

Christ Stopped at Eboli Study Guide

Christ Stopped at Eboli by Carlo Levi

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Plot Summary

Christ Stopped at Eboli, is not, as the title may suggest, about Jesus Christ. It is instead the story of a year (1935-6) that the author, Carlo Levi, spent in a small southern Italian town named Gagliano, which is located in the province of Lucania. Levi is a political prisoner of the Italian Fascist regime and Gagliano is one of the small towns the regime uses as place of exile.

Levi's year is not particularly exciting, and in fact not much happens. One would expect that being the political prisoner of Italian fascism to be a nightmare, but it is not for Levi. Instead, Levi is treated fairly well, and mostly ignored, so long as he stays within a small geographic area.

Fascism, in many ways, is not the subject of the book. It is instead the story of a man of "culture," thoroughly integrated into the thought and culture of the 20th century living in a town that time and civilization forgot. The main theme of the book is Levi's portrait of the townspeople, how they are distinctly and shockingly unmodern, and how they are so ruthlessly oppressed by almost every force around them that they have quietly acquiesced to a continual, unyielding, and cruel fatalism.

One might argue that the point of the book is to expose the 'national greatness' of the Fascist regime. But still, that is not the point. Gagliano's citizens do not hate fascism or resent it; they are largely indifferent to it. They see fascism as just one more political fad in Rome that will have little effect on their lives. Levi notes that they reacted this way to practically any kind of regime. In any case, the citizens of Gagliano see the State itself as alien. This theme is brought out particularly strongly by Levi, who is an anarchist, engaged in Far Left European politics. Yet the book is not often ideological.

The people of Gagliano are forsaken. The title of the book refers to a saying in Gagliano: "Christ stopped short of here, at Eboli." The people of Gagliano regard themselves as being "bypassed by Christianity, by morality, by history itself." They are excluded from human history because they have never been a part of it. The only event that animates the Gaglianoans are the spats of "brigandage" in the mid-19th century, where grassroots Italian brigands fought against the emerging Italian state. The brigands lost, and the Gaglianoans were on the losing side. Only in this war did the Gaglianoans find they had a stake in the outcome because they stood to retain control over their own destiny; they did not even speak of World War I - the brigand wars mattered much more.

Christ Stopped at Eboli then is the story of a people that have not taken part in history and most of it is composed of character sketches and minor plot events. Yet the book as a whole leaves the reader with a sense of a people and a culture radically distinct from our own, shockingly indifferent, stuck in a millennia-old malaise. It is a portrait of the life of the oppressed and powerless, the structure of their world and thought and the ways in which they find meaning.



Chapters 1 - 3

Chapters 1 - 3 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 1

The book opens with the line, "Many years have gone by, years of war and of what men call History." The phrase "what men call History" brings out the central theme of the book. Levi takes the reader to Gagliano, the town in another world "hedged in by custom and sorrow, cut off from History and the State, eternally patient, to that land without comfort or solace, where the peasant lives out his motionless civilization on barren ground in remote poverty, and in the presence of death" (1). The citizens of Gagliano refer to themselves as "Christians" but this means merely being human. For they have a saying, "Christ stopped short of here, at Eboli" to communicate their being cut off from Christianity and everything else that is tied to Western civilization. "No message, human or divine, has reached this stubborn poverty" Levi writes. And the point of the book is to describe this people beyond history, politics, religion, the individual soul, reason, and history.

Chapter 2

The chapter opens with Don Carlo's (the author) arrival in Gagliano in August. He had just received orders to be removed from Grassano, a larger town in the same Italian province of Grassano. Levi despaired at the prospect of being stuck in so small a town for what he expects to be a three year sentence. Levi describes the path of travel from Grassano to Gagliano and bids Grassano farewell. His first impression of Gagliano is that it wasn't a town at all, just a clump of white house although he later finds to have missed part of town over a hill. Levi feels more trapped in Gagliano than he would in a prison cell because of its normalcy; prison cells have a certain romance to them.

Levi is unloaded from the police car and describes the layout of the city. He is greeted by a clerk who takes him to stay with his sister-in-law, a widow, until he finds his own room. The room was disgustingly filthy and covered with flies. After a brief time, there is a knock at the door; several peasants want to meet Don Carlo, who they understand is a doctor. Levi informs the reader that he has not practiced medicine in a long time, however. They take him to a patient who has fallen off of a horse, but Don Carlo can do nothing. He had had a malaria attack, and he could not survive. The town is full of malaria, so this is not uncommon.

Chapter 3

Gagliano has two sides - Upper and Lower. One side of Lower Gagliano has houses; the other a low wall over a cliff called the "Fossa del Bersagliere," named after an event in the brigand wars. The mayor recognizes Levi and comes over. The Mayor, "Professor" Luigi Magalone, was an overweight young man, an elementary school



teacher. His job was to watch the political prisoners in town; Levi notes the eagerness with which he performs this job. He is particularly eager to express his loyalty to Fascism. Don Carlo is forbidden from speaking with the other political prisoners. The mayor "Don Luigi" flatters Don Carlo as a gentleman. Levi speaks to him of the coming war in Abyssinia and not to trust the villagers.

Don Luigi encourages Don Carlo to practice medicine. The official doctor is Don Luigi's uncle, Dr. Milillo. He is slightly under seventy and a good man grown old. The doctor no longer knows anything of medicine, in Levi's opinion. By night, the town gentry are introducing themselves to Don Carlo. The other town doctor is the mayor's enemy and also an elderly man by the name of Dr. Gibilisco. He complains to Carlo about the peasants and how they do not use the doctors when they are sick. Dr. Gibilisco, in Carlo's opinion, also knows nothing about medicine. This is probably why the townspeople do not use him, because he does not make them better. Still the peasants could try, but they did not, and so they often died by malaria. Carlo then describes the carabinieri (national military and civilian police) sergeant. He continues to describe townspeople. The main point of this chapter is to meet many of the town characters. Some of these characters are only part of the background, but others are important later on.



Chapters 4 - 5

Chapters 4 - 5 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 4

Carlo's first impression of the time is how much the townspeople hate and resent one another and how transparent they are about it. Most of the men of means left the town, leaving only people who could not escape. This converted boredom into hatred. Carlo moves to describing his time in Grassano briefly and his mentor, the head of the Fascist militia in town, Lieutenant Decunto. The Lieutenant had brought Carlo from a prison in Rome. The Lieutenant complained about life in Grassano to Carlo constantly and spoke of how he must leave, even if it is to the coming war in Africa.

Carlo uses the Lieutenant's despair and hatred to illustrate a general theme. Because people in Lucania generally and Gagliano specifically feel so alienated from the world, they become caught up in the only things they can affect - each other. This produces great bitterness and resentment, which is passed on from generation to generation. For this reason, the Lieutenant is desperate to escape to war in Africa. He wants his life to be about something more. The Lieutenant tells Carlo about his family's history, stretching back to the brigand wars. He lives it as if that long ago war were from his own lifetime, because he, like so many others in Lucania, only remembers or cares about those events where he or those he knew mattered.

Carlo notes that a silent war between the gentry extends throughout every village in Lucania. The upper classes cannot keep the young men around. Many emigrate to America, like many of the peasants. Some go to Naples or Rome, but none come back. Those left in the villages have no means or abilities that could help them to leave.

Chapter 5

The townspeople never bother to expand or move their city, to seek cures for malaria, and they have anxious and unhappy characters. Eventually a young red-headed man enters the room. He is a tax collector and came to Gagliano to collect his due. Carlo mentions that back in Grassano he had roommates as well. Carlo's roommate returns home, complaining that the peasants have no assets to seize. They have too much debt, malaria, and no food.



