help. This ego-based desire combines with curiosity and convenience to lead him into his relationship with the novel's second major character, and its primary antagonist: the taxidermist, whose name is also Henry.

The Taxidermist (Henry)

The taxidermist's last name is never revealed, and narration never refers to him by his first name, only by his job title: the taxidermist. This suggests that the character is intended to be perceived as, or defined by, what he does rather than who he is. Later, however, as the narrative peels away the layers of the secrets in his life and work (specifically the play he is writing), there is the sense that he is, in fact, acting to preserve the lives, memory, and courage of those whose deaths he was involved in – at least, that Henry suspects he was involved in. Given the metaphoric focus both the novel as a whole and the taxidermist's play seems to put on the Holocaust, and given

the implications of the story he tells as the book reaches its climax (i.e. of a young boy observing the deaths of two women and their babies), there is the sense that the taxidermist is using his work with animals, both in the act of taxidermy and in the act of writing his play, as an attempted act of atonement for being involved, somehow, in the deaths of Jews and others during World War II.

The taxidermist is initially described as looking as though he is in his sixties, but some of the things he says reveal his age to be somewhere in his eighties. He is often unnervingly silent, and when he speaks it is with the sense of everything he says having been calculated, or pre-determined: narration clearly comments that there are few, if any, hesitations in what he says or how he says it. This is a clear contrast to Henry who, in the aftermath of what happens to him as a result of his second novel not being published, struggles to find words. The taxidermist is passionate about his work and about his writing, for reasons that the novel slowly reveals over the course of the story: he is a firm believer in the value of animals (something he has in common with Henry) and, as the climax of the story ultimately suggests, he has some personal demons to expel. In other words, he is a haunted, deeply troubled man. His reaching out to Henry is, on its most apparent level, an effort to get help with writing his play and with finding his writer’s voice (something else in common with Henry). On a deeper level, he is ultimately reaching out for help in healing or transforming his troubled memories. His death at the novel’s conclusion appears to be suicide, suggesting that the depths of his troubled nature and history are more debilitating and troubling than Henry ever imagined.

The Executives

Early in the narrative, a group of executives (including publishers, a historian, and a book seller) tell Henry that the second novel he has been working on for years is essentially un-publishable and un-marketable. Their actions, taken over a somewhat ironically expensive lunch, send Henry into a creative tailspin that borders on depression, which results in him being unable to write.

Sarah

Sarah is Henry's wife. She is generally portrayed as being supportive and loving, but reacts negatively to his relationship with the taxidermist. The description of her experience of giving birth develops the book's metaphoric portrayal of the parallel experiences between being animal and being human in an opposite way from many of the book's other explorations of this idea: where the animals in the book are portrayed in ways that evoke humanity, Sarah's experience of giving birth portrays her in ways that evoke a more animalistic side.

Theo

Theo is the newborn son of Henry and Sarah. He is a minor character, his major value manifesting in a reference Henry makes to how raising Theo, for him, will become an outlet for his creative energy.

Erasmus

Erasmus is Henry's dog, which he and Sarah adopt along with Mendelssohn the cat when they move. Erasmus, who is named after a Dutch theologian, humanist, and philosopher, is generally a friendly companion on Henry's visits to the taxidermist, but at one point somehow contracts rabies, attacking Mendelssohn. Erasmus is eventually put down in a way that echoes the deaths of millions in the Holocaust - that is, in a gas chamber. In that sense, Erasmus' death has significant metaphoric value.

Mendelssohn

Mendelssohn, named after composer Felix Mendelssohn, is Henry and Sarah's cat. She plays a minor role in the narrative, primarily important because of the means of her death: in the aftermath of an attack by the rabid Erasmus. Like the death of the latter, Mendelssohn's death by lethal injection is metaphorically significant, in that it resembles, on some level, the deaths of Jews and others executed during the holocaust

Julian of Hospitator

This saint is the principal character in a short story (by French writer Gustave Flaubert) that the taxidermist sends to Henry along with the first scene of his play. The short story is a fictionalized telling of how Julian's cruelty towards animals was ultimately no barrier to his being redeemed, taken to heaven by Jesus, and canonized as a saint. There is a sense that the story is perhaps intended to be seen as paralleling the taxidermist's desire, in writing his play, to be redeemed for what Henry comes to believe was his cruelty towards human beings during World War II.

Beatrice

Beatrice is one of the main characters in the play written by the taxidermist, and also one of the preserved animals in his shop. In both cases, Beatrice is a donkey, described as hard working and sensitive. She is named after a character in Dante's Inferno, an epic poem in which the narrator (a representation of the poem's author) is taken through Paradise after being taken on a tour of purgatory by a character named Virgil (see below). As such, she seems to be a metaphoric evocation of the taxidermist's desire for redemption.

