

# **The Childhood of Jesus Study Guide**

**The Childhood of Jesus by J. M. Coetzee**

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# Plot Summary

A man and a boy arrive at a Relocation Center in a city called Novilla. They have travelled there from a camp called Belstar, where they were given new names, assigned approximate ages, and taught how to speak Spanish. Now, as 45-year-old Simon and five-year-old David, they arrive in Novilla to begin a new life.

They are given temporary accommodation and Simon is assisted in his search to find work. Simon begins a job hauling sacks of grain at the docks where his foreman, Alvaro, agrees to watch over David while Simon works. Simon plans to assist the boy in finding his mother although neither of them knows her name or what she looks like. Despite this lack of information, Simon is confident that he will know who David's mother is when he meets her. Soon, the pair is assigned their own apartment in a place called East Village, where David befriends another young boy called Fidel and Simon begins a relationship with Fidel's mother Elena.

One day, during a hike in the countryside, Simon and David come across a luxurious building known as La Residencia. They see some people playing tennis within the grounds and Simon is instantly convinced that the woman, Ines, is David's mother. Simon convinces Ines to become David's mother. Simon moves out of the apartment in East Village and Ines moves in with David. The other adults in Simon's life are dismayed by his decision to allow a stranger to take care of David without any evidence that she will treat him well. Elena does not believe that Ines takes care of David as well as Simon used to. Initially, Ines refuses to let Simon spend any time with David, but Alvaro intervenes on Simon's behalf and he begins to spend more time with the boy again.

Ines believes that David is unusually gifted and that his innate intelligence means that he doesn't have to learn to read and write. Simon tries to correct this by teaching David to read using a copy of "Don Quixote" but David insists on his own unusual methods of reading and writing. When the time comes for David to begin school, his refusal to read, write, and count in a standardized way gets him in trouble with the school authorities who take David away from Ines and Simon and send him to a residential school elsewhere. David runs away from the school and Ines and Simon flee Novilla with David so that the school authorities cannot take him away from them again.

Simon, David, Ines, and a hitchhiker named Juan whom they pick up during the journey, travel together to a new city where they plan to begin a new life.



# Chapters 1 – 6

## Summary

A man in his mid-forties and a young boy about five years old have recently left a camp where they were given new names; the man is now Simon and the boy is now David. At the camp, they were taught to speak Spanish. Now, in Chapter 1, they arrive at a relocation center in a city called Novilla. Where the camp is, why Simon and David are there, where they were before, and why they had to leave are never explained. All that is made clear is that people in Novilla do not possess complete memories of what their lives were like before they arrived there.

At the relocation center Simon and David are assigned temporary accommodation by a woman called Ana, but Ana cannot find the key for their room. Simon explains to Ana that he and David are not related - they met on a boat on their way to the camp. Ana sends Simon to look for a woman called Senora Weiss to ask her for the key, but when Simon finds her office he discovers that Senora Weiss has gone home for the day. Ana offers to let Simon and David sleep in the yard outside her home. In the night, Simon complains that it is cold and asks Ana if he and the boy can sleep inside. She throws him a blanket out of the window. In the morning they return to the relocation center and a woman there gives Simon papers that will allow him to find a job.

In Chapter 2, Simon takes David to the docks where he gets work carrying bags of grain. The foreman offers to watch over as David as Simon works. Simon fears he is too old and weak for the work but his workmates are patient and accepting. Simon and David return to the relocation center and gain access to their room there.

In Chapter 3, Simon focuses his attention on his desire to locate David's mother. He asks Ana to help him and explains that although he does not know the name of David's mother, he senses intuitively that both he and the boy will recognize her when they see her. Ana says she cannot help him. Simon and David return to the docks where David has befriended one of the cart horses, who he has named El Rey. The foreman, Alvaro, invites Simon and David to join him at a football match.

In Chapter 4, Ana invites Simon and David to a picnic for new arrivals, but when they get to the park, they realize they are the only people who are coming. They eat very plain and insubstantial food. David complains that he is hungry. Ana and Simon have an argument because Ana is offended by Simon's sexual attraction to her. She tells him that his urges are provoked by her beauty but that her beauty has no rational connection to the physical acts that he wishes to engage in.

In Chapter 5, Simon feels unwell and goes to the doctor, who tells him that his symptoms are all in his mind and there is nothing he can do to help him.



In Chapter 6, David occupies himself playing chess with Alvaro while Simon works on the dock. David has a high-speed game of chess with Eugenio, another of the dockworkers (known as *stevedores*). David wins and Eugenio says that David has a devil in him. A newcomer called Daga arrives on the docks. Daga is paid less than he wants, so he attacks Alvaro with a knife and steals the moneybox as well as the paymaster's bicycle.

## Analysis

In Chapter 1, the reader is in the same position as Simon and David: all are strangers in a new land, who do not understand the rules and customs that govern this society. The implication in these early chapters is that all of the mysteries set-up at the start of the novel will be slowly explained as events unfold, but this is not the case. Who these people are, why they have no memories of their former lives, and what has led them all to Novilla is never explained. Further to this, no explanation is ever provided as to why everyone has been required to learn how to speak Spanish.

The reader only receives small pieces of information which must stand-in for any knowledge of the wider society in which the narrative takes place. In this way, the author recreates for the reader the experience of being a foreign language speaker in an unfamiliar place. The reader receives enough information to get a basic grasp of what's happening in the novel, but not enough information to truly understand what this place is and why the events of the novel are happening. This reflects Simon's complete reliance on beginners Spanish to conduct all of his work affairs and his relationships. He knows only enough Spanish to achieve the basic necessities of his life, but not enough to dive into any more serious depths of understanding or communication.

