

City of God Study Guide

City of God by E. L. Doctorow

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

City of God Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Part 1.....	5
Part 2.....	7
Part 3.....	9
Part 4.....	11
Part 5.....	13
Part 6.....	15
Part 7.....	17
Part 8.....	18
Part 9.....	19
Part 10.....	21
Part 11.....	22
Part 12.....	24
Characters.....	26
Objects/Places.....	28
Themes.....	30
Style.....	32
Quotes.....	34
Topics for Discussion.....	35



Plot Summary

The material collected by writer Everett, the narrator in *City of God*, is an examination of the relationship between human beings and God, between human beings and the world around them, between human beings and one another, and between human beings and their own identity. Everett begins collecting his material because he is developing a biography of the life of Thomas Pemberton, is an Anglican priest experiencing a crisis of faith. Everett interviews Pemberton about his life, his experiences as a priest, and his evolving views of religion and Christianity. In light of the horrors of the history of humanity, Pemberton finds himself unable to believe in the stories of the Bible any longer. He is unable to believe in a God who is involved in the lives of his creation and yet still allows starvation, disease, death, or the horrors of war. As he is questioning his own faith he comes into contact with a Rabbi named Joshua Gruen and his wife Sarah, also a Rabbi, who run the Synagogue of Evolutionary Judaism. Everett then meets the couple as well and begins to write the story of Sarah's father and his experiences during World War II. Sarah's father, Mr. Blumenthal, was held in a Jewish ghetto for much of the war and Everett plans to write a fiction story based on his experiences. Through his contact with the Gruens, Pemberton also begins a journey in search of the stories of the Holocaust leading to an examination of his own belief system through the lens of progressive Judaism. Ultimately, Pemberton arrives at an answer to his questions and discovers the God of the Universe.

In the novel, the concept of human identity is examined through the framework of the horrors of war, historical progression, and the transformative powers of media. Through Everett's stories about Mr. Blumenthal's childhood in the Jewish ghetto, it is revealed the human identity is nearly indestructible. It can be transformed, altered, and harmed but it can never be entirely removed. Mr. Blumenthal loses his parents, adopts a new identity, is adopted by a new family, and finally packed into a train car like an animal. Through all of this he retains his memories of his life before the war, of his parents, and of the people who are killed around him. He retains his memories and he retains a hope for the future and for a world beyond the torture, humiliation, and death of his people at the hands of the Nazis. He is able to survive because he remembers who he is. He remembers he has been shaped by the people and circumstances of his past and present but he knows that, beyond the influence of the past and the present, there is an essential element of his identity, deep in his soul, that cannot be touched by any outside force. Human identity is shaped by the circumstances of the past, present, and future. People can be transformed by the events of their lives and even the books they read, the songs they hear, or the movies they watch. But deep within every individual is an essential part of the soul connected to the vastness of the universe. It is this essential part of the soul that holds and maintains individual identity and creates a community among all human beings.

Ultimately, Pemberton comes to the conclusion at the end of the novel the human race must be remade and in order to do that, God must be remade. He concludes God is a being, essence, or force that exists in the vast reaches of the universe within the mathematical truths of the universe. God is in the simple, elemental world of nature and



can be found deep in the soul of every human being. God exists in the moral sense of human beings that dwells at their core and forms the essence of their identity. This moral sense is the part of every human being that is still connected to the beginning of time, that is still a part of the natural world, and that is untouched by the complications of human history and the cruelties of war. With a cyclical view of human history and birth, Pemberton concludes if human beings can recognize in their moral sense the God of the universe, if they can recognize their connection to one another in a universal brotherhood, then perhaps there can be a revolution in the struggle for life.



Part 1

Summary

The novel opens with a scientific and poetic description of the Big Bang. It describes the process of everything in the universe expanding exponentially from a single point. The opening contemplates the people who are exposed to these wonders in the universe--to astronomy and the real vastness of the galaxy--and questions how they go about their daily lives in the face of this fearsome world. Everett then goes on to describe the first meeting with a woman named Moira with whom he will go on to have an affair. She will meet him for lunch and then suddenly there is a description of all things flying away from each other for about fifteen billion years and then suddenly the emergence of the first entity with a will of its own from a "speck of organic corruption" (6). Everett receives an email from Pem with a jumble of details and names. Everett begins to introduce what he calls the Heist and introduces a characterization of Pem as he walks the streets of New York. He talks about making plans with Moira at an exhibit of Monet. This is followed by an all-encompassing description of New York and the people of the city. Pem senses his own inadequacy as he visits hospital residents. Notes for Pem's sermon ask if he must be blind as he considers the trust of those hospital residents. Pem is confronted by his Bishop regarding his questioning. Pem searches for information regarding the people who plan to violate his church. He waits in the church for them like Superman with his flashlight, but he is unable to capture the thieves. The neutrino was discovered at the Bronx High School of Science when a student named Seligman copied Everett's homework. Everett writes down the lyrics to the song "Me and My Shadow" and recreates them and dissects them.

Analysis

From the vastness of the fearsome mysteries of the universe the reader is plopped into the world of Everett as he begins an affair with Moira. He looks to Moira and a simple quiet life with her for his salvation. He is searching for something, some meaning. However, this affair is meaningless in the face of the enormous universe and the emergence of a single human being, isolated and alone, just as all human beings ultimately are. The original being is created from a "sidereal liaison" of cosmology. For Pem, the city streets of New York are much like the astronomer's study of the universe. It is a vast ocean of movement and mystery with overwhelming and incomprehensible meaning. Just as the cross is stolen from Pem's church, so Everett's scientific discovery is stolen from him. These experiences create shadows that hang over their heads, the shadows of alternate possibilities.