Virgil

Virgil is the second of the two main characters in the taxidermist's play and, like Beatrice, is also a preserved animal in the taxidermist's shop. In both cases, Virgil is a howler monkey, portrayed as simultaneously energetic and anxious, imaginative and nervous. He too is named after a character in Dante's Inferno, in his case a representation of the Greek poet Virgil who takes the poem's narrator through a tour of Purgatory (i.e. a division of the Afterlife). As such, he seems to be a metaphoric evocation of the taxidermist's own experience of a personal, deeply troubled hell - or, more specifically, of the suffering of those whose experiences, the narrative suggests, the taxidermist was involved in.

The Boy

The Boy is the only living human character in the taxidermist's play. In his first appearance, as described in the play's stage directions, the Boy is cruelly responsible for the deaths of Beatrice and Virgil. Shortly afterwards, in an incident narrated by the taxidermist as background to the Boy's appearance in the play, the Boy is described as being a witness to, and peripherally involved in, the deaths of two women and their babies. In the aftermath of the telling of this story, Henry concludes that the taxidermist was, in his youth, the boy - or that at least he had similar experiences.

Gustav

Gustav is the other human character in the taxidermist's play, a dead body given the name Gustav by Virgil with the intention of humanizing him somewhat. His background and the cause of his death are never actually defined, but his presence is the trigger for discovery, by Beatrice and Virgil, of another way of talking about The Horrors.

The Women at the Pond

As the novel reaches its climax, the taxidermist tells a story that he says is background to the events of his play: Beatrice and Virgil, he says, witnessed the suicides of two women who chose to drown themselves and their babies in a village pond rather than face the probable tortures that awaited them at the hands of a group of male pursuers. The story of the women at the pond, and the boy's involvement in their deaths, is the main trigger for protagonist Henry to come to the conclusion that the taxidermist was involved, on some level and in some way, with the deaths of people like the women. The story, in Henry's perception and in the book, is ultimately a metaphor for the deaths of Jews and others at the hands of the Nazis during the Holocaust.

Symbols and Symbolism

The Holocaust

The Holocaust is the term used to refer to what happened to millions of Jews (and others, including homosexuals, gypsies, and the disabled) at the hands of the Nazis and their collaborators in World War II. Essentially, the Nazis espoused a philosophy and practice of racial and ethnic purity: they, under the leadership of Adolph Hitler, imprisoned, tortured, and executed people for no crime other than not fitting in with their ideals of what human beings should look like, behave like, or appear to be. Throughout the narrative, and in a variety of contexts, the Holocaust is referred to, both directly and through implication, as an example of a historic, factual event that could be used as a foundation or springboard for fictional narrative. Considerations and evocations of the Holocaust are at the center of the book's thematic exploration of the relationship between reality and fiction.

Animals

Animals are used as metaphors for human beings by both Henrys in their writing. Throughout the narrative, animals are referred to and developed as the central characters in fictional narratives. The successful first novel of protagonist Henry features animals which, in turn, leads the antagonist (the taxidermist) to reach out to him for help in writing his play, which also features animal characters. Scenes from, and conversations about, this play make up a substantial portion of the book's narrative action. In both cases, animals are anthropomorphic - that is, they behave in human ways and act out of human feelings, needs, and thoughts. In reference to his work with animals, Henry suggests that writing about animals frees both author and reader from preconceptions and expectations.

Henry's Manuscript

Henry's manuscript represents to him the embodiment of an idea that also propels the action of the novel: that an important historical event (such as the Holocaust, as discussed above) can, could, and perhaps should be used as a vehicle not just for recalling history, but also, if used as a foundation for non-fictional writing, it can become a vehicle for insight into, and understanding of, history and humanity in general. Henry is propelled into both a severe case of writer's block and an entirely new life when the manuscript of his second novel (half-fiction, half-non-fiction, entirely prose) is rejected by those who would potentially publish it and sell it.

The Taxidermist's Manuscript

By the time the novel reaches its conclusion, there is the sense that the taxidermist's manuscript represents an attempt at self-redemption for participating in acts of destruction and murder. The Taxidermist, also the novel's antagonist, struggles with the writing of his manuscript throughout the novel. Like Henry, the taxidermist's work contains elements of metaphorical examinations of the Holocaust. Also like Henry's first novel, the Taxidermist's manuscript features animals as central characters. Unlike Henry, the taxidermist's manuscript is a play, rather than prose. Also unlike Henry, the taxidermist's manuscript has a layer / level of personal importance.

The Greenhouse Players

This is the amateur theater company with which Henry becomes involved when he starts his new life after his manuscript is rejected. The name has significant metaphoric value: greenhouses are places where plants (sometimes delicate, sometimes requiring particular environmental conditions) are nurtured into full, healthy life. This relates to Henry in that he too needs nurturing into a full, healthy life: his participation in the theater company is part of that process for him.

The Taxidermist's Envelope

The Taxidermist's envelope and its contents can be seen as a symbolic doorway for Henry into both himself and deeper understanding of his personal and creative beliefs.