The way Simon and David are treated by Ana is a reflection of the way people are treated in Novilla as a whole: they are given precisely enough to survive and are given this without judgement or resentment. Simon and David are given somewhere safe to sleep, just as the residents of Novilla are provided with jobs and housing. However, what Simon and David are given is a bare minimum for survival and does not represent any warmth or generosity on behalf of Ana. She does not invite them into her home or provide them with a nourishing meal, instead feeling that her offer to allow them to sleep on the ground outside is sufficient. Likewise in Novilla as a whole, most people have nothing in their lives beyond the basic necessities of survival.

In Chapter 2, this system of offering the bare minimum of kindness (what will later be referred to throughout the novel as "goodwill") continues at the dockyards. Simon's boss and his coworkers are patient with his initial difficulties carrying the heavy sacks of grain, but there is no suggestion of anything approaching real sympathy or friendship emanating from the men. This lack of emotional depth is reflected in the bland diet that Simon and David have consumed since their arrival in Novilla. Like the endless bread they consume, the human interactions they encounter are sufficient but in no way joyful or inspiring.



Chapter 3 introduces Simon's central goal in the novel: the task of finding David's mother. However the introduction of this goal does little to clarify anything for the reader. Simon refuses to explain to Ana how he became the child's guardian or why he believes that he will be able to identify his mother even though he has never seen her before and does not know her name. Indeed, this is never explained to any of the other characters or to the reader.

Simon's attitude to finding David's mother is a reflection of traditional attitudes towards finding a romantic partner. Standard romances often give the impression that there is a special someone out there in the world for everyone (often referred to as "The One") and although no one knows what this person looks like or what their name is before they meet them, it is believed that when soulmates meet each other they will intuitively know that they have met the right person. Instead of applying this attitude to the search for a soulmate, Simon applies this attitude in a search for David's mother, which makes the attitude appear irrational and peculiar, although it is accepted as a normal belief in other spheres of life.

## Discussion Question 1

How does Ana treat Simon and David? What does this say about her, or the society in Novella?

## Discussion Question 2

How does Simon feel about Ana? What does this reveal about his character?

## Discussion Question 3

Is David content with his life? How can readers tell?

## Vocabulary

partitioned, articulates, perished, rummages, disoriented, informal, extensive, desolate, ascending, anonymous, limbo, substantial, incurious, lethargic, etiquette, shortage, moderate, dolefully, proprietor, bookish



# Chapters 7 – 12

## Summary

In Chapter 7, Simon receives a letter informing him that he and David have been assigned an apartment in a place called East Village and they move in. David befriends another young boy in their apartment complex called Fidel. Fidel's mother, Elena, offers to teach David how to play the violin. Simon asks Elena whether there is a man in her life and privately considers whether or not he is trying to seduce her.

In Chapter 8, Elena and Fidel spend the night in Simon and David's apartment because of a blackout. Elena and Simon have sex. They continue their relationship over the following weeks and discuss getting married. Simon feels that their relationship lacks passion whereas Elena feels that passion is part of an old way of thinking that doesn't apply to people's lives anymore.

In Chapter 9, Simon and David take a trip to the countryside. They come across a grand building called La Residencia where they see two men and a woman playing tennis. Simon instantly senses that the woman is David's mother. He goes inside the building and asks the woman if she will be David's mother. She tells him to leave.

In Chapter 10, the woman from La Residencia, Ines, comes with her brother Diego to visit Simon and David in their apartment. Simon explains that he will give up all claims of guardianship to David if Ines agrees to be the boy's mother. Diego is unconvinced but Ines agrees to the plan. Children aren't allowed to live at La Residencia, so Simon tells Ines that she can have his apartment in East Block and he will move out.

Ines moves in the following day. Elena criticizes Simon's decision to hand over David to the care of a stranger for no reason other than his intuition. Elena offers to let Simon live with her and Fidel, but he refuses and begins sleeping rough at the dockyard. Simon goes to Elena's apartment for a meal and she tells him that Ines has forbidden David from seeing Fidel. Simon tries to visit David but Ines will not open the door. In Chapter 11, Simon tries to visit David again but Ines and Diego are taking him to La Residencia for the weekend. Bored and lonely, Simon takes a bus to La Residencia and watches David play tennis through the fence.

In Chapter 12, Simon tells Alvaro that he found David's mother, and Alvaro expresses sadness and surprise that Simon would give up his relationship with David. Fidel arrives on the docks to invite Simon to have dinner with him and his mother. Elena continues to criticize Simon for leaving David in the care of Ines.

## Analysis

Once Simon and David receive their designated apartment in East Block, all of the necessities of their lives are covered. They have food, shelter, and the society of



colleagues and neighbors. However Simon remains unsatisfied with what has been provided for him, feeling that there must be something more to life. Simon's longing for something more spiritually fulfilling than his current life is reflected in David's desire for something to eat other than bread.

In Chapter 8, just as Simon provided David with fruits and vegetables to make his diet more exciting, Simon begins to pursue a sexual relationship with Elena in order to make his life more exciting. However, because Elena's interest in passion does not match his own, Simon continues to live his life feeling like something is missing.

The trip to the countryside in Chapter 9 swings the narrative into a completely new direction when Simon and David meet Ines, who Simon claims is David's mother. The reader may have expected that when Simon found David's mother, the mystery of how the child was separated from her in the first place and why Simon is so confident in his intuitive abilities will be explained, but this is not the case.

At no stage in the novel does Simon, the narrator, or any other character make any form of explanation as to why Simon believes that Ines is David's mother. Up until this moment in the novel, the reader has broadly sympathized with Simon. The lack of warmth, passion, and generosity in Novilla is unsettling and the reader sympathizes with Simon's sense of alienation and his longing for something more. Chapter 9 is a turning point in the reader's attitude to Simon because his actions appear so unjustified and his blind faith in his intuition seems nonsensical.

In Chapter 10, Simon renounces all of the few comforts which his life has offered him up until this point: he gives up his relationship with David, his apartment in East Block, and he declines the offer to move in with Elena. Further to this, he also reverts to a plain diet of bread and bean soup now that he is not in charge of feeding David. Although Simon had been searching for something more in his life, that search has only served to destroy the positive elements that had existed in his life previously, making his life even less joyful and passionate than it had been before he succeeded in his quest to find David's mother.