Vocabulary

exponential, singularity, voluminous, insensate, mien, solemn, liaison, entity, contemptuous, rummage, transform, adhere, exception, comprise, bearing, ecumenism, aesthetic, unseemly, obsolescence



Part 2

Summary

Albert Einstein thought of his work as “tracking God.” Moira acts in a seductive way that undoes Everett’s perception of her as a pure, calm haven in the storm. Everett discusses standard songs that become signifiers of actions, relationships, emotions, and even lifetimes.

After receiving a phone call from Rabbi Joshua Gruen, Pem goes to meet him and Joshua reveals the cross on the roof of his synagogue. Pem meets Gruen’s wife, Sarah Blumenthal, and falls in love with her.

After disappointing him, Everett puts Moira into a story about a woman crossing class lines and having an affair with a lover with a mysterious past: a controlling man who slowly takes over her life and her husband’s life without revealing the true identity of his inner life. Everett contemplates the fact that nothing can move faster than the speed of light and if someone attempted it they would lose their identity in the speed of his or her travel.

The creation of a standard song occurs when a song expresses a universal truth that can be applied to everyone. Rabbi Joshua calls Pem to discuss the culprit of the cross theft. Pem mulls over what he will say to his colleagues when they examine him. Einstein talks about the ordinariness of his life and his childhood in the ancient city of Ulm. He talks about the paving stones of the road. Pem and Everett meet to discuss the book, and Everett talks about how facts and actuality become relative and inconvenient in the composition of any story, fiction or non-fiction.

Analysis

The cross on the roof of Joshua’s synagogue acts as catalyst for the action of the entire narrative and foreshadows Pem’s conversion to the Jewish faith. This one moment takes on a life of its own as Pem realizes it doesn’t matter who accomplished the theft and the placement of the cross on the roof of the synagogue. What matters is the cross was on the roof and serves as a sign to Pem. It is a sign of the unity of all faiths and the need to rediscover and rename God and faith for the modern world. For Pem, it is the revelation of the fact intellect must be applied to faith so truth can be found and old, useless religious dogmas can be discarded.

The paving stones Einstein contemplates illustrate the various lives of the narrative and how they are all shaped by their own history but combine and interlock with one another to create a single history, a single road. Much like the individual elements of the universe, these stones join together to indicate something beyond their individual existence or history--they indicate the full history of time and the human experience of a multitude of lives. For Everett, the factual recordings of these lives are far less important



than the meaning derived from them. The facts can and should be altered in order to emphasize the most important meaning or purpose spoken through the life of an individual.

Vocabulary

fluke, happenstance, prerogative, entitlement, poignant, signifier, devout, dismantle, nihilism, ardent, ingratiate, endowment, instantaneous, unverifiable, intone, perception, inevitable, admonitory, complacency



Part 3

Summary

Everett describes the villainous lover's slow infiltration of every aspect of the business man's life and the culmination of his machinations when he adopts the face of the businessman through plastic surgery. The businessman is ejected from his home and rejected by his friends and forced to live on the street due to his mad insistence his identity has been stolen. Einstein talks about the self-involved insecurities of all despotism and goes on to discuss the Holocaust. He writes, "For you see what moves not as fast as light but fast enough, and with an accrued mass of such density as not to be borne, is the accelerating disaster of human history" (53).

This introduces the first passage of Mr. Blumenthal's experiences as a Jew during the Holocaust and his career as a runner for the Jewish council in the Kovno Ghetto. He tells his story up to the point where his parents die. The moment of his parent's death is followed by a description of the comfort to be found in the mathematical certainties of the natural world and the possibility of other life that corresponds to our own in the vastness of the universe. Mr. Blumenthal picks up his story and talks about how he goes to live with the tailor Srebnitsky and takes over the identity of his dead grandson, Yehoshua. The only book in the house is a Bible and the tailor points out the inconsistencies and ludicrous concepts contained within it. Pem faces the Bishop's examiners and tells them faith and truth must be discovered through the intellect and in light of this fact it is obvious the stories of the Bible are fiction. Yehoshua finds an American funny paper, and though he cannot understand it, the pictures and figures depicted allow him to imagine worlds of different times and places. These times and places come with dangers of their own and this fact comforts Yehoshua.

Analysis

The story of the businessman questions the meaning and power of identity in the life of the individual. This foreshadows the role that identity will play in the stories of the Holocaust and how the terrors of war affect identity. However, encompassing all of these individual identities is a universal brotherhood of suffering, "the accelerated disaster of human history," in Einstein's words. The vastness of the cosmic universe is staggering and belittling because it is the incomprehensible unknown. But within the enormity of the universe is the comfort of the vast possibilities of related beings. There is an enormous network of unknown realms within the universe, which offer possibility to people just like us suffering just as we do. In experiencing the torments and terrors of war, it is comforting to know others suffer as we do and we are not entirely alone. It is this sense of brotherhood that helps to sustain a sense of individual identity. Each individual suffers within their own unique circumstances, and in this way everyone is isolated and incomprehensible to one another. But each individual is unified in the truth of universal human pain. We all suffer together.