Chapters 6 - 7

Chapters 6 - 7 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 6

Carlo must treat women and children who have the typical symptoms of malaria. After he finishes he goes for a walk, to the limits of where he is allowed to stray. He finds the town priest attempting to get some town boys to leave the church who were harassing him. He begins to complain to Carlo about the lack of religion in Gagliano, about how they're not baptized and how they never tithe. The priest's name is Don Giuseppe Trajella, a thin old man who was once a seminary professor until an affair with a woman got him exiled to Gagliano. He was hated by many in the village, in part because he's a drunk. Carlo regrets that they still hold this against Don Tralleja, he sees that Don Tralleja was once a good and smart man. Don Tralleja does not handle his exile well, however, and appears to almost enjoy making himself miserable.

Don Tralleja uses a small, old church since the former town church, the church of Madonna of the Angels, was covered in a landslide. Eventually Carlo leaves and walks through town, some of which he notes belong to "Americans," peasants who emigrated to American and then came back to town. He then transitions into a long description of the town and its outskirts, eventually reaching the boundary beyond which he was not allowed to pass and turns back. He notes that much of the town has been aversely affected by the State's economic policies. Carlo encounters an elderly man blowing air into a goat carcass to preserve its shape to make a flask, a man named Carnovale who attempts to find Carlo lodging. The house is fairly impressive but neglected. But Carlo likes it better than the widow's place and takes Carnovale's offer. Carlo ends the chapter by telling briefly the story of two of the communist prisoners in the village.

Chapter 7

That afternoon, the mayor takes Carlo to meet his sister, Donna Caterina Magelone Cuscianna. She was about 30, small, stout and possessing an "intense" look about her. She feeds Carlo and promises him a servant. She begins to talk about her own petty hatreds, particularly of Dr. Gibilisco and his two nieces. Donna Caterina sees Carlo as a god-send, as a chance to exact revenge on her enemies. He describes her as intelligent and basically as running the town. She did not care about Fascism. Instead, she wants to ally with Carlo as he practices medicine and promises to mollify Don Luigi so that Carlo has more freedom. Carlo then goes onto describe the history of Donna Caterian's hatred of the Gibiliscos, a hatred a century old. It turns out she believes the Gibiliscos arranged an affair with her husband, Nicola, and intended to poison her so that one of the nieces could marry Nicola. Apparently Donna Caterina handles her husband effectively. She removes all his arrogance and constantly accuses him of murder, adultery, and refuses to sleep with him. Eventually her husband escapes to the war with Abyssinia, hoping to win back her love with extra pay and honor. As Donna Caterina



tells her story, her father-in-law, Don Pasquale Cuscianna walks up. He was a schoolteacher before he retired and was respected around town, although in his retirement he mostly slept, ate and walked around town. In the next few moments, two dark "stocky and plump" young, twenty-something women run inside. Their names are Margherita and Maria, Dr. Millilo's daughters. They were to be introduced to Carlo. Donna Caterina begins to speak of Carlo's medical skill and attempts to secure him the approval of Dr. Millilo, such that Carlo may freely practice medicine. Dr. Millilo lectures him on the medical customs for pay and service in the village.



Chapters 8 - 9

Chapters 8 - 9 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 8

Carlo stays in the widow's house three weeks waiting for another place, while the summer is at its height. Carlo watches the weather and the townspeople, describing them in relaxed tones. He notes that the townspeople think there is something satanic about goats, but it has nothing to do with Christianity. Animals just have spiritual powers - the goat is the symbol of the ancient "satyr." Carlo begins to make his way to the cemetery on a walk. He spends a great deal of time here and falls asleep.

Carlo wakes up to an old man speaking to him, a man almost ninety, with no teeth, whose appearance is timeless and whose face looks like a "dried-up apple." Carlo begins to have a conversation with the man, but the man is near incomprehensible, and Carlo is never sure if the man is listening to him. He is the town gravedigger. But he is regarded as much more by the townspeople. He is seen as having "another existence" and having a "dark, impenetrable power." The man was thought to be able to call up spirits and control animals. He once tamed wolves. The man makes a strange remark to Carlo, one which Carlo takes to have significance: "The village is built of the bones of the dead." Carlo initially does not know what this means, but the man cannot explain it to him. It turns out that the village is actually built partly on bones and tombs, such that human bones often turn up when the town digs into the ground.

Chapter 9

Carlo also goes to the cemetery to paint. The old man watches him. Don Luigi comes by to look at him, so does the sergeant. They eventually tacitly allow him to go beyond his geographical limits to paint other scenes. This was due to Donna Caterina's efforts. Don Luigi calls a gathering for everyone to come to the town square at ten the next day and listen to a radio announcement from the government. Carlo notes that the gentry were all members of the Fascist party, which to them simply meant Power. No one there really had any ideology because they didn't see the point. They were practically from another planet. Ideology and the like was the affair of "the fellows in Rome." The townspeople simply exclaim that "the fellows in Rome don't want us to live like human beings." A phrase they often say to Carlo: "too bad! Someone had it in for you." This communicates to him that he is part of their powerless fate.



Chapters 10 - 11

Chapters 10 - 11 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 10

Carlo continues to practice medicine and gets to know many peasants this way. The practice makes him anxious, however, as he has no books or tools to help him. Carlo has a brief visit from his sister. She is brought to him in a car, the property of an "American" mechanic in town. The car was available for public use for a small fee.

Carlo's sister is a shock to the townspeople, as she is a woman from the city. Home seems foreign to Carlo now. His sister gives him news, and they speak of many things. But his sister's life seems foreign to him. The peasants look on people from the north almost as "foreign gods." Carlo's sister was shocked by the poverty of Matera and more shocked by Gagliano. She tells him the story of her time in Matera, how the town officials told her there was no malaria around. She is also a physician and spoke of finding a near "infinite" number of sick, impoverished children for whom she could do nothing. Carlo puts his sister up in one of the communist prisoner's spare rooms. What is most shocking to Carlo's sister is that no one cares to make anything better. But Carlo tells us that things are more complicated here than what a few social programs can fix. The chapter ends as his sister leaves.

Chapter 11

Carlo's sister leaves him with lots of books, medicine, etc. There were few illnesses at the time, so Carlo spends his days doing other things. To his surprise, he was able to cure many of the townspeople, although he didn't know how this happened. Carlo goes to see Don Trajella, who has intestinal hemorrhages.

In this chapter, Carlo finally finds a house. The priest prior to Don Trajella had built the place by the old church. The house is out of the way of the mayor and his disciples, much to Carlo's approval. Carlo's house belonged to the priest's heir, Don Rocco Macioppi. He was a fairly simple, middle-aged man and landlord. He shared title with his niece, Donna Maria Maddalena, an unmarried woman of twenty-five.

Carlo receives a package of books. But Don Luigi must inspect them. Carlo continues to settle into his house and starts to look for a woman to clean, fetch water, and cook. Donna Caterina has the responsibility of finding him someone. It is apparently hard to find someone to help Carlo, as he is a single man. The people of Gagliano have a custom where a woman is not to be alone with a man other than her husband for any reason. The Gaglianoans believe that sex can overpower a man and woman, such that they cannot control themselves.

Carlo notes that the town is run by women because the strong men have emigrated to America. Once the men leave, they rarely stay in touch with their wives. Carlo notes that



Gagliano has twelve hundred inhabitants, but there are two-thousand men in America from Gagliano. It no longer matters who the father of a woman's children is because they the women rule the town.