Before Simon's decision to leave David with Ines, the reader has been broadly aligned with his way of thinking. Alvaro's refusal to question the pointlessness of their work on the docks and Elena's lack of interest in passion and romance have seemed unnatural and strange, leading the reader to sympathize with Simon. A switch occurs after the introduction of Ines, when both Alvaro and Elena become more aligned with the reader, expressing their puzzlement at Simon's decision-making and expressing concern for David's welfare in Chapters 10 and 12. This is the first clue in the novel that Simon's own perspective may be as flawed as the world around him, just in different ways.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Simon believe that Ines is David's mother? What does this say about Simon?





## Discussion Question 2

How is David's life changed by suddenly having a mother?

## Discussion Question 3

What role does Elena play in the novel?

## Vocabulary

cluster, communal, amenities, sparsely, disorderly, dutifully, surge, preoccupied, prominent, impels, habitation, terminates, adversaries, accompanied, vigorously, manservant, infringing, regulation, qualms, urgings



# Chapters 13 – 18

## Summary

In Chapter 13, Simon spends his time lurking around East Block in the hopes that he will bump into Ines and David. One day, he sees them. Ines is pushing David in a stroller even though he is old enough not to need one. Simon worries that David seems anxious. Later, Elena once again criticizes Simon for allowing a stranger to take charge of David without first establishing that she would take good care of him. Simon continues to insist that it was essential that he trust his intuition.

In Chapter 14, Simon argues with his colleagues at the dockyard. Simon insists that their job is pointless and would be better done by machines. His colleagues (especially Eugenio) disagree and insist that their work is noble and valuable in and of itself. Simon visits the warehouse and discovers that it is infested with rats.

In Chapter 15, Eugenio apologizes if he hurt Simon's feelings during their argument. He invites Simon to join him at The Institute, a center that offers educational classes for adults. Simon goes to The Institute and attends a philosophy class with Eugenio during which the teacher asks them to consider how they know that a chair is a chair. Simon leaves the class early and bumps into Ana from the relocation center in the hallway. Ana is at The Institute because she is posing nude for a Life Drawing class. Simon tries to join the Life Drawing class but it is full. Back at work, Simon tells Alvaro that Ines is refusing to let him see David. Alvaro calls Ines and convinces her to allow Simon to visit David once a month.

In Chapter 16, Ines phones the dockyard because there is a plumbing emergency in the apartment. Simon goes to the apartment and unblocks the toilet.

In Chapter 17, Elena tells Simon that there are locations he can visit if he is searching for sexual relief. Simon visits a place called Salon Confort and fills in an application form to become a member. On the application form, he describes why he is interested in having sex with the women who work there. Simon receives no response to his application for membership and assumes that he has been turned down.

In Chapter 18, Simon visits with David. David claims that Ines told him he will have some brothers and that he is so clever that he does not have to go to school. David tells Simon that he knows all the numbers and lists a series of apparently random numbers. Simon tells him that being able to name numbers isn't the same as being able to count. Simon decides to teach David to read, using a copy of Don Quixote from the East Block library, but they disagree about how to interpret the story.



## Analysis

In Chapter 13, Simon continues to suffer the consequences of following his intuition in relation to Ines, as he grows uneasy about the way that David is being treated. However, because of his decision to give up his own duty of care towards David, he no longer has any way of influencing the situation for the better.

In Chapter 14, at the docks, Simon makes a convincing argument that the work of the stevedores would be better done by machines, rather than requiring the grueling physical labor of the men. But now that the flaws in Simon's own perspective on the world have been revealed in relation to his treatment of David, the reader starts to suspect that it may be Simon who is unable to see the world clearly and rationally, rather than his fellow dockworkers. Unbeknownst to Simon, his suggestion that they should use machines at the dock will lead to him being physically harmed and no longer able to work later in the novel.

The suggestion that Simon lacks the same level of philosophical and spiritual understanding that his colleagues have is continued in Chapter 15 when Simon visits The Institute. Throughout the novel, Simon has protested that life in Novilla is not enough and that there is something of great importance missing in his life. However, when given the chance to explore a new perspective on the world and a new attitude towards the nature of reality (when the philosophy instructor begins to discuss how to understand the concept of a chair) he rejects the chance.

Rather than trying to see the world in a new way and approach everyday objects from a new perspective, Simon continues his old way of thinking which is driven primarily by physical needs such as hunger and lust. This is symbolized by his interest in attending the Life Drawing class, which is in fact merely an interest in seeing Ana naked after she turned down his sexual advances earlier in the novel, and his desire for salt to add to his spaghetti sauce. Although Simon claims to be searching for some higher meaning in life, he rejects the chance to pursue it when it is offered to him, preferring to remain mired in worldly concerns.

The sense that Simon is trapped in a life that revolves around the low concerns of the body, as opposed to the high concerns of the mind, is heightened in Chapter 16 when he becomes literally covered in the excrement of other people while trying to mend the toilet as well as mend his relationship with David and Ines.

Chapter 18 is the first real suggestion in the novel that David is not a normal child, although this has been hinted at throughout. Like the adults around him, David has his own perspective on the world that seems strange to other people. This is symbolized by the book *Don Quixote* which deals with the themes of delusion, perception, and reality through a protagonist who suffers delusions that he is a knight. David's refusal to accept Simon's interpretation of the book foreshadows the difficulties he will have with his teachers when he begins school.



## Discussion Question 1

How does Simon's attitude toward his job differ from the attitude of his colleagues? What does this suggest about Simon?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Simon not enjoy the philosophy class at The Institute?

## Discussion Question 3

How do the other characters feel about Simon's decision to leave David with Ines? How do you feel about his decision? What does his decision suggest about Simon?