Vocabulary

invasive, undue, narcissist, culminating, commune, pious, density, accelerating, insofar, propagate, forays, feign, indelible, pretense, implicate, accumulate, contemplation, sequential, luxurious, dispute

Part 4

Summary

Pem talks to the Bishop's examiners about the concept of a scapegoat and goes on to say the history of Christian doctrine is the history of power. After sewing a uniform for the head S.S. officer in Kovno, Srebnitsky cuts apart the uniform while the officer is wearing it. Srebnitsky is arrested and Yehoshua runs to the council. He later questions his identity as he is no longer the son of his parents but someone who would run away and hide while an old man is arrested. Srebnitsky is hung in the middle of the ghetto as an example to all other Jews who would consider attacking a German officer. Everett ends this narrative with a dangerous and sinister description of the dismantling of the earth and an ironic conclusion that the planet is at least livable. He then jumps back into his film vision of the villainous lover who murders the businessman and is then arrested for his murder. Ludwig Wittgenstein points out the difference between the truths that can be spoken and the truths that exist only in silence. Pem points out to Everett God is ahistorical. He is a being without shape, without beginning or end. He is outside of creation and greater than the entire universe. He is incomprehensible.

Analysis

This definition of a scapegoat parallels the narrative of the Holocaust. The Jews were proposed as scapegoats for the trials of the world, and they were sacrificed fruitlessly in a search for power. As Pem says, modern Christian doctrine has been forged out of a history of a struggle for power. Stories are developed and canonized in order to suppress and rule over other human beings. Srebnitsky's actions with the S.S. officer are his calculated attempt to declare his independence from this type of oppression and his assertion of his identity to those who are trying to take it from him.

The villainous lover, who, like the Nazis, attempts to erase identity, is arrested for the murder of the businessman. This act of melodrama undermines the subtle horror of the earlier usurpation. Everett imagines all sociopaths of this nature receiving their just desserts in their own melodramatic destruction and the collapse of their plans in the face of their own "wretched insufficiency" (85). Their insufficiency derives from the fact of their insignificance in the face of the truths of the universe--the truths that point to the identity of a being outside of and greater than all of creation, a being beyond time and moment, beyond comprehension. God is one of the incomprehensible truths of silence because no words can capture the essence of this Being. The stories of the Bible are attempts to categorize and characterize this truth outside the realm of human understanding, but they are no more sacred than any other work of fiction.

Vocabulary

heretical, scapegoat, sect, sacramental, consolation, disarray, drab, apprehend, impending, designate, unassailable, modulate, intolerable, invidious, inconceivable, subtle, existential, schizoid, modality

Part 5

Summary

Everett includes a brief description of certain bottom-feeding creatures in the ocean. These animals live in places that scientifically shouldn't be able to sustain life. However, these animals have adapted to their surroundings so that they not only survive but flourish.

Blumenthal mentions Mr. Barbanel's diary, a history written in Yiddish of the captivity and torture of the Jews during the Holocaust. He introduces Miss Margolin, a nurse at the Kovno hospital who smuggled Barbanel's history and people out of the ghetto. Barbanel's radio gives the runners a sense of connection with the rest of the world and a sense of hope through this connection. Sarah Blumenthal is a widow and Pem desires to be with her while he mourns her husband at the same time. Yehoshua sees a spy when he visits Miss Margolin, and Barbanel decides to have him go to the city in disguise and have him deliver his diary to a reliable priest. Yehoshua is horrified by the difference between the city and the ghetto. Everett mulls over the existence of the various aspects of nature and writes, "We are instructed that whatever condition God provides some sort of creature will invent itself to live in it" (105).

A movie is being filmed outside of Everett's apartment and he imagines himself as a man who realizes the film is being made about his own life. The man is eventually drawn into the film to play himself and ends up not being able to tell the difference between his own reality and the movie being made about it. Everett puts the lyrics to the song "Good Night Sweetheart" into his notebook and presents an alternate version of the lyrics, which include a reference to the banishing of sorrow in sleep and finding pictures for the pain in the drowsiness of the brain.

Analysis

The scientific discussion of the bottom-feeding animals of the sea and their survival in seemingly unsustainable environment serves as a symbolic example of the survival of the Jews during the persecutions of the Holocaust. Whatever conditions they are placed in, the Jews still retain their identity as individuals and as a people. Just as Barbanel's radio gives the runners hope, a sense of connection with a world outside of their own torment sustains the Jews. A sense that they have a role to play in the narrative of history and a sense that there is a role beyond the current circumstances of their torture sustains them through the horrors of the ghetto.

The man who is drawn into the film illustrates the power of the escapism of cinema. The escape into another world of imagination, a world removed from everyday concerns or horrors, delivers a healing sense of community and ultimate salvation.