The only women that can help Carlo are those exempt from the town custom, women who were not really prostitutes but were known to be easy. Gagliano had twenty of these women. The one who comes to aide Carlo is Giulia Venere. She is forty-one years old and has had seventeen pregnancies with fifteen different men. Most of her children had died at an early age. She was tall and shapely; when she was young, Carlo notes, she must have been pretty. He tells us that she had a "cold sensuality, hidden irony, natural cruelty, impenetrable ill-humor and an immense passive power ...". She aided Carlo gladly and could help him acquire what he needed. Her house was near Carlo's as well, where she slept with her most recent lover, the young albino barber. From this time forward, to a large degree, his daily companions are only Giulia and his dog, Barone.



Chapters 12 - 13

Chapters 12 - 13 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 12

The chapter opens in September and autumn. Carlo describes the beginnings of the change in the landscape. Along the valley is Giulia's town, Sant' Arcangelo. He recounts the local legend of its founding. The townspeople believe that there is no real division between the human world and that of animals and monsters. All creatures in Gagliano have a dual nature. The town, for instance, believes the some of the town's men are werewolves. The dual nature is tarrying but also creates a sense of respect, as if it had a divine element. This leads Carlo to tell us that the townspeople greatly respect Barone, treating him as a "heraldic animal," and Carlo tells us how he came to have Barone.

Barone's origin is a mystery. Some railroad employees found him on a train between Naples and Taranto. Barone was handed from person to person until the dog reached Grassano and was given to Carlo as a parting gift. It is not clear what breed Barone is, perhaps a cross between poodle and sheep dog. Apparently both Barone and Carlo have the dual nature of being half baron, half lion. In fact, the peasants regard everything as having a double meaning. The only things without them are "reason, religion and history." Religion really has no unique place in Gagliano, as everything participates in the divine - Jesus and the goat. Carlo illustrates this with a story about a local feast day of the Virgin Mary. The town has a procession, where the Madonna is carried around town. But rather than cheer her, the towns people have a bizarre reaction to this jet black statue. The townspeople became mad and hypnotized. The animals made noise and so did the children. The women sang. The Madonna was not the mother of God but a "subterranean deity ... a peasant Persephone."

Chapter 13

Rain does not follow the procession, as hoped. The Madonna was unresponsive. The peasantry, Carlo tells us, see her as beyond good and evil. Carlo has now been in most of the peasant's houses and notes that she is not the only "guardian angel." In each house there is a symbol of the Madonna and a print of merican President Franklin Roosevelt. No one else's picture was ever displayed, not even the Duce (Mussolini). Carlo saw them as the two forces dividing the universe of the people of Gagliano.

Rome doesn't mean much to the townspeople; Naples is closer to a capital for these people, as Naples is also impoverished. The capital of the poor is America. Carlo tells the story of the "Americans" in Gagliano, who come back for a visit but often get trapped in a marriage or financial scheme and never return. The "Americans" as a result can't be distinguished from the others villagers. The cause of most of their return was the stock market crash in 1929 and high unemployment. For some reason, the economy was



better in Italy at the time, so they often returned. Carlo tells us of an "American" barber just in this situation, who had his own shop and four assistants in America. Another "American" was a large, stubborn, gold-toothed man named Faccialorda (Dirty Face). He had come back from America with some money, and while he lost some of it on a land deal gone bad, he still lived well. He made his money due to a work injury in his mining job, which he eventually parlayed into a workman's compensation pay out. He pretended to be deaf to fool the doctors and his employers, and he eventually convinced them. He did not regret getting money in this way at all. Faccialorda was proud because he had fooled the smart American. And in Carlo's words, "He felt that he was a defender of the poor, whom God had rewarded for his struggle against their enemy, the State." Carlo describes a third "American" named Saracino with a similar story.

Carlo ends the chapter by telling us that the people of Gagliano often use American tools and weights and measures. They took whatever they could from New York and did not let American culture interrupt their ancient mode of life. They never received anything from Rome however, but taxes and speeches.



Chapters 14 - 16

Chapters 14 - 16 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 14

October begins and so has Italy's war with Abyssinia. The peasants care little for the war, regardless of the number of speeches Don Luigi makes. Don Luigi and the sergeant spoke so highly of the government in Rome that the peasants didn't believe them. The fellows in Rome had no relation to them except as distant oppressors. The people of Gagliano certainly didn't think they had any interest in this war. They'd prefer that the government build a dam or a bridge. The people of Gagliano did once care about a war, though, the Brigand wars that ended in 1865. Yet everyone spoke as if they remembered it. The brigands were roving bands attempting to oppose Italian unification, committing ruthless and violent crimes along the way. But the peasants understood it differently. Brigandage was a revolt against their fate of being oppressed, a revolt they knew they must lose but yearned to fight anyway. The oppression has built up a horrible rage which springs from the desire for justice but becomes something dark.

Chapter 15

The brigands, along with many other past peoples of the area, left many treasures in the ground. One day, Lasala, a carpenter, brought Carlo some old brigand treasure so that he could see it for himself. The legend in Gagliano is that one can be led to brigand treasure but only under special circumstances. Carlo tells a story as illustration. Apparently the stories are related to the local legend of gnomes, small drawfish people who do not do evil but instead are constant pests. Catching one leads to gold. Carlo tells us of Carmelo, a husky, twenty-something day-laborer who once saw a gnome with a fellow worker. They attempt to catch him with the help of an engineer and foreman but fail. This is one among other legends which continue to illustrate the mythology of the town.

Chapter 16

Carlo's life of painting and medicine continues; he avoids getting pulled into conflicts between the gentry. October was over, and Carlo paints some of the younger boys in town. He asks Giulia to pose for him, but she refuses. People in Gagliano believe that if you allow yourself to be painted or photographed that you lose part of yourself to the image. Carlo knows that Giulia loves to be dominated and so he threatens her and beats her a bit. She was happy when she was dominated. She submits to being painted. The days past without much variation. Giulia teaches him about potions and love spells.



Chapters 17 - 18

Chapters 17 - 18 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 17

The chapter opens with a letter from Matera. Carlo is to be allowed holiday in Grassano to be allowed to complete some paintings. The trip to Grassano pleases Carlo and brings back to him a sense of life from the end of his extended solitude. Carlo describes the trip to Grassano in detail. He ends up at the door of Prisco's inn and is greeted by Prisco, a strong, boisterous, cheerful man of fifty years. His wife was gentle, quiet, and tall. They have several children together. Their oldest son is called by a nickname, "Capitano" because he leads the other boys. He is about thirteen or fourteen. Carlo notes that the peasants of Grassano are as poor as those in Gagliano, but in Grassano there was a large middle class of skilled laborers. It changed the feel of the village. Many in Grassano argued over why Carlo was transferred, with some groups accusing others of sending anonymous letters to the authorities. Carlo takes a stroll and begins to describe the town. Prisco and Carlo briefly discuss a business venture, but a friend tells Carlo it won't work. The day ends and the following day they travel down to a place where Carlo can paint Grassano. Several people go with him. It begins just before Carlo finishes.

Chapter 18

The people of Grassano are visited by a small acting troupe. They are a single family, a father, mother, two daughters, their husbands and some relatives. They are Sicilian. When the father discovers Carlo paints, they ask him to make new scenery. Carlo proceeds to describe how Grassano effectively fights malaria due to the efforts of their mayor, Dr. Zagarella, a physician. In Lacciana, malaria is a major problem. This affects production, weakening people and destroying their savings. It continues to compound the poverty of the area, making the treatment of malaria relatively more expensive.

We are introduced to a common game known as Passatella, a favorite game of peasants. It is basically a competition of speeches containing insults for another player. Then cards are played to determine the "King" of passatella and his assistant. The King controls the wine and can control who drinks it. So can the assistant. They have to justify their choices. Cards and wine-drinking lasts for hours until players are so hurt, upset and drunk that things get tense and sometimes a fight develops. The carpenter's wife, Margherita, does Carlo's washing and cleaning. She is a well-educated woman for the town, with a fifth grade education, and remembers all the things she learned. Carlo tells the tragic story of how she lost her third son and how the Madonna helped to save him only to have the child die at age six falling down some stairs.