## Vocabulary

retrospect, adrift, unvaryingness, humiliating, lurking, pining, dawdles, outskirts, placidly, hinterland, atmosphere, comrades, tenant, fobbed, fastidious, incredulously, gambolling, quizzically, bordello, reckless



# Chapters 19 – 24

## Summary

In Chapter 19, a fire at the docks leads to the death of one of the stevedores, a man called Marciano. David is very upset by the news of Marciano's death and asks to see his body so that he can breathe life back into him. Simon says that Marciano's soul has gone onto the next life and there is nothing they can do for him now. Simon and David continue to read Don Quixote together, but David stubbornly refuses to accept the things Simon tells him about the story. David insists that he knows how to read, but when Simon asks him to read he just recites a series of nonsense words.

In Chapter 20, Simon tells David that he should not eat pig meat because pigs ingest excrement and it is unsanitary, so David gives his dinner of sausages to the dog. Simon tells David that one day he will have to get a job and earn money but David does not understand why. David tries to show Simon that he can write, but Simon does not understand the symbols that David uses as letters and tells him that it is not really writing. David expresses a concern that people can fall into the cracks in between numbers, but Simon does not understand what he means.

In Chapter 21, David tells Simon that they saw Senor Daga, the man who stole the money and the bicycle from the dockyard. A few days later, Ines arrives at the dockyard in a panic and tells Simon that Daga has kidnapped David. Simon finds Daga's address and goes to his apartment, where he finds David watching Mickey Mouse cartoons. Simon takes David home.

In Chapter 22, Elena warns Simon that she thinks Ines wants to have more children and that if Simon doesn't offer to have children with Ines, then she will have them with Daga. Simon offers to get Ines pregnant but she refuses him. Simon and Ines return to the apartment where they are joined by Daga, Daga's girlfriend, and both of Ines's brothers. David insists that they all drink some sherry and play Truth or Consequences. David asks Ines which of the men in the room she would like to have a baby with but she refuses to answer. Diego says that Ines is not interested in men.

In Chapter 23, El Rey the carthorse is taken away from the docks and shot. David insists on seeing the dead body and tries to bring it back to life by breathing into its mouth. Simon helps David make a garland of flowers which they place around El Rey's neck.

In Chapter 24, David starts school. After a few weeks, Ines and Simon receive a letter asking them to visit the school. David's teacher, Senor Leon, complains that David seems unable to learn how to read, write, or count and that he is disruptive in class. He refers David to a psychologist. Ines and Simon meet the psychologist, who insists that David should be sent to a special learning residential school at Punta Arenas. Ines and Simon refuse.



## Analysis

In Chapter 19, David asserts that he would be able to bring Marciano back to life by breathing into him, a suggestion that Simon dismisses as the ramblings of a confused child. The reader, too, might be tempted to dismiss David's attitude as a childish delusion were it not for the novel's title and its reference to Jesus, who did have the ability to bring people back to life. The only suggestions in the novel that David would be capable of performing miracles come from the title's reference to Jesus and from David's own assertions about his abilities. However, these abilities are never put to the test, leaving it to the reader to interpret whether or not David possesses divine powers or whether he is merely a very disturbed and confused young boy.

Chapter 20 shows Simon's change in attitude in regards to David's diet. Whereas previously Simon feared that it was too plain and bland and that the boy needed to eat meat in order to be healthy, he now adopts a completely different stance and insists that pig meat should never be consumed. This highlights some of the flaws in Simon's initial way of thinking about food. When he first arrived in Novilla, Simon considered the lack of variety in the city's diet to be something limiting and negative. However, once David has access to a more varied form of diet, it raises issues of ethics and hygiene which never had to be considered while they were partaking of a simpler diet. By inviting further complications into their lives, Simon remains preoccupied with worldly concerns surrounding hunger and diet, once again being unable to push towards an understanding of the higher meaning of life. Simon's focus is on the potential harm of sausages, rather than the potentially profound implications of David's idiosyncratic approach to numbers and letters.

An extreme vision of Simon's initial plans for David is shown through David's relationship with Daga. Like Simon when the pair first arrived in Novilla, Daga believes that David should have access to more exciting food and entertainment. Further to this Daga, like Simon, is preoccupied with female bodies, as symbolized through the pen he shows David with a picture of a naked woman inside. Although Simon used to consider his desire for David to have a more eclectic diet and his own physical desire for women's bodies to be perfectly natural and harmless, when he sees the same attitudes expressed in a coarse and more extreme form in the figure of Daga, he considers such things to be dangerous and unhealthy for David to be around.

David announces in Chapter 23 that El Rey the carthorse will come back to life in three days. However Simon once again dismisses his words as the ramblings of a confused child and never seeks to confirm whether David's prophecy came true. The reader, too, is left in the dark about whether David really does have the power to bring the horse back to life.

David's disruptive behavior at school in his first few weeks in Chapter 24 is the event that provokes the destruction of everything Simon has built in Novilla, and will necessitate them starting their lives all over again somewhere else at the end of the novel.



## **Discussion Question 1**

How does David react to his encounters with death? What does this suggest?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What is the significance of Don Quixote in the novel?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Why might David struggle at school?

## **Vocabulary**

freighters, commotion, shrilling, billowing, austere, cluttered, withered, momentary, ingrained, dismissively, triumphant, gelding, interpret, mare, hygienic, assigned, resistance, overshadowed, guidance, arisen



# Chapters 25 – 30

## Summary

In Chapter 25, Simon informs the school that they intend to educate David at home but they are told that this is against the rules. They are summoned to appear at a tribunal. Simon insists that David must learn how to read, write, and count, so that they will accept him back at his old school. David surprises Simon by accurately reading random sentences from Don Quixote.

In Chapter 26, Simon takes David to show Senor Leon that he can read and write after all. Senor Leon tests David by asking him to read some random sentences from a book, which David does successfully. Senor Leon asks David to write “I must tell the truth” on the blackboard but instead he writes “I am the truth.” Senor Leon takes this as a sign that David is disobedient and disruptive and insists that he must be sent to Punta Arenas. They all attend the tribunal which concludes that David must go to Punta Arenas. After the hearing, Ines announces that she is going to run away from the city with David so that they cannot take him away from her.