Early in the narrative, Henry receives an envelope from the taxidermist that contains three things: a short story by French novelist Gustav Flaubert; a scene from the taxidermist's play; and a note requesting Henry's help. The envelope and its contents represent an intriguing mystery to Henry that, as he investigates the envelope's contents further, draws him further into the meaning of those contents and also further into himself.

The Divine Comedy

The fact that the Taxidermists gets the names for his main characters from Dante's The Devine Comedy, metaphorically suggest that that play is, on some level, a similar guide through hell, a suggestion reinforced by various narrative elements, including Henry's deduction that the taxidermist was, in his youth, involved in some horrible, Nazi-related crimes.

The Divine Comedy is an epic poem written in the early 1300's by Italian poet Dante Alighieri. It is the story of a man (given the name and persona of the author) taken on a tour through hell and purgatory, guided by the poet Virgil, and then guided through

paradise by the beautiful Beatrice. The book, and more specifically these two characters, provide the names for the central characters in the taxidermist's play.

The Okapi

Because an okapi has an appearance that resembles a combination of zebra, antelope, and giraffe, there is a sense, throughout the narrative, that the reference to okapis is also a metaphoric reference to the kind of work that both the taxidermist and Henry are trying to accomplish - a combination, or hybrid, of fiction and non-fiction. A preserved okapi (a rare African animal) is in the window of the taxidermist's shop, and in fact gives the shop its name.

Pears

A key scene in the taxidermist's play involves Virgil's detailed, vivid description of a pear to Beatrice, who has never seen one. There are several metaphoric values to this: the qualities of a pear, as described by Virgil, can be seen as evoking hope, while the act of description of an object to someone who has never experienced it can be seen as paralleling a description of an event (such as the Holocaust) to someone who has never lived or experienced it.

The Horrors

In the book and the play, the term "The Horrors" can be seen as being metaphorically linked to "The Holocaust." Note the superficial visual resemblance between the words, as well as the implied meanings of both.

As part of the action of the taxidermist's play, characters Beatrice and Virgil struggle to find ways to refer to the suffering and tortures they have lived through. They eventually decide on "The Horrors," a term that, for them, sums up and encompasses everything that has happened to him.

The List (Sewing Kit)

The list can be seen as a concise summing up of the book's narrative and thematic interest in fictionalizing traumatizing and horrific non-fiction, such as the Holocaust: the list is, at its core, a group of ways in which that process of fictionalizing takes place for Beatrice and Virgil, and therefore are examples of how it can take place for other writers and readers.

As part of their struggle to find ways to talk about The Horrors, or perhaps as a result of that struggle, Beatrice and Virgil put together a list of all the ways they come up with, ways that are mostly metaphorical. They call the list their "sewing kit," in response to the fact that the country they live in is called The Shirt.

Settings

Canada

Protagonist Henry begins the story living in an unnamed city in his home country of Canada. The narrative portrays him as having had significant personal and professional success there, but as feeling he has to leave to start a new life in the aftermath of having his second manuscript rejected.

London

The British city of London - more specifically, a fancy restaurant in London - is the setting for one of the book's key scenes: the rejection of Henry's manuscript by those who had been interested in publishing and marketing it. There is a sense that, because London is such a world-recognized center for artistic achievement and exploration, the fact that this particularly life-shattering moment is set there gives the moment even more weight and impact.

The Unnamed City

In the aftermath of what happens in London, and as a result of his decision to move from Canada, Henry begins a new life in a city that is never named, but which is described in narration as “one of those great cities of the world that is a world unto itself … perhaps it was New York. Perhaps it was Paris. Perhaps it was Berlin” (21). The city is the broad-strokes setting for much of the novel's main action: there is a sense of it being European rather than North American, but this has more to do with a feeling associated with how it is described, rather than any actual details of its place and identity.

Okapi Taxidermy

Much of the book's portrayal of the relationship between Henry and the taxidermist is set in the taxidermist's shop, Okapi Taxidermy. There, surrounded by death reconstructed to look like life (i.e. stuffed animals), scenes between the two characters enact each character's individual struggle to come back to life in the aftermath of something inside them dying, and also to preserve something emotional, spiritual, or intellectual that had likewise died.

The Shirt

The action of the taxidermist's play is set in a country he calls The Shirt. It is a symbolic name that, on one level, evokes the universality of his story (in that shirts of one kind or

another are found in every country, in every society). On another level, and because of how The Shirt is described (as having vertical gray and white stripes), the name is also a metaphor for the experience of The Holocaust: prisoners kept in the various internment camps associated with The Holocaust wore uniforms made of fabric with blue and gray stripes.