Vocabulary

camaraderie, confide, indelible, resplendent, immeasurable, morale, perceive, trivialize, transfixed, infectious, complicity, cunning, scurry, environs, redress, sentient, inevitable, astute, manifestation



Part 6

Summary

With the approach of the end of the war, the Germans begin slowly to attempt to hide their war crimes by burning the bones of the dead and kill off the remaining Jews so they cannot tell the story of their imprisonment and torture. The Jewish partisans offer the option of escape, though only a small portion of Kovno accepts the invitation. Those who remain in Kovno are corralled and jammed like cattle into train cars without food, water, or toilets. Everett philosophizes on the meaning of consciousness and the place of human beings within the wide universe. He goes on to give a short biography of his mother and father, detailing their courtship and his sense of them after their deaths. He goes on to give the story of his father's role in World War I as an instance of the culminating moments of history. His father is saved through the use of the Yiddish language, a cousin of the German language, and is able to divert German soldiers away from his hiding place. Everett goes on to ruminate on the first song, the fact that dung beetles would have been absolutely essential to Noah on the ark, and the horror of the natural environment of the desert in which the historical figures of the Bible had to undergo the testing of their faith.

Analysis

Even in the face of impending freedom, the danger persists for the Jews and actually increases. Pain and suffering are never ending in a world of horrific monsters who disguise themselves as human beings. Pain and suffering are universal and continual and the perpetrators never receive the fullness of their punishment. Death is not enough to compensate for their crimes against other human beings.

However, within this continual parade of atrocities is the truth that each individual within the multitude contains all the experience of the world. All individuals are united in the merger of the inner life and the reality outside of their own consciousness. They are united in pain and suffering, and in this unity they find some relief from their sorrow. In this way, their inner consciousness, their soul, is an eternal thing untouchable by the external forces of circumstance and the machinations and the soulless individuals who perpetuate pain and suffering.

Everett senses his parents as a moral presence after their deaths and suggests this sense is held by all people after the death of a loved one. His following narrative about his father's role in World War I illustrates this sense of universal consciousness. When his father uses the Yiddish language to divert the Germans by shouting something that resembles the German language, it is his heritage and the history of his people that is saving him. This instance illustrates the sense that everything in the history of the world has led up to this one moment in time and this one place in history and that things



will continue to progress in this culminating fashion until the end of time. Each individual consciousness is a part of the whole.

Vocabulary

reclaim, archive, inexplicable, tenable, acute, paradoxical, impunity, avert, battered, fleeting, contrived



Part 7

Summary

Blumenthal narrates the suffocating ride of the Jews in the train car that took them away from Kovno. He describes the removal of individual identity as the Jews are reduced to the status of animals. He describes his own rediscovery of himself as he is able to gaze at the outside world through a hole in the car siding.

Everett has lunch with Sarah Blumenthal and she tells him it was the Yiddish language that led her to become a Rabbi. After his dismissal from his post as priest, Pem decides to go in search of the Kovno diary. Everett follows Pem's walking path through the city streets of New York. Everett is approached by a movie director who wants him to make a film about a life within a film. Ludwig Wienerschnitzel describes his philosophy that all the values of society must be given up in the discovery of the soul. He presents the concept that movies are not so much escapes as reflections of the reality of the world. Rather than language, they use images of analogous impact that provide the viewer with a clearer view of reality. The darkness of the theater reflects the darkness of the world. Everett records the lyrics of the song "Dancing in the Dark."

Analysis

Sarah's interest in the Jewish religion is created through her desire to maintain a connection with her mother after her death. She heard her mother speaking Yiddish with her grandmother and this linguistic basis for the history and life of her people is what drew her to become a Rabbi. Pem's search for the Kovno diary is an effort to connect with Sarah but also an effort to discover the truth of history and to unearth the lives of the Jews in the Holocaust. Wienerschnitzel's theory of movies develops one of the underlying themes of the novel, which is that language is inadequate in the categorization and capture of reality. Images and signs are far more effective.

Pem argues that the sign of the cross on the roof of the synagogue was far more effective than any lecture on the universality of human experience could ever be. Wienerschnitzel's concept supports the earlier story of the man whose life is taken over and enfolded within the framework of a film. The lyrics of the song dancing in the dark lead to the conclusion, by Everett, of the escape and healing power of film. That the viewing of a life outside of our own, which nonetheless contains moments of reflection of our own existence, is analogous to Yehoshua's experience of looking out of the hole of the train car and reaffirming his own identity.

Vocabulary

chassis, arousing, degradation, sundered, clientele, incorporate, crucial, presumptuous, momentous, aspire, vulnerable, indecisive, impoverish, homologous, consolation



Part 8

Summary

Everett meets with Pem's bishop and learns of Pem's obsession with the Holocaust and his criticism of postwar Christian theology. Pem's father-in-law writes him asking for advice in dealing with a man in a wheelchair who has camped out in front of his house and cannot be gotten rid of. Everett continues the biography of his family with a reintroduction to his mother and father and the further biography of his older brother, Ronald, who fought in World War II. Ronald survives a plane crash only to land on the unearthed bones of those who were murdered in World War I.

Analysis

The revelations of Pem's bishop underscore the motivating forces behinds Pem's search for truth in religion and his search for the Kovno diaries. He is unable to reconcile the God of the Bible and the God who allows atrocities like the Holocaust with the God of the universe. He is unable to fathom a punishment terrible enough or a hell vivid enough for the monsters of humanity like Hitler. And so he feels some deeper understanding is necessary than that which is put forth by the books of the Bible.

The narrative of Ronald's involvement in the war underscores the eternal nature of strife and pain in the world. Just as his father was forced to participate in World War I, Ronald now fights in World War II, and later generations will fight in Vietnam. The mention of the man in the wheelchair outside of Pem's father-in-law's house will lead to the discovery that the man is a Vietnam veteran searching for redress for his torment in the war and the horrors that continue to plague him after his return home.