In Chapter 27, the stevedores decide to test using a crane to do their work, as Simon had suggested. Eugenio operates the crane but loses control and knocks Simon into the crack between the boat and the dock, breaking his ribs. Simon falls into the water and Alvaro jumps in to save him. David and Fidel come with Ines and Alvaro to visit Simon in hospital. Ines and David told Simon that David had escaped from the school at Punta Arenas by walking through barbed wire and a woman had found him wandering the streets naked and had called Ines.

In Chapter 28, Simon is discharged from hospital and visits the apartment in East Block with Eugenio. When they arrive, Ines is being confronted by government officials who insist that David must return to Punta Arenas. One of the officials claims that there is no barbed wire at the school and that David is lying. Ines and Simon say they believe David, but Eugenio says he would have to see the school for himself before making up his mind. The woman from the government takes Simon aside and tells him that David was very happy at the school and all the older boys loved him but that he ran away because he knew that Ines would be upset without him.

In Chapter 29, Simon, Ines, and David leave the city in Diego’s car. They drive north and rent a cabana for the night. Inside, David opens a present he received from Daga: a magic trick with instructions to set fire to some powder that will make David invisible. David performs the trick but the powder explodes, burning David’s hand and blinding him.

The next morning, in Chapter 30, Ines and Simon go with David in the car in search of a doctor. On the way, they pick up a hitchhiker called Juan. Simon stops the car to let Juan leave but David commands that Juan must stay with them. They arrive at the





doctor's office. The doctor treats the burn on David's hand and tells them that there is nothing wrong with David's eyesight: he is just claiming not to be seeing normally. David asks the doctor to come with them, but he declines.

Simon, David, Ines, and Juan get back into the car and head north to Estrellita to begin a new life.

## Analysis

When, in Chapter 25, Simon discovers that David can read and write after all it raises questions about the nature of communication between human beings. Simon had assumed that because David chose not to communicate with him in the standard way of using numbers and letters, that this meant that David did not understand the standard method of communication. When David demonstrates in Chapter 25 that he is perfectly capable of reading and writing in the standard way, it suggests that his other attempts at communication were not made out of ignorance but out of a desire to find a new way of doing things.

This is a reflection of the communication difficulties Simon suffered with the other adults when he first arrived in Novilla. Simon assumed that Elena and Ana's lack of interest in sex, and his colleagues lack of doubt about the usefulness of their profession, were a sign that they did not understand Simon's perspective. On the contrary, the other adults, like David in this chapter, understood Simon perfectly. They were choosing to pursue a new way of thinking and communicating and it was Simon, not Ana, Elena, Alvaro, or Eugenio, who is incapable of understanding what was going on.

The suggestion that David is some sort of divine being is returned to once again in Chapter 26 when the boy writes "I am the truth" on the blackboard. Because neither Simon nor Senior Leon are interested in the implications of why David would make such a proclamation, the meaning of the statement is never pursued. It is left to the reader to ponder David's motivations and abilities, without being given any evidence or explanation within the narrative itself.

In Chapter 27, Simon falls in the crack between the boat and the harbor, echoing David's strange warning that people could fall into the cracks between numbers. Once again, Simon's insistent focus on worldly concerns leads to a worsening of his worldly condition. Rather than be content with the nature of his job, as the other stevedores were, Simon has instigated a change at the dockyard that led to his own physical harm.

Chapter 28 deals with the question of whether or not David is telling the truth and which of the characters trust his version of events. This chapter echoes the position of the reader in relation to the novel. Because David's claim to have healing powers are never tested or explained within the narrative, it is up to the reader to decide whether they believe that David can really do what he says he can do. In this chapter, both Simon and Ines insist that they believe David's story about the barbed wire (although they do not believe his claim that he can bring Marciano and El Rey back to life). In contrast,



Eugenio says that he would have to see the barbed wire for himself before he can make up his mind. The reader is in a similar position. Does the fact that David's ability to perform miracles is never depicted in the novel mean that they are a delusion? Is it necessary for the reader to have such miracles described in the text before they can be acknowledged as part of the story? These questions remain a mystery.

The questions of interpretation, perspective, and communication continue in Chapters 29 and 30 when David claims to have damaged his eyesight but the doctor insists that he can see perfectly normally. This is a question that can never provide a concrete answer as no human being can definitively claim to know what another human being can see, reflecting the novel's own lack of conclusions and certainty. David's sense of himself as an authority figure grows in these concluding chapters as he begins to issue commands and orders to the adults he meets.

Having tried and failed to establish a life for himself and David in Novilla, Simon begins a new life in a new location. As he continues to be preoccupied with worldly concerns, rather than the spiritual possibilities of his own life or of David's special abilities, there is no reason for the reader to believe that Simon's new life will be any different to the one he is leaving behind.

## Discussion Question 1

What are the pros and cons of David living with Ines or going to school in Punta Arenas?

## Discussion Question 2

What might the crane represent or symbolize in this novel?

## Discussion Question 3

What impact does Senor Daga have on the story?

## Vocabulary

intervenes, dyslexia, dormitory, exceptional, scrawny, peremptorily, recitation, hurls, resist, rebelliousness, idle, unanimous, discharge, consents, chaos, unfulfilled, intruder, ingenious, manifestations, inflammable



# Characters

## Simon

Simon is the central character/protagonist. He was assigned the age of 45, at the camp at Belstar, based solely on his appearance. At the time, Simon was offended by this age because he believed himself to be much younger but later, after spending time working in a physically demanding job, he starts to suspect that he might be much older.

Nothing at all is revealed to the reader about Simon's past, where he came from, or what his life was like before he arrived in Novilla. All that is certain is that Simon met David while they were travelling together by boat and that Simon began to take care of David because the boy had been separated somehow from his parents. The relationship between Simon and David is the central relationship of the novel and most of Simon's actions are motivated by his desire to do what is best for David.