Themes and Motifs

The Tension between Reality and Fiction

Over the course of the narrative, the work of three writers explores and develops the theme of the tensions between reality and fiction: the two writers whose intentions, actions, and struggles define the narrative's action, and the writer of the book, the author, who introduces this theme in the novel's earliest pages and then plays it out both in what he does and what his characters do. The point is not made to suggest that either Henry (the protagonist-writer) or the taxidermist (the antagonist-writer) is intended to be a surrogate for the author, although there are arguably similarities in the experience of both novel-writer and protagonist-writer. Rather, the point is made to suggest that there is a very clear narrative and thematic connection between authorial intention and the experience of the characters he has created. In any case, all three writers, in their own ways and for different reasons, are interested in how reality becomes fiction; could become fiction; and arguably should become fiction. All three use the specific example of the Holocaust as the vehicle for their explorations of this idea: that while non-fiction communicates facts, art and fiction communicate meaning, and offer opportunities for interpretation. Finally, all three use the Holocaust and its events as a foundation for imaginative, fictionalized narrative, and therefore as the vehicle for the exploration of this theme.

The questions raised by the novel-writer and the protagonist-writer are the same: is it not valid to use the events and context of the Holocaust as a springboard for other, fictionalized narratives that explore those same issues from a different, imagined, interpretive perspective? The action and content of the novel-writer's work suggests that it is valid; the experiences of the protagonist-writer suggest that while it may be valid, the use of Holocaust-as-springboard-is unacceptable (interestingly, the novel does not go deeply into questions of why: there is the clear sense that the reasons given by the publishers and booksellers whom Henry consults are excuses, rather than truths).

Meanwhile, the antagonist-writer, for his part, has what is arguably the most valid reason to explore this idea: if Henry's deductions are to be believed, the taxidermist was there. He was involved, or at least an observer, of the Holocaust-related events that he and the other writers are considering and writing about. Perhaps he writes what he does, in the way that he does, as an attempt at redemption; perhaps he is trying to heal; perhaps he is trying to apologize. In any case, his is the only example of all three writers who explores the book's example of reality-turned-fiction from a perspective of having LIVED it. The irony, of course, is that he and his experiences are the creation of the novel-writer, arguably a representation of the latter's main point in relation to this theme: that reality is there to be explored in whatever artistic way a creative feels inspired to follow. All this, in turn, relates to a sub-theme of this principal theme: an exploration of the nature and practice of art.

The Function and Practice of Art

In both its action and its thematic considerations, the narrative argues that art has two functions: the preservation of, or interpretation of, the past, of what has been lived and experienced. In the book, the primary manifestation of the former is in the work of the taxidermist, whose lengthy analysis of the process of taxidermy clearly suggests that there is an art to it – specifically, that of bringing to life that which is not, in fact, alive. His art, like all art, recreates life, distills life, and presents life's essence and core truths. The narrative's descriptions of the various animals preserved in his shop bear this out: the tigers seem prepared to spring, the other animals seem about to move in their individual, idiosyncratic ways. There is also the sense, in the taxidermist's description, that preserving and presenting the essence of the animal is part of his work and intention.

A secondary example is the efforts of protagonist-writer Henry to preserve the taxidermist's play. With his own writerly art, Henry preserves what the taxidermist has written simply because he seems to believe that it has value as something that has been created: his actions seem to suggest that art has intrinsic value simply because it was brought into being. His actions, in creating the "Games for Gustav," then take this particular exploration of this particular theme to the next level: in creating the "Games," he is interpreting both the taxidermist's art and his reality.

What's also interesting about the taxidermist's work is that it also moves to the next level: art's value as an interpreter of reality. Here, the primary example can be found in the narrative's description of the taxidermist's Beatrice and Virgil – the actual animals, not the characters in the play. Not only has the taxidermist preserved their physical realities, he is telling a story about those realities, the relationship between the two, in the way he has posed them. Here again, there is a variation on the primary theme: on how the physical, actual truths of the two animals are shaped into a fictionalized relationship that gives those truths additional layers of meaning. In other words, the taxidermist's work on the physical, actual Beatrice and Virgil embodies both aspects of the novel's consideration of the nature and practice of art.

Finding an Artistic Voice

As they explore the tension between reality and fiction, and as they define for themselves the function and practice of art, the struggle of the two artists in the story (Henry the protagonist-writer, the taxidermist / antagonist-writer) is the same: how to find, build on, and honor the individual artistic voice. At the beginning of the story, protagonist-writer Henry essentially has his voice taken away from him: on one level, the story as a whole is about his finding it again. "Games for Gustav," as narration comments, is Henry's first attempt in speaking artistically in the aftermath of feeling as though he had lost that voice. As the story progresses, he finds himself slowly drawn towards that new voice: his writings at the strong request of the taxidermist are steps in that direction. As for the antagonist-writer, the taxidermist, his initial appearances

suggest that while he has made a beginning in terms of finding his artistic voice, he has become stalled, and asks for help from someone (Henry, the protagonist-writer) whom he believes to have a similar voice, similar perspectives, and similar experiences: specifically, using animals as vehicles for artistic communication and exploration.