Vocabulary

empathy, absolutism, preempt, seep, maverick, faux, unwitting, unregenerate, tinny, armament, credentials, widespread, deferential, flummox, denigration, dissipate, compress, attenuated



Part 9

Summary

Everett discovers that Schmitz, the S.S. officer from Kovno, is in the United States using a different name and has been tried for his war crimes. However, the evidence was insufficient to prove he was Schmitz and he was allowed to walk. Everett develops the story of a middle-aged journalist who has worked his life away unappreciated at the Times. At a certain point he simply decides to retire and after a time of experimentation with life he begins to think about the way stories are never finished for a reporter. This ex-Times journalist decides to finish some stories and he hears about the trial of Schmitz.

Sarah and Pem travel to Germany to the site of Joshua Gruen's murder during his search for the Kovno diaries. Everett inserts here a letter regarding the acquisition and exhibition of items of Judaic history by the Institute for the Exploration of the Jewish Question. The letter is essentially a long list of items stolen from the Jews. Everett creates a posthumous epistle by a European philosopher stating America is no different from her antecedents in Europe and all over the world. The fact is, the world is hell and continues to develop in the "dreck of the real, our wrecked romance with God" (192). Sarah echoes this philosopher's words when she speaks in the synagogue and says her efforts are all aimed toward getting back to the pre-scriptural, ground-level state of simple, unmediated awe.

The ex-Times guy buys a bike in order to scope out the neighborhood of the ex-S.S. sergeant. While biking, he accidentally runs over an old man and kills him. In a panic he returns to his hotel room and turns on the news to discover the old man was none other than Schmitz. Everett talks about how the importance and lasting power of great songs lies in their simplicity of structure, harmony, and words. Pem returns triumphantly to the United States with the Kovno diaries.

Analysis

Sarah preaches out the importance of pagan-like simplicity in the synagogue. She extols a simplicity that sees the good and bad of the world clearly and has the courage to fight for the good and against the bad a simplicity that can comprehend and understand the simple, unfathomable mystery of God, a simplicity that is able to work to strip away all the doctrinal lies and traditions that surround the Christian and Jewish concept of God. Illustrating this type of simplicity is the ex-Times reporter who assassinates Schmitz by accident. The reporter is at first unable to get past the societal rules that prohibit him from bringing justice to Schmitz. It is only after he has overcome his compunctions that he accidentally runs over the S.S. officer. It is the very accident of this occurrence that proves Schmitz was meant to be punished and was meant to die.



Everett talks about the powerful emotional impact of certain songs due to their simplicity. It is the simplest things that contain the most meaning.

Vocabulary

functionary, talons, gullet, unassuageable, affront, boorish, delusion, indigenous, conundrum, hallucination, composure, presume, profound, insufficient, unprepossessing

Part 10

Summary

Pem returns with the chest containing the Kovno journals and the material is turned over to the U. S. Attorney's office in order to prosecute certain individuals for their war crimes before the material returns to Sarah. Everett considers the influence of James Pike, former bishop of California, on Pem. Pike was Pem's mentor who believed, like Pem, the God of the universe is above and beyond the fictional stories of the Bible. Pike went out into the desert in Jerusalem in an attempt to find the historical Jesus and died there, stranded in the heat and the sand.

Everett goes on to present a small excerpt detailing the invention, by a scientist named Louis Slotin, of the atomic bomb. In a prayer, Pem reveals the story of his search to escape ritualization and find illumination in the wilds of Africa. He tells the story of his young African wife and her conversion to Christianity. He reveals that all of tribal heritage was removed with the growth of her faith until she was far more orthodox than he would ever be. Everett discusses the history of films which began as silent pictures and still employ the symbol or the sign as a form of communication over the use of language. Pem leaves the church. Everett writes a poem from the viewpoint of the Vietnam veteran who camps outside Pem's ex-father-in-law's house.

Analysis

The theme of the validity of simplicity in life and religion is carried on in this section of the novel. Pem's own Christian doctrines corrupt the simple beliefs of his African wife, and he is unable to communicate with her any longer. Her later letter to Pem after his return to the United States is written with a kind of cold formality typical of the mindset encouraged by the religious dogmas of the Anglican church.

In his discussion of the history of films, Everett's narrative tone implies a corruption over time of the movie form. He presents the silent films, which employed a symbolic form of communication over the linguistically heavy films of the modern era. However, films are still the most transcendent form of communication as they are essentially illiterate events employing impressions to communicate.

Vocabulary

impound, contrary, unearthly, apprehension, accumulate, synapse, transfiguration, intone, induce, raucous, excoriating, imperious, oxymoron, contrive, illusory, reconnoitering



Part 11

Summary

Pem resigns from the church and experiences an identity crisis. He considers getting rid of his ecclesiastical possessions and books but decides to keep them. He discusses Augustine's City of God with Everett. Everett records the words of The Song is You and tells the story of a young man from New Jersey who escapes from the poverty, abuse, and hardship of his life by becoming a singer. He has always admired those singers who create songs of true artistry and meaning, but he escapes to his dream city of New York, the alabaster city, by singing romance ballads. The song is New York City.