Simon's goal at the outset of the novel is to reunite David with his mother, although it is never explained within the narrative where Simon got the idea that this was necessary or possible or why exactly he is so confident that he will be able to identify David's mother despite neither of them knowing her name or what she looks like. Simon is initially introduced as a sympathetic character and the reader empathizes with his difficulty adjusting to the emotionally hollow behavior of the people around him. However, Simon becomes less of a sympathetic character when he makes the decision to give up his duty of care to David and leave him with a woman that he knows nothing about.

Simon's actions are clouded by his attitude to women and by his focus on the body at the expense of the mind. Simon is incapable of seeing women as anything other than objects of his sexual attraction or as mothers to children. Further to this, he cannot comprehend of a woman being both of these things at once, so that the most intense sexual attraction he feels is directed at the woman (Ana) who shows the least amount of interest in taking care of David (in comparison to Elena and Ines). Simon's rigid attitude to gender (and the suggestion that women are more naturally suited to parenting than men) means that he is incapable of recognizing that he himself is already fulfilling David's need for a parent. Simon's focus on the body rather than the mind is symbolized by his preoccupation with food and sex. This is made most explicit during his visit to The Institute where he turns down the opportunity to learn about philosophy, being more interested in seeing Ana pose naked in the Life Drawing class and pining for some salt to add flavor to the spaghetti sauce served in The Institute's canteen.

## David

David is a young boy, aged about five years old, who was separated from his parents in mysterious circumstances while travelling to Novilla. The title of the novel implies that,



like Jesus, one of David's parents might be God, but this is never explicitly suggested by anyone within the narrative itself.

When David first arrives in Novilla he is completely dependent on Simon to provide him with food, love, and shelter. After these basic needs have been met, David starts to show an inventive and unique perspective on the world through developing his own way of writing, reading, and counting. Further to this, David possesses a strong belief in his ability to bring people back from the dead, although whether or not he can really do this is never revealed.

David's refusal of standardized forms of communication causes trouble with the school authorities who seeks to correct David's differences rather than explore or celebrate them. Because David is still a child who remains dependent on the care of Simon and Ines, his options for expanding his talents are limited. Unaware themselves of the possibilities of David's abilities, all Simon and Ines can do for him is to start another life in another city, with no reason to believe that things will be any different for them there than they were in Novilla.

## Ines

Ines is a woman living in the luxurious La Residencia complex in the countryside surrounding Novilla. After Simon and David see her playing tennis with her brothers, Simon is instantly sure that Ines is David's mother. Simon convinces Ines to take over the role of mother for David and she moves into Simon's apartment. She does not take care of David as well as Simon does although she professes to care for him deeply. Very little of Ines's character, personality, thoughts, or beliefs are explored in the novel. This reflects the limitations of Simon's own perspective on women. Because Simon is incapable of seeing Ines as anything other than a mother to David – and because the novel is told entirely from Simon's perspective –the reader never finds out anything about Ines as a human being.

## Alvaro

Alvaro is the foreman at the docks where Simon works. Alvaro is kind and generous to Simon and David when he first meets them, offering to watch over David while Simon works and lending Simon some money to help him meet his needs until payday. Simon thinks that Alvaro is narrow minded because he fails to see how much of their work on the docks is pointless and how it could easily be done by machines instead. Alvaro, in turn, is also perplexed by Simon's attitude to life, most notably his decision to give up his relationship with David, which Alvaro believes goes against human nature. Alvaro is responsible for restoring Simon and David's relationship after Simon relinquishes his rights to see the boy.



## Eugenio

Eugenio is a stevedore who works on the docks with Simon. He is the character who first notices that there is something unusual about David when he comments that the boy has a devil in him after he beats him at chess. Eugenio argues with Simon about his attitude to the meaning of their labor on the docks and tries to widen Simon's horizons by inviting him to a philosophy class at The Institute. Later, when the workers decide to test out Simon's plans by using a crane to do their work for them, Eugenio loses control of the machine and seriously injures Simon.

## Elena and Fidel

Elena and Fidel are a mother and son who live in an apartment building in East Block near to Simon and David. David and Fidel are initially good friends but when Ines becomes David's mother she refuses to let David play with Fidel anymore. Elena and Simon begin a sexual relationship but Simon always feels as if Elena's feelings for him lack passion. Elena is heavily critical of Simon's decision to allow Ines to take responsibility for parenting David. Elena and Simon's relationship slowly comes to an end after the arrival of Ines.

## Ana

Ana works at the Relocation Center and is one of the first people Simon and David have contact with in Novilla. She extends a certain amount of kindness to David and Simon but only ever the bare minimum: she allows them to sleep in her yard but will not let them come inside and she invites them to a picnic but only serves plain under-nourishing food. Simon's sexual attraction to Ana annoys her and causes them to argue. Later, Simon's continuing desire for Ana's body prompts him to try to join a Life Drawing class where she poses as a model.

## Daga

Daga is a man who works one day at the docks alongside the other stevedores but steals the moneybox and a bicycle and cuts Alvaro's hand with a knife because he feels that he is being underpaid for his work. Later, Daga becomes acquainted with Ines and David. Daga shows David pictures of naked women, feeds him ice cream, lets him watch cartoons, and gives him a gift of a magic trick that is dangerous and leads to David hurting himself. Daga's irresponsible behavior towards David is contrasted with how sincerely and maturely Simon previously took care of him.



## Senor Leon

Senor Leon is David's schoolteacher who refuses to keep David in his class because of David's unusual attitude to reading, writing, and counting and because he believes that the boy is incapable of being obedient. Senor Leon's inability to see David's unique gifts is symbolized by his glass eye meaning that he is both literally and metaphorically incapable of seeing everything that is happening around him.