Our attention is turned back to the acting troupe, who is now performing their play. The peasants took great interest in the performance. The play subtly represents a conflict

between peasants and the classes that oppress them, as one of their rank becomes a literary figure. The chapter ends with Carlo and a journalist from New York named Signor Orlando discussing the hopeless prospects for improving the area. One morning Carlo's vacation ends and he rides in the car back to Gagliano.



Chapters 19 - 20

Chapters 19 - 20 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 19

Carlo returns to Gagliano as winter approaches. One night the town crier announces that the pig doctor is coming the next day. All the women bring their pigs to the town square the next day and the pig doctor, a tall, red haired man with a mustache, castrates them all. He is impressively efficient and skillful. None of the pigs die later from infection.

The sergeant is transferred out of town and his successor is quite different - young, blond and blue-eyed. This was his first post. He is shocked by the dishonesty in town. Don Cosimino has begun to give mail directly to the political prisoners, without running it by the censors in Matera. But the censorship rules change and Don Luigi is given the authority to read the mail. Carlo notes that this brings one new political prisoner a great deal of trouble.

Chapter 20

We are now in December. The village children are playing an instrument named the "cupo-cupo" - made of a saucepan and tin can covered with stretched skin like a drum. Carlo notes that around Christmas there is an ancient custom that the poor give gifts to the rich. So Carlo is showered with gifts, which he tries to refuse.

Don Luigi allows Carlo to stay out later to go to midnight mass, along with the other prisoners. The townspeople are waiting for Don Trajella, but he can't be found. After a half-hour Don Trajella shows up and opens the Church door. After a brief liturgy, he gives a rambling homily. He clearly hasn't written one and appears to be drunk. Don Luigi begins to shout him down for being drunk, but Don Tralleja continues. He claims to have forgotten his sermon at home. As Don Luigi yells, Don Tralleja kneels in front of the crucifix to pray and begs Christ for rescue. But he then finds a letter from a villager serving in the Abyssinian war. The letter simply wished many of the townspeople well. But the sermon is drowned out by Don Luigi and other Fascists singing songs over Don Tralleja like a popular tune called "Little Black Face" and the Fascist anthem Giovinezza. The peasants didn't follow him.

Afterwards, Don Luigi seizes the opportunity to get rid of Don Tralleja. Don Luigi reports the priest to the bishop, and the bishop sends Don Tralleja back to Gaglianello and forbid him from returning to Gagliano. On Christmas Day, Carlo waits for Giulia to come by and teach him spells that can only be spoken on Christmas Day. The year, 1935, ends, but begins, oddly, with a solar eclipse.



Chapters 21 - 22

Chapters 21 - 22 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 21

The eclipse represented the poison gas massacres in the war. The villagers believe no sin goes unpunished. Carlo often sees the peasant children and paints them. A ten-year old boy named Giovanni Fanelli tries to mimic Carlo's painting. Carlo thinks that his paintings, while primitive, were charming. All the boys were poor, thin and usually had malaria. He goes on to briefly describe some of the other children. Carlo notes that these children are unusual, that they have a bit of animal spirit to them and are quite mature for their age. They begged Carlo to teach them to write. Carlo notes his aversion to teaching and didn't give him them as much time and attention as he now wishes he had.

Chapter 22

Spring is not far away. Carlo dreads the return of Malaria and tries to get Don Luigi to do something about it, but Don Luigi has no intention of doing so. Carlo then writes a memorandum to the mayor about what must be done and Don Luigi said he would shoot it to the prefect in Matera. The police in Matera, however, forbid Carlo from practicing medicine in Gagliano, or he will go to prison. The peasants are furious.

Carlo is later asked to aid a man in the Bog who is dying of appendicitis. Carlo could not help him when he got there and the man died. The villagers did not blame Carlo, however. When Carlo returns to Gagliano, everyone knew about the man who died. They blame the man's death on the ban on Carlo's practice. They are furious and tell Carlo "We're dogs and in Rome they want us to die like dogs. One Christian soul took pity on us, and now they want to take him away. We'll burn the town hall and kill the mayor." Revolt rises in people's minds and the old, ancient anger that stems from millennia of oppression springs up. Carlo notes that on that day he could have led a brigand-style revolt. He calms the townspeople and the next day they circulate a petition on his behalf. But Carlo tells them it will do no good because the Fascist government is lawless. In a few days, some men come to Carlo's house and ask for his white doctor's coat. It turns out that they are actors and put on the play of the man with appendicitis. They represented the State as a horrible Roman man who eviscerated the sick peasant.



Chapter 23

Chapter 23 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 23

The peasants remain angry and bitter. They ignore the ban and come to Carlo's house cautiously. But Carlo can only give advice and distribute medicines in stock. As he is unable to practice, the other doctors practice in his place, but they are incompetent. Carlo recounts one story of this incompetence. Giulia suggests that Carlo simply heal through sorcery, as she has taught him the relevant spells. Carlo then digresses into a discussion of the uses of magic in the village, particularly of the phrase "abracadabra". They have spells to cure everything. But Carlo continues to use medicine in secret and avoids magic altogether.

Giulia's husband had gone to Argentina years ago with her oldest son. Giulia gets a letter from this son one day. He has grown up in Buenos Aires and has joined the Italian Army to go to the Abyssinian war. From time to time, he sent Giulia a photo. Eventually he sends her a letter asking her to find him a wife, as he was to return to the village. Carlo regards this as a great tragedy.



Chapter 24

Chapter 24 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 24

April sees much sun and rain. As Carlo is walking across town, he meets a woman who gives him a telegram. A close relative has died and he is to be taken to the funeral. He is brought to Matera and then boards a train. He stays only a few days in Turin. He calls his visit melancholy and notes that all his friends and family seemed very far away. He felt "foreign to their interests" and found it hard to relate to them. On the way back to Gagliano, accompanied by two guards, Carlo finds himself considering the political and economic problems of Southern Italy. At the funeral, he was asked about these matters in detail. Everyone had a solution and it involved some version of State power.

Carlo believes that all his former friends and family are State worshippers. It didn't matter what kind of state it was, be it Fascist, Communist, or Liberal. These people would never understand the peasants because they didn't know what it was like to feel so disconnected from political power. The peasants found the politicians' solutions to problems abstract. Carlo tries to tell them that the problem of the South is not a lack of State intervention but the State itself. The only solution, in Carlo's mind, is to have a political order that the peasants have some part in.

Carlo believes that Southern Italy has three problems that keep Northern Italy from helping it. First, they are two different civilizations - a pre-Christian and a post-Christian one. If the North insists on imposing State-worship on the south, there will be no peace. The second problem is poverty. The land no longer grows food; the forests are gone; the rivers are often dried up, and animals are scarce. "There is no capital, no industry, no savings, no schools; emigration is no longer possible, taxes are unduly heavy and malaria is everywhere," Carlo points out. And this is largely the fault of the State. Finally, there is a social side to the problems of the South. Many blame landowners, but Carlo doesn't think this is the issue. The problem for the peasantry was the tyranny of middle-class individuals. They ruthlessly enforce their feudal rights. These problems were not caused by Fascism but Fascism made them worse. The middle class came to identify with State power. Carlo argues that without a peasant revolution, there will not be a "true Italian" revolution - the two ideas, he thinks, are the same. Fascism cannot solve the problems, nor will a new State. Italy must invent a new form of government that does not worship the collective, but is based on the individual - but not the notion of an abstract individual, but with the idea of persons as "a meeting place of relationships of every kind." This is like the Ideal State, Carlo argues, and the individual and the State must coincide.