The ex-Times reporter decides to close another story and goes to Queens to assassinate a former Guatemalan death-squad commander. He is caught before he can complete his task, and it looks like he is going to be killed, but he surprises the commander when he lunges at him with a knife. The commander falls back in his chair and the impact of his head hitting the floor kills him. The ex-journalist wins again with another accident.

Everett again traces the history of cinema as a reflective, self-made process to a big money production of social archetypes and imaginary perfection. Everett talks about Valdemingomez, the City of Birds. Everett meets Pem, Sarah, and her two sons in Central Park on a Sunday. He brings along a woman whom he knows Sarah will not approve of because he is attempting to create distance between Sarah and himself. He remembers Sarah's sons finding an ant colony and how this made him think about the difference between the individual alone and the individual within a crowd.

Analysis

Pem picks up Augustine's City of God and now views it from a fictional, novelistic perspective rather than a theological treatise. Everett asserts Augustine is a good writer and he can appreciate his novelistic form. However, following the reality-based philosophical trend of the novel, the city of God turns out to be New York City. Like the city on a hill that was supposed to be America, New York will be the city of God that will begin the religious revolution headed by Sarah Blumenthal and Thomas Pemberton.

Everett traces the corruption of film from a valid form of communication that reflects the images of our world back to us in a way that allows for meaning and interpretation to a thing of escape that brings the viewers out of the reality of their lives. Movies have become like dreams. Everyone aspires to the perfection and wealth portrayed in movies. Instead of providing deep philosophical meanings and exploring the depths of human existence, movies now reduce the experience of life to trite perfection.

Vocabulary

symbolism, constituency, vestments, restraint, auxiliary, vamp, perpetual, cavernous, alabaster, contempt, disgruntled, distinction, cascade, prepossessing



Part 12

Summary

Pem goes back to the hospital to see one of the old patients there, an old man who is a stalwart atheist but kind enough to listen to Pem. When he arrives he finds a nun singing a secular ballad and he is moved to tears by the sweet simplicity of the song and the attention expressed by the old man and all the residents of the cancer ward. Everett states the central purpose of Sarah's synagogue, which is to consider the various aspects of Jewish teaching and practice from an intellectual, modern perspective and strip away all excess or unsupported assertions and traditions. Pem says he loves Jesus as a prophet and the ethics of the man, but he doesn't follow the theology or believe in the Trinity. Everett attends to services at the synagogue and looks on as Sarah is tested by her congregation. He is surprised when a man named Seligman, an old school mate from the Bronx High School of Science who used to copy his homework, is the one who succinctly sums up the main point of Sarah and Pem and defends their stance on religion. Everett transcribes Sarah Blumenthal's address to the Conference of American Studies in Religion in which she asserts the idea of God is evolving and God cannot be found or categorized by religious doctrine. Instead, she asserts, God is to be found in the evolving moral sense of themselves given to every human being.

Pem and Sarah are married and Everett attends their reception. Pem gives a speech summarizing the themes of the novel. Everett ruminates favorably on the postmodern concept of creating ephemeral art of the city and land. He imagines a film where an individual city is overwhelmed by the number of wretched it must contain, the city begins to implode from within even as prophets arise announcing the fury of God and his coming wrath. The military stages and coups and the government become totalitarian and enforces every aspect of human life. However, the hero and heroine of the film are a vitally religious couple who run a small, progressive synagogue in New York City and whose conviction promises a revolutionary new beginning.

Analysis

The totalitarian government described by Everett in his film vision greatly resembles the Nazi rule of Kovno and all German-ruled locations during World War I and II. This concept of the rise of a totalitarian government in the future in America supports the cyclical view of history presented in the novel and the view of American society as a product of its European antecedents. The novel emphasizes the fact that war is a recurring fact of life; it includes descriptions of World War I, World War II, and Vietnam. Each generation must struggle with its own war and battle with the forces of despotism that attempt to remove its identity.



However, there is a unity in this concept of cyclical history that brings a sense of community to those suffering under the burden of oppression. This is not the first time war has come and it will not be the last, and yet human beings continue to survive. Even deeper than personal identity lies a communal, societal, and human identity that protects every person from the total annihilation of himself or herself. The modern human's evolved, moral sense of himself or herself is where God is to be found. He is to be found in the moral compass provided by the memory of our parents and in the moral certainties found in the numeric foundations of nature. Simplicity in the basic elements of life and morality reveals God.

Vocabulary

vantage, cavernous, bulwark, instinctive, uncharacteristic, untenable, indivisible, adhere, conceive, insufficient, gravitate, reaffirm, infinitesimal, ineffable, indissoluble, catastrophe, flourish



Characters

Everett

The author of *City of God*, Everett compiles and composes the parts of the novel and places them together in his journal. Everett has no strong religious beliefs although he has a Jewish heritage. Everett attended the Bronx High School of Science.

Thomas Pemberton

An Anglican priest, Pem is experiencing a crisis of faith throughout most of the novel. After meeting Sarah Blumenthal, he begins to make sense of the conflict between his intellect and his religion.

Rabbi Joshua Gruen

Joshua is a Rabbi in the progressive synagogue based out of his home. Joshua is dedicated to the heritage of his people and his determination to revolutionize the Jewish belief system. He eventually dies during his search for a Holocaust diary.

Sarah Blumenthal

Sarah is married to Joshua Gruen and shares in the instruction in their synagogue. Pem is attracted to her from their first meeting and although she loves Joshua, Sarah eventually marries Pem after Joshua's death.