## Diego

Diego is one of Ines's brothers. He opposes Simon's plan to have Ines become David's mother and refuses to help Ines when she wants to escape from Novilla to ensure that David does not have to return to the school at Punta Arenas. Because Diego refuses to help Ines, Simon steps forward and takes them all to begin a new life somewhere else at the end of the novel.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Bread

Bread is symbolic of earthly concerns and physical needs. In Novilla, most people subsist on a very simple diet consisting mostly of bread. At the start of the novel, Simon finds the lack of variety in the city's diet stifling and believes that it is not sufficiently nourishing for himself or for David. However this, in turn, symbolizes Simon's lack of philosophical understanding. Simon's focus on the worldly concern of bread and his belief that a more varied diet would bring some much needed excitement into his existence belies the fact that the search for meaning in life must be undertaken on a spiritual level, not on the earthly level symbolized by bread.

## Glass Eye

Senor Leon's glass eye is symbolic of the novel's theme of perception and reality. All of the characters see the world in a slightly different way and consider other characters to be crazy or stupid for seeing things in their own way. When David starts school, his refusal to read, write, and count in the standardized way causes him to fall out with Senor Leon who fails to see the whole of David's intelligence and abilities, just as he literally cannot see everything that is in front of him because one of his eyes is made of glass.

## Don Quixote

Don Quixote, similarly to the glass eye, is symbolic of the novel's theme of perception and reality. The classic interpretation of the novel is that Don Quixote is deluded and his servant, Sancho, knows what is really happening. However, David rejects this interpretation of the book when Simon offers it to him, hinting at the fact that David may have a higher level of spiritual understanding than those around him. Further complicating the novel's use of Don Quixote is the fact that Simon – the supposedly more mature, rational, and intelligent of the pair – continually tells David that the novel was written by a man called Benengeli who is, in fact, a fictional author invented by the novel's real author Cervantes. Simon's conviction that the novel was written by Benengeli implies some society-wide misinformation as does David's belief that the song he sings in German is English. These different levels of interpretation and misinformation make it impossible for the reader to fully accept any of the characters' worldviews.

## Crane

The crane used at the dockyards by Eugenio to haul the grain off the ships is symbolic of Simon's inability to appreciate what is good in his life, and the fact that his tendency



to attempt changing his worldly circumstances instead of pursuing spiritual concerns always leads to a worsening of his earthly conditions. Simon believed himself to be much smarter than the other men when he suggested the crane, but when they agreed to try it out it resulted in Simon being knocked overboard and seriously injured. Although the crane was a more efficient way of achieving the work, it also had more potential to harm the workers.

## Rats

Rats are symbolic of the futility of focusing on worldly concerns at the expense of spiritual development. When Simon discovers that the warehouse where the grain is stored is infested with rats, it makes him despair about the pointlessness of his labor on the docks. He believes that because so much of the grain is “wasted” when it is eaten by rats, that this makes much of their labor pointless. However the rats, like the humans, are earthly creatures that need to eat in order to survive. Simon’s plans to make the dock work more efficient would not change this fact and an endless pursuit of eradicating rats from the process would do nothing to further Simon’s spiritual understanding of existence. In contrast, Alvaro takes a more philosophical approach, arguing that rats will always thrive where humans thrive and that it is nothing to be concerned about.

## Life Drawing

The Life Drawing class at The Institute is symbolic of Simon’s preoccupation with matters of the body rather than matters of the mind. When he arrives at The Institute, Eugenio invites Simon to join a philosophy class which he is attending, but Simon leaves the class early without attempting to engage with the topic. Simon’s sexual attraction to Ana is established in the earlier chapter at the picnic, so her appearance again at The Institute as a nude model for the life drawing class links Simon’s interest in the class with his sexual interest in Ana.

## Football

Football is symbolic of community values and the possibility for workers to find meaning and joy in their existence, beyond the basic necessities of survival. In Novilla, as far as the reader can tell, no one goes without work and no one goes hungry. Although little information is given about the wider society, this can be inferred from the treatment that Simon and David receive upon their arrival and the ease with which Simon finds work. Living a life that does not have to solely focus on work and the need to put food on the table allows the men from the docks to seek meaning in different areas, in this case through their engagement with sport and their support for their favorite team.





## Music

Music provides deeper meaning in Elena's life in a similar way to the way football provides deeper meaning for the lives of the stevedores. Further to this, music also symbolizes the different levels of understanding that human beings must go through in order to achieve greater spiritual development. When David first expresses an interest in learning to play the violin, Elena tells him that he must learn to play the recorder first before he can move on to the next level of learning to actually play the violin. This reflects Simon's stunted growth as a spiritual being: he wants to get to a higher level of spiritual understanding and fulfillment in life (symbolized here by the violin) but refuses to engage in the groundwork necessary to reach that level of understanding (symbolized here by the recorder.)

## Mickey Mouse

When they first arrive in Novilla, Simon worries that David's development will be stunted by the lack of variety and fun in his diet and his activities. However, the type of variety that Simon seeks to introduce to David is not the sort of thing that would lead to the development of David's unusual and potentially divine abilities. This is shown through the figure of Senor Daga, who actually follows through with his impulse to make David's life more fun by feeding him ice cream and allowing him to watch Mickey Mouse cartoons. Rather than aiding David's development, however, these actions only serve to make David unruly and badly behaved.

## Spanish

On a metaphorical level, the fact that everyone is speaking in a foreign language, which is not their native language, is symbolic of the quest for spiritual meaning. All of the characters in the novel were taught to speak Spanish at some form of refugee camp before arriving to begin a new life in Novilla. Why this happened on a practical level is never explained. Simon is searching for a higher meaning in his life, but this meaning lies outside of the realms of his current way of seeing the world. Like learning to speak in a foreign language, Simon would have to completely change the way he thinks and communicates before he could find the meaning that he is seeking.