The real way out, Carlo thinks, is "autonomy." The State has to be a federation of autonomous groups, an "organic federation." These cells must involve the peasants in democratic life. Only through decentralization can the two halves of Italy live together.



Yet this democratic form of life cannot exist without autonomy in factories, schools, and "every form of social life." This is what Carlo takes himself to have learned in his year in Gagliano.

In some ways, this chapter is the core and climax of the book. Most of the book up to this, the penultimate chapter, is a description of scenery, characters, and minor events. Yet it operates at a deeper level, describing how distinct Southern Italian civilization is and how powerless and angry the people of Gagliano are. The themes are subtle in the previous twenty-three chapters, but in chapter twenty-four they are made explicit. Gagliano is part of a different civilization; it has been ruined economically by the attempt to impose a different political form onto it than it can accommodate, and finally the social class structure is corrupted as a result of all this, with the people becoming hopeless and this turning into petty vindictiveness, a rule of the weak over the weaker. The solution is a kind of federalism, a model that is surprisingly reminiscent of the early American theory of republican government, where autonomous, democratic political units were united under a federal government that served their common interest without dissolving their local autonomy. But Carlo's theory combines republicanism with an anarchistic conception of extending democracy throughout all social institutions. He is anti-hierarchical, arguing that all individuals and social groups must have autonomy, with no one ruling anyone else, not in the factory, the school, the family or any other social institution. Without this kind of cultural change, various forms of oppression will persist.



Chapter 25

Chapter 25 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 25

The final chapter opens with Carlo's travel back to Gagliano. Spring had arrived in Southern Italy. When he returns to Gagliano, it seems both smaller and more depressing than before. Giulia is not waiting for him and will no longer speak to him. Her lover, the albino, had become jealous of Carlo in Carlo's absence and threatened to kill her if she continued to care for Carlo. Donna Caterina sets off to find Carlo another helper. The woman she picks, Maria, is sixty years old and was the mistress of Don Luigi's eighty-two-year-old father. She was more witch-like than Giulia with "none of Giulia's animal dignity." But she was very competent.

The new priest, Don Pietro Liguari, had just come from Miglionico. Don Liguari is fairly zealous and looks to change the townspeople's religion, with much the same aims of Don Trajella but none of Trajella's despair. Don Liguari invites Carlo to play piano as an accompanist for Mass. On the Sunday that Carlo first assists him, the Church is full for the first time. Donna Caterina brought Carlo a potential wife, an eighteen-year-old-girl named Donna Concetta, the most beautiful girl in the village. The villagers wanted Carlo to marry Donna Concetta and stay in Gagliano.

The people do not return to mass the next week, but the priest remains unshaken. The Spring turns into May. The war in Abyssinia is nearly over and Addis Ababa had been conquered. Giulia's son writes of his soon return and hopes that his bride will be ready. After the war however, several amnesties are granted for political prisoners, and Don Carlo is on the list. All of Gagliano's political prisoners are freed except for the two communists. Carlo could have left immediately but stayed for ten more days. The people want him to stay, to marry Donna Concetta, and to become Mayor. He claims he'll return but they do not believe him. He loads his baggage into the car and leaves. The book ends with his description of the scenery.



Characters

Don Carlo Levi

Don Carlo Levi is the author and main character of *Christ Stopped at Eboli*. He is a political prisoner who spends a year in the town of Gagliano, in the province of Lacania in Southern Italy from late summer 1935 to spring 1936. Carlo has been imprisoned for criticizing the Fascist regime in Italy at the time. It is not clear his political position, although he is often thought to be an anarchist.

Carlo is no mere political prisoner, however. He has many talents. First, he is a trained physician although he has not practiced medicine in some time when he reaches Gagliano. He also paints extensively, which impresses the simple townspeople, and he even once plays piano for the church. Obviously he is a writer of great talent as well. The people of Gagliano regard his presence with them as a kind of God-send; they see him as a baron from another world, or at least a civilization much different than their own. In some sense, Carlo always stays above the day-to-day conflicts in Gagliano, making sure not to take sides. He mostly aims to live out his depressing stay in Gagliano quietly, occasionally seeing friends and patients, painting, and walking with his dog Barone.

Carlo's ideology comes through strongly in the book. He seems to be somewhat of an anarchist, and at the very least a strong form of anti-statist, or one who opposes the level of influence the modern nation-state has in day-to-day social and political life. He believes that the Italian State must devolve power to Southern Italy so the people have a sense of control over their lives and again feel that they have a stake in their society. He is urgent about the need for local, democratic institutions that cannot be crushed by a totalitarian, all-powerful state.

Don Luigi Magalone

"Professor" Don Luigi Magalone is the Mayor of Gagliano. In some ways, he is a villain in the book, but this would be too simple of a description. Don Luigi is overweight, with oily black hair and black, insincere and self-satisfied eyes. He was the town elementary school teacher but was charged with watching the political prisoners in Gagliano. He did this, Carlo notes, with "gusto and zeal." Don Luigi is a committed Fascist, attempting to get the townspeople to care about Fascist politics. Yet the townspeople are indifferent. Throughout the book, Don Luigi occasionally becomes an annoyance to Carlo, but usually little more than that. In actual fact, Don Luigi is terrified of his enemies and his bosses and revels in any approval he receives from a civilized man like Don Carlo.

Luigi has a running feud with the town priest, Don Trajella. Trajella judges the townspeople and the mayor in particular. Luigi sees this as a nuisance and hates the priest's drunkenness. Over time, Luigi finds a way to have Trajella exiled from town, when



Trajella is drunk at the midnight mass of that year. Luigi reacts in a typical fascist fashion, demanding that Trajella be seized and attempting to drown out Trajella's rambling sermon by loudly singing famous, fascist songs. This is only one case of Luigi's attempt to control and dominate the local townspeople. Another is the excitement he has when he is giving the task of censoring the town's mail; he eagerly reads everyone's letters, seeking out "bad" ideas by which he can condemn others.

Luigi is not wholly wicked. Instead, he is simply a petty fascist who loves the little bit of power he has. He shows mercy to various townspeople and will often give Carlo a break if he is certain his enemies will not discover that he has been lax with a political prisoner. He seems largely indifferent to suffering in the town but can be brought to care. In some ways, Luigi, too, is a victim of the oppression of the Italian State and every other regime that has ruled Southern Italy. The real enemy in the book is the State.

Dr. Milillo

One of the town's physicians and Don Luigi's uncle, Dr. Milillo is advanced in his years. He clearly knows little about medicine. The elderly man is kind, although he expects a kind of respect for his position that perhaps he doesn't deserve.

Dr. Gibilisco

The other doctor in town, besides Dr. Milillo and Don Carlo, is also elderly and incompetent. He is mistrusting and suspicious of Carlo in the beginning, fearing the competition of a young, far more competent man.

The Sergeant

The Sergeant is the Mayor's right hand man. He is a member of the carabinieri, or state police. He is nearly always in uniform and keeps his distance from Carlo, since Carlo is a political prisoner.

Mr. S

A lawyer and the richest man in the village. Carlo thinks he's a good man, although sees his scorn for the villagers.

Poerio

An old man with a long beard, the retired postmaster and a friend of Dr. Gibilisco.



P

A cheerful, young town lawyer. He had studied at the University of Bologna but financial troubles in his family got him stuck in Gagliano.

Don Cosimino

The current postmaster, a "keen-faced" hunchback, kind and wise. Later in the book, he gives Carlo his mail without passing it through the censors in Matera.

Barone

Carlo's dog. Barone's origin is a mystery. Some railroad employees found him on a train between Naples and Taranto. They kept him and gave him to the station employees at Grassano. The mayor took the dog to his children, but Barone made too much noise. While at Grassano, Carlo got a puppy but didn't keep him. When he was sent to Gagliano, the townspeople of Grassano gave him Barone as a parting gift. It is not clear what breed Barone is, perhaps a cross between poodle and sheep dog.