Mr. Blumenthal

Everett creates a firsthand account of the Kovno Ghetto using the testimony of Mr. Blumenthal regarding his experiences during the war.

Josef Barbanel

A member of the Jewish council in Kovno, Josef becomes like a father to Blumenthal after his parents die. Josef illegally records the events of the Holocaust so they will be preserved, and these records are later used to persecute individuals for their war crimes.



Greta Margolin

A nurse in Kovno, Greta is Josef's lover and becomes like a mother to Blumenthal. Greta assists Josef by transferring his writings to a safe location and also helps individuals escape from the ghetto.

Everett's Father

Everett's father fought during World War I as a communications expert. Everett includes the story of his father's experiences in his notebook.

Ronald

Ronald is Everett's brother who fought in World War II as a pilot. Everett narrates the story of his brother's survival after his plane crashes over Europe.



Objects/Places

New York City

The present narrative of *City of God* is set in New York City which provides a backdrop for the collection of diverse characters in the book. Everett and Thomas Pemberton both walk the streets of New York and simply observe the multiplicity of creation and the diversity of life. New York City serves as a symbol of the ultimate community of all human beings.

The Stolen Cross

The cross is stolen from the church of Thomas Pemberton and placed on the roof of the progressive synagogue run by Rabbi Joshua Gruen.

Barbanel's Diary

Barbanel records the events of the Holocaust that occur within his ghetto and what information he receives about outside events. His record serves to preserve sanity and a sense of action when it is written and later, when it is rediscovered, to serve as a source of evidence against the perpetrators of the Holocaust crimes.

Ulm

A city on the river Danube in Germany, Ulm is known for having the tallest church steeple in the world and being the birthplace of Albert Einstein.

Ghetto

During World War II, ghettos were created in Nazi-occupied territories throughout Europe in order to confine Jews and sometimes Gypsies in specific locations.

Torah

The first five books of the Jewish Bible, the Torah was revealed to Moses on Mt. Sinai.

Kovno

Kovno is the second-largest city in Lithuania. Before and after the Nazi occupation of the city, Jews were ostracized and killed.



City of God

City of God is a book written by Augustine in the early fifth century AD. The philosophical treatise deals with issues concerning God, martyrdom, Jews, and various aspects of Christian theology.

The Abraham Tory Diary

The Abraham Tory diary is the diary of one inhabitant of the Kovno Ghetto describing the events that occurred there during the Holocaust.

Everett's Notebook

This is the notebook in which Everett continuously records a variety of circumstances, thoughts, and characters. This notebook contains the entire novel of City of God.

Themes

Evolution

The novel opens with an eloquent scientific description of the Big Bang. The words create a mental image of a vast mixture of darkness and light containing isolated elements whipping around in chaotic order. The description encompasses the massive space of cosmic existence, the vast amount of years accorded to its development, and the wondrous beauty of its elements. The description combines poetic description and scientific language in an image of breathtaking beauty and staggering complication.

The concept of evolution applies first literally to the scientific progression of life and later to the historical progress of human existence. Finally, at the end of the novel, it is applied to the human conception of God and religion. According to Pem, God must be remade in the modern world. There must be an evolutionary transformation that will provide a valid foundation for the modern amalgamation of intellect, science, and religion.

Human Reality

Reality is something that can be very difficult to determine and pin down in this novel. It is constantly shifting and changing just as the passages shift and change without warning or introduction. The novel presents the idea that reality can be corrupted, replaced, or supplemented by media--the media of the detective novel or the media of cinema. Everett tells Pem facts and actuality are irrelevant and distracting in the composition of a novel whether it is fiction or nonfiction. In the composition of a story, facts are selected, changed, and left out.

Pem arrives at and describes his theory of the stories of the Bible in light of detective novels. He says the writer works backward in all stories because the ending is known from the beginning. Knowing people speak different languages leads you to the tower of Babel. Knowing all life ends in death leads you to the story of The Fall. Pem often imagines himself as a detective in a novel and these imaginings actually occasionally help him to arrive at deductions and facts in his real life. There are several passages in the novel that describe people going to movies in order to escape their lives and live through the lives of imagination they see on screen. In Everett's imagination, movies take on a life of their own and control the world through the influence they maintain over people's emotions. At one point in the novel, Everett imagines a man who sees a movie being filmed outside his apartment and realizes the movie is about his life. Eventually he is drawn into the movie to play himself and he can no longer perceive the separation between film and reality.



Identity

The concept of human identity plays a large role in the novel. The novel endorses the idea of communal history and cosmic connection. The descriptions of the galaxy and the universe present an image of what seems like a mass of isolated, individual objects, which, in reality, function in tandem and rely on one another for existence. In the same way the individuals of the novel seem to be isolated from one another and from the people within their narratives, they have difficulty establishing their roles in the world and in their interactions with other people.

However, by the end of the novel it is clear the lives of these individuals are all intertwined. They flow out of one another just as the events of the novel and choices of the characters lead to the final marriage of Pem and Sarah. Individual human identity seems like something fragile and can be stripped away by the horrors of existence. But in the vast framework of the universe, human identity is secure in its communal composition. Each identity is a part of the whole and therefore can never be completely stripped away from the individual. The evil schemer in the novel can take the face of his lover's husband, but he is unable to remove the man's identity. Against all odds and in the face of insanity, the man is able to remember who he is and maintain his own identity. Men can be tortured, beaten, killed, and shunned, but all of these external forces of cruelty are unable to touch the abiding sense of self that lies deep in the nature of every man.