It is interesting to note that as Henry's story takes him in one direction (i.e. rediscovering his voice through the actions, and recreations, of another writer), the taxidermist's story takes him in another direction: into what seems to be his own personal truth. It is significant that the story of the women at the pond at the end of the book is not written or presented in the voice of either Beatrice or Virgil: the taxidermist tells the story himself. The clear implication, as Henry realizes, is that the taxidermist was there: it is his story, not theirs, reality not yet transformed into art. The taxidermist's artistic voice has been discovered: it has not yet been shaped. Henry has found his own artistic voice in a variation on someone else's.

It is also interesting to note that the beginning points for the individual journeys of both these writers can be seen as defined by similar experiences (i.e. loss of artistic voice), while the journeys themselves (along with those of other characters in the story) are likewise similarly defined (i.e. reconnecting with voice). All these parallels are part of the book's exploration of its fourth major theme: its consideration of fear and courage.

Fear and Courage

The final moments of the play within the novel – Beatrice and Virgil struggling to maintain courage within the fear of their impending deaths – embody and manifest the struggles of the book's two central characters. Both Henry and the taxidermist start their journeys through the story in a place of fear – specifically, the fear that their once-reliable writer / artist voices have abandoned them, and the artistic practices that have sustained and defined them are no longer available to them. As they both move through the story, and as they trigger and propel each other towards new artistic achievements and experiences, the courage to step forward wells up and they are able to eventually overcome these fears. For Henry, his newly found courage expands beyond the boundaries of his artistic experience: he discovers that he has the need and nerve to confront the taxidermist with what Henry sees as the truth – and what is an act of courage but an act of need entwined with nerve? This act of courage is met with a violent act of fear – the taxidermist's attempt to kill him which might have several specific motivations (the narrative is never explicit) but all of which (fear of being exposed, fear of being abandoned, fear of being condemned or ridiculed) spring from fright. But then the narrative raises another question: is his self-immolation in the fire that destroys his shop an act of fear or courage? The narrative is not clear. What is clear is that for Henry, the act of trying to recreate the taxidermist's play is an ultimate act of courage, in terms of both his own truth (artistic and otherwise) and adopting and exploring the taxidermist's.

There is one other enigmatic expression of the tension and relationship between fear and courage in the novel. While the action of the entire play-within-the novel is an

exploration of this tension (i.e. Beatrice and Virgil struggling to have the courage to move forward with their lives in the aftermath of the terrors they have experienced), it is the story of the women in the pond at the novel's conclusion that, most significantly, plays out on the knife-edge boundary between the two feelings. The taxidermist's narration of this moment (again, note that it is the taxidermist telling this story, not one of his characters) suggests that the women are afraid of what might happen to them and their babies if they are captured by the men, making the decision to end their own lives and those of their children in ways of their choosing. They live and die on their own terms rather than on the probably violent, possibly torturous terms of others (terms that are perhaps hinted at in Beatrice's story of being imprisoned and tortured). The taxidermist's telling of this story seems to hint at a belief that the women acted courageously, again within a context of overwhelming fear. The reader, however, might see their actions as giving in to fear, rather than facing it down. Ultimately, the moment is another ambivalence in a work that is full of moral, narrative shades of gray.

Giving Birth

In the middle of the darknesses and agonies, the fears and tortures that play out through both action and implication in this novel, there are vivid expressions of hope and possibility, birth and rebirth. Most of them are subtle and implied rather than overt, but they are there. The birth of Henry and Sarah's son is perhaps the most literal of these, but there are also births of art, births of artistic voice and creative inspiration, and births of new perspective that do not quite balance the cruelties but do suggest the potential for movement past them.

The true action of the novel begins from a desire for such rebirth: Henry's move to a new (and intriguingly un-named) city is a clear evocation of his desire to start again after the debacle of his failed book. The experiences he initially encounters there – the music lessons, the job in the café, the pets, the participation in the work of the appropriately named Greenhouse Theatre – are all outward manifestations of this internal drive towards new life, and all, in turn, trigger further steps forward. His experiences with the taxidermist, while on some level frightening and painful, might on some level be considered the metaphoric equivalent of labor pains, suffering that ultimately leads to the emergence of a new life. In that sense, it could very well be argued that in spite of the horrific content of "Games for Gustav," and as the narrative itself suggests, as Henry reintroduces himself to the art of fiction, he and his work as an artist are being reborn.

For his part, and in vivid contrast, the taxidermist initially seems to be more interested in death than in life. He claims to be preserving life in his art and work, but no matter what he does, the animals whose experience he recreates are never more than close to life. They are not born, or reborn: they are suspended in time. The writing of his play can be seen as an attempt at rebirth, or at least an attempt at creating something new and affirming out of something old and destructive – something alive out of something full of death. But there is a sense throughout the novel that the taxidermist's efforts are ultimately doomed to failure, because on some level, he himself is dead. Not in the sense of the body no longer functioning, but the way he is described (i.e. physical

appearance, attitude, voice) suggests that on some fundamental level he has already left life, spiritually and emotionally. Arguably, his attempt at artistic life in the play is an attempt to bring himself back to an inner life: his death at the end is, likewise arguably, is his body finally catching up with his mostly-departed spirit. If Henry is correct and the taxidermist was the boy at the pond watching the deaths of the women and their babies, the taxidermist's soul died a long time before the novel begins: everything he has done since has been an effort to re-liven and reclaim himself, an effort that ultimately ends in failure but, perhaps, the eventual relief of death and of finally letting go … certainly an ironic end, given that as a result of his death, both his work and the inheritor of that work – Henry – are given new life.