Lieutenant Decunto

Carlo's mentor in Grassano, and head of the Fascist militia there. He befriended Carlo and constantly spoke of his hatred of the townspeople and his despair over his place in life. He was eager to get away by going to war. Carlo suspects that in Lieutenant Decunto's despair there is a self-hatred which "made him capable ... of any evil." Carlo thinks of Decunto's despair and self-hatred as characteristic of the oppressed people in Grassano, Gagliano, and towns like them.

U. E., the Tax Collector

The Ufficiale Esattoriale is the local tax collector, a sad, red-headed man who only collects taxes to make a living. He'd prefer to pursue his clarinet playing. He complains that the townspeople can never afford to pay him.

Baron Nicola Rotunno of Avellino

A ruthless, rich landowner in the province, and a member of Catholic action.

Don Giuseppe Trajella

Don Trajella is the town priest. Once a seminary professor, Don Trajella was sent into de facto exile by the church to minister to a parish in Gaglianello. He was once a man of



wit and letters, according to Carlo, but has since given up in despair. He spends most of his time either in the church in Gagliano or his small, filthy home with his ailing, elderly mother. He is incredibly bitter and despises the townspeople for their lack of religion. He is hated by most of the townspeople in part because he is perpetually drunk.

The Americans

The Americans are a group of Gaglianoans and Southern Italians who emigrate to America for a few years but return for one reason or another, usually to visit family and friends. They often get trapped back in town by a wife, a bad land deal, or (as was often the case) the stock market crash of 1929.

Two Communist Prisoners

There are two communist prisoners in town. Carlo can't get to know them because political prisoners are forbidden to speak to one another. The two communist prisoners once fraternized but split up when one of them told some townspeople about Darwin's theory of evolution. Don Luigi perceived Darwin as contrary to Catholic, and since, as he said, Fascism and Catholicism were the same, they were anti-Fascist and so must be split up. They sneak meals to one another from time to time and occasionally communicate clandestinely with Carlo.

Donna Caterina

Donna Caterina Magalone Cuscianna is Don Luigi's sister. She is about thirty, small, and stout. She is extremely strong-willed and fairly intelligent. She has many political connections in town and in some ways is at the heart of town politics, running the town. She quickly allies herself with Carlo, in part because she believes that Dr. Gibilisco's daughters tried to poison her so that they might have her husband. She does numerous favors for Carlo throughout the book, such as finding him a servant from the town.

Nicola Cuscianna

Donna Caterina's husband. He was a schoolteacher but cheated on Donna Caterina with one of the Gibilisco's daughters. His wife hates him as a result and he eventually escapes his house by going off to war.

Don Pasquale Cuscianna

Donna Caterina's father-in-law, a generally respected, retired schoolmaster, mostly interested in sleeping, eating and smoking.



Margherita and Maria

Dr. Milillo's daughters. Plump, dark-skinned, with light mustaches, they are good girls, "incredibly ingenious and ignorant."

The Gravedigger

A quiet, ninety-year old man, the town gravedigger was regarded by the townspeople as something more than a man. They said he could tame wolves and speak to the animals and spirits in the village and surrounding areas. Carlo talks with him on several occasions, but the man is nearly incomprehensible. Carlo wonders if the man fought in the brigand wars as he seems to remember vividly meeting one of the most famous brigand generals, Ninco Nanco.

The Fellows In Rome

The people of Gagliano's term for the Fascist government. The term denotes their feeling of utter detachment from their government.

Luisa

Carlo's sister, who comes from a brief visit to Gagliano. She is also a doctor and is horrified by the sickness and poverty in Southern Italy, particularly in Matera. She shares a cultured life with Carlo and the townspeople also regard her as royalty during her brief stay.

Giulia Venere

A middle-aged town "witch" or a woman who knows magic and is considered "easy," she becomes Carlo's servant. Giulia can break the town's custom of being alone with a man who is not her husband because of her half-prostitute social status. She is a good housekeeper to Carlo, but laments his lack of sexual interest in her. A fairly tall, shapely and once-beautiful woman, despite her yellow skin and "wolf teeth," she gets Carlo everything he needs. She has had seventeen pregnancies and a few of her children have survived. Her husband and first-born son are in Argentina. Her current lover is the albino barber in town. She knows pretty much everything about everyone in town without being a stereotypical gossip. She teaches Carlo many spells during their time together. At one point in the book, Giulia and Barone are Carlo's only companions.

Giovanni Pizzilli

The town tailor, and barber, one of the "Americans" who hates that he is still stuck in Gagliano.



Faccialorda (Dirty Face)

Faccialorda is also one of the "Americans," a big strong man, with gold teeth. Faccialorda became rich in America by getting a workman's compensation payout by pretending to be deaf. He was proud of this feat. Like many others, he did not regret tricking those he regarded as illegitimate authorities.

Carmelo

A twenty-year-old workman from Grassano, husky "with a burned face." He recounts to Carlo the tale of his encounter with gnomes. Carlo uses his story to draw out the area's mythology.

Nino

Giulia's baby, a plump, happy little child who played with Barone.

Prisco

An inn owner in Grassano and friend of Don Carlo, he is a boisterous and enterprising businessman.

Capitano

Prisco's son and ringleader of the boys in town, a smart, fast-talking little boy with a mind for slap-jack.

Antonino Roselli

A barber in Grassano, a young, black mustached flute-player.

Riccardo

A sailor from Venice and Antonino's brother-in-law. Riccardo was a political prisoner as well, as communist propaganda was found on his ship on return from Odessa. He likes Grassano, however, and marries Antonino's sister Maddalena.

Dr. Zagarella

A physician and mayor of Grassano who does much more about malaria there than Don Luigi does in Gagliano.



Margherita

An old woman, considered well-educated for her fifth grade education and sharp memory. She was a mother and tells Carlo the story of how the Virgin Marria or "Madonna of Viggiano" saves her daughter. Carlo uses her to illustrate, again, the town's mythology and religion.

The Pig Doctor

A tall, red-headed man with a large mustache, this man visits villages in the area to castrate pigs, and is quite good at his job.

The Next Sergeant

The first sergeant had gotten himself transferred out of Gagliano. He is replaced by a young, blond-haired, blue-eyed boy from Bari who had just graduated from training school. He was zealous at first and appalled at the townspeople for their dishonesty.

Town Children

A few of the town children begin to hang around Don Carlo, in part to watch him paint and be painted by him. They often try to mimic his painting and they beg him to teach them to write and read. The children bring Carlo some joy, although he regrets later in life that he did not teach them more.

Don Pietro Liguari

The new town priest, after Don Luigi has Don Trajella transferred. He is round, keen-witted and determined to return the town to Catholicism. He spends much time with Don Carlo and eventually gets him to play piano for mass.

Maria

A sixty-year-old "witch," who is Carlo's second servant after Giulia's lover forbids her from serving Carlo any longer. She is also a very competent server, but is older and stranger than Giulia, with none of her charm.



Objects/Places

Gagliano

Gagliano, in Lacania Province, Italy, is where nearly the entire book takes place. Gagliano is a city "without a history" that seems to have remained unchanged for centuries if not millenia. Don Carlo's illustration of the townspeople is the main part of the book. The people of Gagliano live in incredible poverty; their town is constantly afflicted by malaria, and they are illiterate. The townspeople are "pre-Christian" in that they still inhabit a largely pagan world, full of superstition. The people regard themselves as beyond hope, for all the forces that could help them are either indifferent or against them. They hate, in particular, the State, which they see as a constant source of hardship and oppression.