Style

Point of View

The novel contains short poems, philosophical passages, and character narratives collected by a writer named Everett. If there is one main narrator it is Everett. However, the passages are written from a variety of individual perspectives. Almost all of the passages are written in the first-person narrative form as Everett is working on several biographical compositions. However, many of the passages are also composed in third-person point of view and many of them are poems or songs. The largest portions of the stories are narrated by Everett and Mr. Blumenthal, although Everett is writing the recollections from Mr. Blumenthal's perspective.

Setting

The various sections of the book are set in many locations. The main setting is New York City, where the present-day characters live. Everett is a lifelong resident of New York and the city develops into its own character in the novel. Parts of the novel are also set in various locations in Europe, with the Kovno Ghetto in Lithuania being the most important and receiving the largest portion of the narrative. Although the settings are located around the world and the descriptions come from various historical eras, the events described often mirror one another.

Language and Meaning

The language of *City of God* is often as confusing and jarring as the various sections. Due to the intellectual bend of the novel, the language is often highly philosophical and occasionally vague. The inner thoughts and language of the characters can sometimes be confusing because they are not contextualized. The reader is plopped down into the life or conversation of a given individual and must construct a valid conclusion. This method of narrative mirrors the logical progression of philosophical thought and examination.

Structure

The structure of the novel is often jumbled and jarring. The novel is not easily divided as it has no chapters, parts, or major divisions. The assorted narratives and ruminations are contained within sections of unequal lengths. The various sections have no introduction or heading so that the reader has no idea who is talking or what is going on at the beginning of the passages. While this type of narrative can be extremely confusing, it highlights the fact that in many cases the various story lines reflect one another even though they involve different times and places. This structural style also helps highlight the chaos in the mind of Pemberton and Everett as they both search in

different ways for some type of resolution. The enormity of the thoughts and events contained within the narratives and the massive amounts of meaning they contain also reflect the influence of the narrator's ruminations on the vastness of the universe and the intersections of the galaxy.



Quotes

It is a rather frightening idea, in fact, that if I moved at the speed of light, I could get no confirmation of my existence from an objective source of reflected light such as a mirror. I would be like a ghost in the universe, materially unverifiable in the stream of time.

Feelings transmute as quickly and perversely as subatomic events, and when there is critical mass a song erupts, but the overall amount of pure energy is constant. And when a song is good, a standard, we recognize it as expressing a truth. Like a formula, it can apply to everyone, not just the singer.

Every stone recorded its own shaping, it had the mark of its history of human work, and all the stones together represented an infinity of decisions under one plan, an intent to make a passable street.

Because evil as it is most often committed comes of the given life, it takes not only its motivation but its form from the structure of existing circumstances, it is not usually a thing of such high-concept deviance and requiring such extensive planning to perform.

I take the position that true faith is not a supersessional knowledge. It cannot discard the intellect. It cannot answer the intellect with a patronizing smile.

Under fire, I became terrified as an animal but in the midst of my trembling I defined courage as, and took it in, the conviction that one's true world-creating, world-created soul... is finally inviolable by circumstance.

So I pictured my father in the state of war / a state neither French nor German nor American / but founded to contest all sense and meaning.

You want to make a movie about a man who makes a movie with an actress whose fate in the movie is repeated in her real life, except that her real life is a movie that you are making with another actress about how your movies foretell real life--is that the idea?

The experience of experience is untransmittable, / The children shrug what's done is done, / and history instructs them finally / not to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, / As some thirty million were in World War Two, / each a packet of terminal agony / for at least one unendurable moment / and all the loving structures of consciousness / satanically compressed as the world / came to an end.

Orthodox devotions that do not let in the light of modern knowledge are no more than a form of ancestor worship.



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

What do you think Doctorow's purpose was in structuring the novel as he did? What meaning did you derive from the structure? How did the structure make you view the story?

Topic 2

How do science and religion interact in the novel? How does religion interact with the intellect in the novel? What meaning does religion seem to have for the survivors of war and the Holocaust?

Topic 3

Why does Pem believe that the words of faith and concepts of God must be reborn? What does he mean when he suggests that men change God when they alter their definitions and view of God? How does religion interact with the modern world in this novel?

Topic 4

What do evolution and the Big Bang have to do with the events of the novel? How are these scientific ideas viewed by the characters in the novel? How do they interact with religion?

Topic 5

What are the various quests taken up by the characters in the novel such as Pem, Sarah, Everett, and the ex-Tiimes man? How do these quests relate to one another? How do they relate to truth, chaos, meaning, and significance?

Topic 6

Why is Pem so affected by the scene of the nun singing with the inhabitants of the cancer ward? What does it mean when the pop song becomes transformed into a kind of secular hymn? What is a secular hymn? Why does this song seem to have more of an impact on the patients than all of Pem's visits?



Topic 7

What do media forms like novels and movies have to do with the story? What role do they play in the development of the characters? What role do they play in the development of society? What do novels and movies represent in the story?

Topic 8

In what ways does religion interact with the concept of communal history in the novel? What effect does the concept of communal history have on the characters of the novel? In what way does the concept of communal history interact with Everett's musings on the galaxy and the universe?