Styles

Point of View

The story is told from the third person limited point of view – that is, from the tightly focused perspective of protagonist Henry. In many ways, the style and focus of the piece might seem to lend itself to a first person approach, given that the narrative is so narrowly tied to the central character's perceptions, actions, and reactions: there is virtually no insight into other characters other than what is filtered through Henry's experiences, and interpretations of those experiences. This puts the reader in close emotional and intellectual proximity to the protagonist: not quite as close as first person narration might, but close enough for the reader to become effectively engaged with Henry's experiences and thought processes.

On the other hand, there are also several places where the book inserts narratives written from other points of view in the form of writing presented as the work of other authors. One such insertion is from the actual writings of novelist Gustave Flaubert – specifically, an excerpt from his story about Saint Julian. The point of view there is of a writer communicating a hagiography: the story of a saint, with all its implications of the miraculous presence, and transformative power, of God. Another, and more significant insertion (or series of insertions) is from the play-within-the novel – specifically, the play written by the taxidermist. The point of view here is that of an allegory, a narrative involving a particular line of action that is, in fact, an extended metaphor, or representation of something else. In the case of the taxidermist's play, the allegorical point of view is that of two anthropomorphic animals, each surviving horrific circumstances. The animals and their experiences are intended to be seen, by the reader if not by Henry, as a representation of the human suffering perpetrated during the Holocaust (that is, the genocidal slaughter of Jews and others by Nazis in World War II).

The book's thematic point of view, as suggested in early conflict between Henry and those who would publish and market his book and as enacted through the taxidermist's play, is that traumatic history in general, and the Holocaust in particular, is valid and effective fodder for explorations that go beyond the entirely literal, or non-fictional. Art, contends the book and its characters, can be used to explore the meaning of historical events, consideration of which (the book further contends) should not be limited to narratives of the actual events themselves.

Language and Meaning

There are several different layers to the use of language in this novel. The first is the language of the narrative, of the general storytelling in the primary narrative line - that is, the story of Henry and the taxidermist. The language and word usage here are fairly objective and analytical in quality: even moments of powerful emotional intensity have a certain quality of detachment about them, of reporting rather than inhabiting events.

This almost academic tone is established right from the book's opening paragraphs, and while there are occasionally dips into more immediacy and rawness (such as the description of Sarah's giving birth, or the deaths of Henry's pets), it remains generally consistent. What's particularly interesting about this stylistic choice is that it allows for the Holocaust-related horrors that the narrative occasionally describes to essentially speak for themselves: while the events are described in clear, evocative detail, there is little or no sense that the writing is intended to artificially intensify the reader's reaction.

Another layer of language usage is that of the taxidermist's play. Here there are two points to note: the fact that, like most plays, the story is communicated by dialogue; and the fact that, unlike most plays, both the dialogue and the stage directions have qualities of poetry that entwine with qualities of philosophical debate that make the language used by the characters seem more stylized than realistic, more formal than conversational.

A third layer of language and meaning actually provides the foundation for both the above layers, existing at the core of the book's function and purpose. This is the language of allegory, of words being used to describe one thing but evoke, hint at, or suggest another. Thus, for example, the description of the horrors suffered by Beatrice and Virgil (that is: of events in the story told by the taxidermist) and the description of the deaths of Erasmus and Mendelssohn (that is: of events in the story told about protagonist Henry) are both intended to evoke experiences of suffering and death in the Holocaust. In other words, the language of the piece asks the reader to think about what is being said, and how, rather than feel it, and to understand that everything is functioning on at least two levels of meaning (the narrative and the allegorical).

Structure

The primary point to note about the book's structure is that there are no chapters, no sections, no "parts": it is composed of a singular piece of narrative writing, with one exception. The last section, titled "Games for Gustav," serves as something of an epilogue and is set apart from the rest of the narrative visually, stylistically, and content-wise. There is a sense that this separation from the rest of the work highlights the epilogue's narrative values (i.e. as something separate from the main narrative, in some ways a product or end result of the story's events) and content (i.e. as something very different, emotionally and stylistically, from what has gone before). Up to that point, as noted, there has been no division of the narrative into any sort of formal units. There are certain places where a slight shift in focus is defined by a series of periods: for the most part, though, those semi-divisions (for lack of a better term) are used to emphasize moments or images, not to define the story by separations.