The town seems small to Carlo at first, and it is, with only twelve-hundred inhabitants, but it has lower and upper halves, with various homes of gentry and peasant. The town is Carlo's prison for a year, although it was originally intended to be three years. The town is built around slopes of white clay with few trees. There are no real shops and no hotel. The air is black with flies and town life is incredibly monotonous and boring. The town is sharply divided not only among classes but among families with feuds that originated centuries before. The townspeople are in general embittered at their station in life and take this bitterness out on one another. They care little for ideology or particularly for Fascism. Their only real interest is in the brigand wars, the revolts against Italian unification - the only war in which they felt like their people ever had a stake.

The name "Gagliano" is fictional; the real town where Don Carlo Levi stayed is named Aliano.

Grassano

Grassano is another small, South Italian town in Lacania. It was where Carlo was kept before he was transferred to Gagliano. The town is nearly as impoverished and hopeless as Gagliano, but the people are more excited and have a large middle class of skilled laborers. Carlo enjoyed his time in Grassano and made many friends there. He travels there periodically during the book.

Matera

Matera is the center of the local bureaucracy in the area. The poverty there is stunning; the town is stricken with malaria. Carlo's sister was horrified by what she saw there and many of the local bureaucrats, while not committed fascists, are heavy-handed and slow-moving.



Gaglianello

A small town near Gagliano of about four-hundred people. They have even less than Gagliano does, with no doctors at all.

Stigliano

Another town in the area.

The Bog

A place three hours away from Gagliano where Carlo treats several sick people.

The Fossa del Bersagliere

A low wall over a precipice on one side of the town square.

The Church of Madonna of the Angels

Madonna of the Angels is the name of the old town church that was covered by a mudslide. They now call the area "The Mound."

The Widow's House

The widow's house is where Carlo takes up residence a few days after arriving in Gagliano. Within a few weeks, he moves into another place.

Prisco's Inn

Prisco's Inn is in Grassano. Prisco, the owner, became friends with Carlo during Carlo's stay there. When Carlo visits Grassano, he often stays there.

Carlo's Home

Carlo's home is a small, three-room home that was built by the town priest who preceded Don Trajella. It was a bit away from town, which pleased Carlo because he wouldn't have to make small-talk with the villagers. To Don Carlo's surprise, it had a toilet, although without running water. Carlo spends most of his time in Gagliano in his house or near it.



The Cemetery

Carlo spends time talking to the gravedigger and painting in Gagliano's cemetery.

The Church

The town church is where Don Trajella operates. It only plays a significant role in the book during a Christmas Eve (Midnight) Mass, where the conflict between Don Trajella and Don Luigi comes to a head.

The Black Madonna

The Black Madonna is a statue that the townspeople use on "feast days" to celebrate the Virgin Mary. But Carlo notes that the people of Gagliano are really pre-Christian and that they do not see the Madonna as the benevolent, humble mother of God represented in Catholicism. The Madonna was not the mother of God but a "subterranean deity ... a peasant Persephone." And she was "beyond good and evil" sometimes answering their prayers, and other times not. Symbols of the Madonna adorn every home, and Carlo sees her as one of two town gods, the Madonna and Franklin Roosevelt.

Passatella

Passatella is favorite game of peasants. It is basically a competition of speeches containing insults for another player. Then cards are played to determine the "King" of passatella and his assistant. The King controls the wine and can control who drinks it. So can the assistant. They have to justify their choices. Cards and wine-drinking lasts for hours until players are so hurt, upset and drunk that things get tense and sometimes a fight develops. It is what the peasants play when they are bored, particularly during the winter.

Spells

Magic is a common part of Gagliano's life. Many witches practice spells, and Carlo learns a few from Giulia, although predictably he can never get them to work. One common spell is simply "abracadabra," which the people believe has special power.



Themes

A People Without A History, A Different Civilization

Carlo believes that Southern Italy contains a different civilization from the rest of Europe. He sees it as composed of peoples who were passed over by the Greeks, the Romans, Christianity and the post-Christian ideologies like Fascism. In some sense, life is the same there as it has always been. The people are pagan, "pre-Christian" and their lives are full of superstition. They believe in devils, ghosts, gnomes, spells, the Virgin Mary, and on and on. Their lives are full of the spirit world and everything has a double nature in that it represents itself and something deeper. Like many ancient civilizations, the people of Gagliano fill their world with the supernatural such that life is constantly accompanied by the mystical.

Carlo argues that Northern Italy, since becoming Fascist, is post-Christian and that it rules the South by forcing its "deification of the State" on them. The "peasant civilization," Carlo argues, will always lose to the North. But it will "persevere under a cover of patience, interrupted by sporadic explosions." This is represented in Carlo's discussions of the brigand wars and the occasional outburst of violence or revolt in the town. The oppression of the people makes them feel powerless and corrupts them, and every once in awhile they will rise up and revolt against their oppressors. Carlo thinks that ultimately either the two peoples will have to split or the North will have to allow the South to be governed by institutions in which they have a stake.

Poverty

A constant theme of *Christ Stopped at Eboli* is poverty, both spiritual and economic. The people of Gagliano are not merely poor, they are shockingly poor. The land does not effectively grow food. The forests for the most part have been harvested. The rivers have been drained and redirected such that they are shrunk to streams that often dry up. Livestock and other animals are rarely seen. For some reason, the State tries to force the South to grow wheat, which is not compatible with the soil. The people try to raise livestock, goats in particular, but the State gets in their way; for instance, they tax goats to the degree that they aren't worth keeping alive. The people are then forced to slaughter some of their only assets. The state collects high taxes from the poor, which they cannot pay, leaving tax collectors to garnish the people's assets. There is no sense among the people of the South that the State cares for their interests, but instead only exploits them and holds them down.

The poverty results not only in undernourishment and a lack of education, but of disease. Malaria is everywhere in Gagliano and treatment is difficult to obtain. The State could make a genuine effort to eliminate Malaria, but it does not care. For this reason, huge numbers of the people of Gagliano have Malaria, especially peasant women and children. This often gives their skin a yellow tint and kills many of them early. The people



have mixed feelings about modern medicine because they are so unfamiliar with it, and while they will take Carlo's treatment, they refuse Quinine because they are suspicious of it. Often they turn to sorcery for cures. Carlo thinks the poverty is an artifact of the powerlessness of the people of Gagliano. They have no share in political power and so they cannot demand that their interests be tended to.

The spiritual poverty of Gagliano is seen in its superstitious nature and its constant social strife. The people despair and hate their lot in life and often take it out on one another. They also have little interest in religion as such, again because they feel as if their lives are nothing but sorrow.

Petty Tyranny, Meaningless Social Strife

Carlo thinks the "problem of the South," represented by Gagliano, is actually three problems. First, there is the problem that Italy contains two civilizations, as noted in the first theme. Second, there is the problem of economic and spiritual poverty, as noted in the second. But the third problem, to Carlo, is that of social strife and petty tyranny. He notes that many believe that the social problems of the South are caused by large landowners. But Carlo rejects this explanation. The real problem are the petty tyrants of the middle class. Because of oppression, emigration, and war, the remaining middle class are women with children without husbands and men without the skills or wits to escape. As a result the middle class is "physically and morally degenerate." The class lives through theft from the peasants by applying a distorted version of ancient feudal rights. To illustrate, in Gagliano at Christmas, there is a custom where the poor give the upper class gifts, and not the other way around. Carlo believes that the power of this class must be suppressed and replaced with something better. Otherwise, the South has no hope.