All that said, there is nevertheless a sense of forward, linear movement in the narrative. There are occasional flashbacks, and early in the book's expositional sections, there is a sense of moving back and forward in time. Specifically, early paragraphs refer to Henry's wife having a baby, an event that actually takes place a substantial distance into

the main story. For the most part, however, the narrative follows a single, fairly clear, forward line.

All of this builds to an extended scene of climax, in which Henry's pursuit of what he believes to be the taxidermist's truth leads to a verbal confrontation that, unexpectedly for Henry, becomes dangerously physical. The climax, in which the taxidermist stabs Henry, is arguably as much of a surprise for the reader as it is for Henry – a surprise, that is, in terms of what happens. It is less of a surprise in terms of what it reveals about the taxidermist's long-suspected beliefs, values, and intentions. Either way, it marks the novel's emotional and narrative high point, with the thematic high point (climax) following shortly after: this is the moment at which Henry writes (and presents) the "Games for Gustav" in which he does what he has claimed all along as his right as an artist: to use the Holocaust as a springboard for an act of imagination.

Quotes

… the encounter with a reader was a pleasure. After all, they'd read his book and it had an impact, otherwise why would they come up to him? The meeting had an intimate quality; two strangers were coming together, but to discuss an external matter, a faith object that had moved them both, so all barriers fell. This was no place for lies or bombast."
-- Narration (Part 1)

Importance: On one level, this quote from the novel's first page evokes the pleasure that protagonist Henry feels, and that would arguably be felt by any writer, at learning that his or her work has been received positively. On another level, the quite ironically foreshadows the meeting, later in the narrative, between the two central characters, a meeting that starts in much the same sort of spirit as the meeting described here, but which eventually leads into a relationship that's not much of a pleasure at all.

There are truths and there are lies – these are the transcendent categories, in books as in life. The useful division is between the fiction and nonfiction that speaks the truth and the fiction and nonfiction that utters lies."
-- Narration (Part 1)

Importance: This quote sets up one of the most significant conflicts of ideas in the book, as the relationship between the two central characters eventually, and climactically, becomes defined by question of what is a truth and what is a lie.

The human violence, then is directed by a moral compass, navigating Julian on a path of lesser evil in which, if there needs to be killing, it is better that those killed be culpable … and this, the use of the compass of morality in times of violence, made sense. Indeed, it is precisely at such times that it must be used."
-- Narration (Part 2)

Importance: This quote, a component of Henry's contemplations of the short story about Saint Julian, can also be seen as ironic commentary on the mass killings of the Holocaust (referred to earlier in narration). It can also be seen as ironic foreshadowing of further comments about the Holocaust and the killing it involved later in the story.

Slice a pear and you will find that its flesh is incandescent white. It glows with inner light. Those who carry a knife and a pear are never afraid of the dark.
-- Virgil (Part 2)

Importance: Virgil, one of the characters in the scene of the play sent to Henry, highlights the color and texture of a pear in his detailed description. This section of the description contains a line that Henry finds particularly memorable, and which triggers his interest in following up on the play further. In the context of the narrative as a whole, this particular part of the description can be seen as evocative of hope, of possibility, and of vision.

The okapi is an odd animal. It has the striped legs of a zebra, the body of a large, reddish-brown antelope, and the head and sloping shoulders of a giraffe, to which it is in fact related. Indeed, once you know the relationship, you can see it: an okapi looks like a short-necked giraffe, with only the striped legs and big, round ears appearing incongruous. It's a peaceable cud-chewer, shy and solitary …"
-- Narration (Part 3)

Importance: This description of an okapi refers primarily to the stuffed animal in the window of the shop where Henry encounters the taxidermist, but it can also be seen as metaphorically referring to the combination of personal characteristics in both Henry the writer and Henry the taxidermist. In other words, the odd mix of traits found in the okapi can be seen as paralleling a similarly odd mix of traits in the identities and characters of the two men.

It dawned on Henry with amazement: this is the help he wants. It's not a matter of encouragement, or confession, or connections. The help he wants is with words. Had the taxidermist made the request to Henry ahead of time in his letter, he would have refused, as he had refused writing commissions of all kinds for years. But here, in this setting, next to the very characters, in the fire of the moment, something in Henry woke up and yearned to rise to the challenge."
-- Narration (Part 4)

Importance: Here, narration portrays a key turning point in the narrative – the point at which Henry takes his uneasy, early-stages connection with the taxidermist to another level. There is a sense that his initial movement into further connection with the taxidermist is the result of his (Henry's) beginning to feel a "yearning" to move past his silence as a writer and at least begin to find his voice again.

The choice is usually between the theatrical or the neutral, between the animal in action or the animal at rest. Each choice conveys a different feel, the first of liveliness captured, the second of waiting. From that, we get two different taxidermic philosophies. In the first, the lifelines of the animal denies death, claims that time has merely stopped. In the second, the fact of death is accepted and the animal is simply waiting for time to end."
-- The Taxidermist (Part 4)

Importance: This section of the taxidermist's extended written commentary on his work identifies a key perspective on his work that also foreshadows a key aspect of his goals and values as revealed later in the narrative: his determination to keep the stories he tells, and portrays, as alive as possible.

He was an old man. An old man stooped over a sink, working. Did he have a wife, children? His fingers were bare of rings, but that could be because of the nature of his work. A widower? Henry looked at the man's face in profile. What was beyond that blankness? Loneliness? Worry? Frustrated ambition?"
-- Narration (Part 4)

Importance: In this quote, narration describes how Henry's consideration of the taxidermist moves to a different level, considering him more as a human being.

Sarah had long ago lost interest in the Holocaust, or at least in his creative involvement with it. And she was wrong. It wasn't that he saw the Holocaust in everything. It's that he saw everything in the Holocaust …"
-- Narration (Part 5)

Importance: In this reference to Henry's artistic and creative priorities, this quote also refers to one of the book's central thematic questions: whether it's appropriate to draw upon the Holocaust as a source of inspiration for fiction.

… the taxidermist just wasn't a man you laughed at or with. The air around him, the expression on his face, sucked the life out of laughter.
-- Narration (Part 6)

Importance: This quote sums up the intensity of the taxidermist's negativity and powerful presence, an aspect of his character and identity that the book seems to explain later in the narrative.

Someone is dying and as they are dying they grab at the red cloth of suffering and they pull and tear at it and nothing before in their life has involved them so completely … so the cloth becomes everything they see and feel … until the red cloth chokes them and they breathe their last, at which moment the cloth, as if pulled by a magician, vanishes, and there is only a body left, surrounded by people whose very pulsing being has made them incapable of seeing the cloth …"
-- Virgil (Part 7)

Importance: This is the first part of an important speech in the taxidermist's play, a metaphoric exploration of how suffering and pain can become overwhelming and dominating in someone's life. There is a sense of metaphorical echo here, in relation to Henry's experience of losing his drive to write, and also of the experiences of Beatrice and Virgil in the taxidermist's play.

Over the course of the next twenty-four hours, [Sarah] was reduced to a mucky animal who, after many pants, whimpers and screams, excreted from her body a pound of flesh, as the expression goes, that was red, wrinkled and slimy. The event couldn't have been more animal-like if the two of them had been in a muddy pen grunting. The thing produced, weakly gesticulating, looked half-simian, half-alien. Yet the call to Henry's humanity couldn't have been louder or more radical."
-- Narration (Part 7)

Importance: In its description of Sarah's process of giving birth, narration draws a connection, or contrast, between her humanity and the animalistic aspects of the experience of giving birth. There is a sense here of an ironic parallel with the characters of Beatrice and Virgil: where Sarah is a human who becomes more animalistic, Beatrice and Virgil are two animals who are essentially human. The reference to the simian-like

nature of the baby has a particularly significant resonance: “simian” is a term generally synonymous with ape.

Here was irrefutable proof that [the taxidermist] was using the Holocaust to speak of the extermination of animal life. Doomed creatures that could not speak for themselves were being given the voice of a most articulate people who had been similarly doomed. He was seeing the tragic fate of animals through the tragic fate of Jews. The Holocaust as allegory.
-- Narration (Parr 7)

Importance: This quote sums up the core of Henry’s realizations about the nature and intention of the taxidermist’s play. It also sums up, through the use of a specific example, one of the book’s central thematic contentions: that explorations of, and the meaning of, a catastrophic event like the Holocaust should not be limited to purely non-fictional narrative.

There was silence, that silence the taxidermist was so comfortable with, in person and in his writing, that silence in which things can grow or rot.”
-- Narration (Part 8)

Importance: This silence metaphorically evokes a silence that can come into existence in the aftermath of a small-scale horrific event, like that experienced by Beatrice and Virgil. The thematically relevant implication here is that there can also be a kind of silence about a larger scale event like the Holocaust if, as Henry and the book suggests, there are limits placed on how such an event can be discussed.

Game Number One: Your ten-year old son is speaking to you. He says he has found a way of obtaining some potatoes to feed your starving family. If he is caught, he will be killed. Do you let him go? … Game Number Seven: Your daughter is clearly dead. If you step on her head, you can reach higher, where the air is better. Do you step on your daughter’s head? … Game Number Twelve: A doctor is speaking to you. ‘This pill will erase your memory. You will forget all your suffering and all your loss. But you will also forget your entire past.’ Do you swallow the pill?
-- Narration (Henry) (Epilogue)

Importance: These are three of the twelve “Games for Gustav” written by Henry in the aftermath of the destruction of the taxidermist’s shop. Each of the twelve total games poses a similar painful dilemma to those listed here. There is the clear sense, in the context of the book as a whole, that these “games” are echoes of actual circumstances experienced by those caught up in the Holocaust. They are also, as narration comments, Henry’s first piece of fiction writing in years, all of which means that the “games” also evoke the book’s overall thematic interest in the tension / relationship between reality and fiction.