We see the theme of petty tyranny throughout the book. The people of Gagliano hate one another and the more powerful take advantage of the weak. The doctors know nothing, yet overcharge their patients for care. The landowners often get the peasantry hooked on mortgages and loans they can't repay. Don Luigi is perhaps the primary petty tyrant, reveling in the power his membership in the Fascist party gives him. And because of the constant poverty and oppression, people latch onto centuries old feuds as one of the only things that give their lives meaning. They carry hatred with them and most of the time are resigned to it. But occasionally they rise up in revolt, as they did in the brigand wars.



Style

Perspective

Carlo Levi was a political prisoner during the period covered by *Christ Stopped at Eboli*. He was a member of the far Left, although not a communist. He appears to have been an anarchist at the time, holding that the nation-state is the cause of major social problems. He is also a man of some culture, a physician, a painter, a pianist, and a writer. His time in Gagliano is lonely, detached and depressing, full of boredom, frustration and anxiety over sickness in the town.

All these facts color the author's perspective. He writes in the first person, occasionally recording what he says to the townspeople. For the most part, though, he operates as a somewhat impartial spectator. In some ways, though, he is not trying to be objective. Economic, social, political, personal and spiritual themes pervade the book and they are often clearly shaped by Carlo's experience and directly injected into the story. For instance, Carlo sees the townspeople's frustrations as with the State itself, rather than as merely with the State as it currently operates. And as a member of the far Left in the mid-20th century, he tends to see social conflict as one of class struggle, rather than as varied struggles between individuals. He argues in Chapter Twenty-Four that the only solution to Gagliano's problems and the problems of Southern Italy generally is a Peasant Revolution. Thus the perspective is the one of a detached, humanitarian intellectual living among the oppressed, a common perspective of many leftist intellectuals in the 20th century. There is a cool impartiality colored by searing social commentary mixed with a touch of ennui.

Tone

The tone of this book is halfway between objective and partisan. Carlo tells the story from his own perspective, but he attempts to tell the events of his stay in Gagliano just as they happened. He appears, despite his education, to have great respect for many of the peasants and does not condescend to them, even when he writes about them. His descriptions of them are flowery, objective, and while sometimes piercing, always fair. Yet he is not completely detached because he sees himself as on the side of the peasants and wonders from time to time whether they would stand behind him were he to lead a brigand-style revolt.

Carlo's tone, like his perspective, is colored by his political ideology. Because he believes that the peasant classes have been oppressed for centuries by a variety of different powers, he sees them as having no real country, at least the Italian peasantry does not see itself as part of the state in Carlo's opinion. His tone is that of one who is nearly alone in his sympathy for the oppressed and awareness of their true conditions. He sees himself as sad, detached and distant from those who do not understand or care for the plight of the Southern Italian peasant class. As such, his writing juxtaposes



sharp social commentary with lucid, detailed descriptions of persons, places and events.

Structure

The book is composed of a brief introduction and twenty-five chapters with no epilogue. The chapters are typically in chronological order, starting from the beginning of August 1935 and ending in Spring 1936. Chapters rarely proceed by theme or event, but rather tend to proceed by groups of characters and the events they recount to Carlo. Some chapters are about a particular character, like Don Luigi or Don Trajella, but most of the time Carlo ebbs and flows among character descriptions, briefly recounting an event, story or legend, and describing the scenery. The book functions more as a whole throughout its first twenty-three chapters, gliding gently from character to character and event to event.

The climax of the book may be the ban on Carlo's practice of medicine, for it nearly leads to a revolt. But perhaps it is better to see Chapter Twenty-Four as the climax. The entire book works at two levels - as a description of Carlo's experiences and as an extended social and spiritual commentary. Yet he does not often explicitly advocate his analysis of what the real problems of Gagliano are and what their solutions might be until Chapter Twenty-Four. Much of the Chapter is an intense, terse description of Gagliano's problems, the distinctness of its civilization, its poverty, and its various petty tyrannies and social strife. He argues that the solution to these problems is not a mere alteration in the shape of the State, say from Fascist to Communist, but rather, as he implies throughout the book, that the State itself is the enemy of the people of Gagliano. And he ultimately argues that it needs to be replaced by some sort of "organic federalism" - or a federation of organic political units governed democratically by its people. After Chapter Twenty-Four comes Chapter Twenty-Five, which ends the book. It is anti-climactic. Carlo finally leaves the town but leaves without much fanfare. One day, as the war in Abyssinia is ending, Carlo hears that in celebration some political prisoners are being released. Carlo is one of them. And the story ends there. It is in many ways the book's denouement.



Quotes

"We're not Christians,' they say. 'Christ stopped short of here, at Eboli.'" (1)

"But to this shadowy land, that knows neither sin nor redemption from sin, where evil is not moral but is only the pain residing forever in earthly things. Christ did not come. Christ stopped at Eboli." (2)

"A prisoner may find greater consolation in a cell with romantic, heavy iron bars than in one that superficially resembles a normal room." (5)

"... he was aware, in a primitive and sentimental fashion, of the decay and spiritual poverty around him, and he saw the war as an escape, an escape into a world of destruction." (28)

"She neither knew nor cared about Fascism; in her mind, to be the local Party leader was simply a means of holding the reins of power." (56)

"The village is built of the bones of the dead." (69)

"Here where time has come to a stop, it seemed quite natural that bones of all ages, recent, less recent, and very ancient, should turn up all together at the traveler's feet." (70)

"Everyone knows ... that the fellows in Rome don't want us to live like human beings." (76)

"To the peasants the State is more distant than heaven and far more of a scourge, because it is always against them." (76)

"The only defense against the State and the propaganda of the State is resignation." (76)

"Too bad! Someone had it in for you." (78)

"But what surprised and shocked her most was that no one had any wish to improve the village." (89)

"To the peasants the Black Madonna was beyond good and evil." (122)

"The Madonna appeared to be a fierce, pitiless, mysterious, ancient earth goddess, the Saturnian mistress of this world; the President a sort of all-powerful Zeus, the benevolent and smiling master of a higher sphere." (124)

"But from Rome came nothing. Nothing had ever come but the tax collector and speeches over the radio." (133)



"They have led exactly the same life since the beginning of time, and History has swept over them without effect." (142)

"Just as I had imagined, she knew no greater happiness than that of being dominated by an absolute power." (158)

"Their mothers fled from them in terror, because here every symbol is a reality and to them the masked children stood for a triumph of death." (223)

"At bottom, as I now perceived, they were all unconscious worshipers of the State." (255)

"The State ... cannot solve the problem of the South, because the problem which we call by this name is none other than the problem of the State itself." (256)



Topics for Discussion

How does the political and economic powerlessness of the people of Gagliano affect their day-to-day lives? And how does it affect their characters and interactions with one another?

Why don't the people of Gagliano care about Fascism or the State generally?

To what extent and in what way are the people of Gagliano Christian? Pre-Christian? Why does this matter?

What drives the superstition in Gagliano? Why has it persisted in the face of modernity?

Do you think the people of Gagliano are constantly resentful of their institutions? Or do they for the most part, ignore them? If so, why? If not, why not?

Why do you think Carlo decided to leave Gagliano? Why doesn't he stay, marry and become mayor of the town?

What do you think the conflict between Don Luigi and Don Trajella represents? Does it reach into the corrupted structure of social life in the town or is it merely a superficial conflict between two petty men?

What is the role of the Black Madonna in the story? And/Or Franklin Roosevelt?

How does the war in Abyssinia play into the story? To what extent is it an escape for the townspeople and if so how so?

What do you think of Carlo's proposed solution to the problem of the South in Chapter Twenty-Four? Does it sound too Utopian? And to what extent does Carlo's solution endorse the State as a legitimate institution and to what extent is it hostile to the State as such?

Why does Carlo believe that the problem of the South will not be resolved by the elimination of Fascism? Why does he think that the problem is the State, be it Fascist, Communist or Liberal?