# Settings

## Novilla

Novilla is the main setting for the novel. Simon and David arrive in Novilla to begin a new life and the story of the novel follows their path as they forge, and eventually destroy, their new life here. Novilla is characterized by something the characters refer to as “goodwill” in which the bare minimum of kindness and generosity is shown by everyone to everyone, but the emotional tone of the city and its people never reaches any greater emotional depth or passion. This lack of passion unsettles Simon but, as the novel progresses, it seems more and more likely that the people of Novilla have found a higher level of spiritual fulfillment and that it is Simon who is lacking something important in his approach to others, rather than the people of Novilla.

## Relocation Center

The Relocation Center is the first place that Simon and David go to when they arrive in Novilla. It is characterized by practicality and formality, without any signs of warmth, kindness, or joy being shown by the people that Simon and David encounter there. The Relocation Center serves as symbolic bridge between the camp where Simon and David were taught Spanish (which is only described in the novel: no action takes place there) and the new lives that await them once they live in East Village.

## East Village

East Village is the location where Simon and David are assigned an apartment, allowing them to move on from their time at the Relocation Center. It is here that David makes friends with Fidel, and Simon begins a relationship with Fidel's mother Elena. Although, on the surface, it seemed as if Simon had everything that he was looking for in life once they moved to East Village, he feels that something is missing. Simon turns over the tenancy of the apartment to Ines after he convinces her to become David's mother, at which point he moves to sleep rough at the docks. Simon's move from East Village to the docks symbolizes the fact that Simon allows his dissatisfaction with life to drive him to make his circumstances even worse.

## Docks

The docks are a location defined by camaraderie, hard work, and mutual support. Simon is shown great kindness by the foreman Alvaro, who agrees to watch over David while Simon works and lends him some money to tide him over until payday. Likewise, the other workers are patient with Simon as he slowly gets to grips with the demanding physical labor. However, the satisfaction quickly wears off for Simon who is not content with having a job or with the goodwill of his colleagues. Simon complains that the work

at the docks could be done more efficiently, which eventually leads to Simon being injured by a crane.

## **The Institute**

The Institute is a learning center where the adult population of Novilla goes in the evening to take classes. This location symbolizes the disconnect between Simon and the other adults in Novilla. Before his visit to The Institute, the reader has broadly sympathized with Simon's feeling that the residents of Novilla lack passion and emotional depth. After his visit to The Institute, the reader starts to suspect that the other residents might be engaged in more important occupations of the mind and that Simon's own attitude to the world is lacking in depth.



# Themes and Motifs

## Perception and Reality

The central theme of the novel is perception and reality and the impossibility of truly distinguishing between the two. Through the protagonist Simon, the reader is introduced to the world of Novilla through his specific perspective, guiding the reader to initially view this strange world through Simon's perspective. Many aspects of Novilla seem strange to both Simon and the reader to begin with, including the unsettling lack of emotional depth behind the "goodwill" offered to Simon and David, the lack of variety in their diet and pastimes, and the absence of romance and sex in the minds and lives of most of the population of Novilla. At this point, the reader sympathizes with Simon's belief that the people here are missing something in their lives that only he, Simon, is aware is missing.

Later, however, it begins to become apparent that Simon's perception of the reality around him has its own limitations. This becomes most obvious when Simon makes the perplexing and apparently irrational decision to give up his duty of care to David and leave him with Ines, a woman about whom he knows nothing. This is the first major sign for the reader that Simon's perception of the world is distorted. As Simon attempts to explain his actions to other characters (notably Elena and Alvaro) it becomes clear that he has very fixed ideas about men and women and the role that they should play in the world. Because Simon is so attached to the inflexible idea that it is the job of a woman to provide nurturing care for children, he is unable to recognize that he was already fulfilling David's need for a parent and there was no need for him to hunt down a female parent figure to replace himself in David's life.

The sense that it is actually Simon, rather than the population of Novilla as a whole, who has a distorted view of reality is heightened when Simon visits The Institute and fails to engage with the discussion of the nature of reality in the philosophy class. The teacher wishes the students to question elements of reality which they take for granted, using the example of how they know that a chair is a chair. However, Simon feels no interest in these questions, preferring to stick with his own narrow view of reality and his preoccupation with physical sensations such as hunger and lust. Simon's focus on these physical experiences is symbolized during his visit to The Institute by his interest in seeing Ana pose nude for the Life Drawing class and his desire in the canteen to add some salt to the spaghetti sauce.

The theme of perception and reality is symbolized by Simon and David's opposing interpretations of the novel *Don Quixote*. Simon sticks with the traditional interpretation of the text by stating that the character Don Quixote is delusional and does not know what is "really" happening. However Simon's attitude is undermined by his false belief that the novel was written by Benengeli rather than Cervantes. This mistake plants doubt in the mind of the reader about whether it is truly Simon, rather than David, who has the better grasp on reality.



## Communication

The theme of communication is symbolized in the novel by the unexplained fact that everyone in Novilla has been required to learn Spanish and must now communicate everything they want to say in a language that is foreign to them. This reflects the deeper spiritual meaning of the text and its suggestion that the physical realm is too limited to understand the higher meaning of existence. Being trapped in the concerns of the body is like being forced to speak a foreign language: it is impossible for anyone to get to a higher level of understanding before they have learned the language that these lessons will be communicated in.

The different levels of communication, and the various stages of learning which must be undertaken before the next level can be reached, is symbolized through Elena's methods as a music teacher. Elena knows that David cannot learn to play the violin before he has learned a more basic approach to the concept of music. First he must learn to play the recorder and then, once he has grasped this level of music, he can move on to the more advanced stage of playing the violin. This is a concept that Simon fails to grasp in his own approach to life. He falsely believes that he can find the answers to the things that he feels are missing in his life by searching for them in the worldly physical realm. However, because the thing that is missing from Simon's life is spiritual in nature, he will never be able to find it until he learns to view things in a philosophical/spiritual way rather than a material/worldly way.

Simon is offered the chance to learn the basics of this philosophical approach to life (the equivalent of Elena's offer to teach David how to play the recorder) when Eugenio invites him to join their philosophy class at The Institute. However, Simon does not show the kind of patience with the learning process that he encourages in David, abandoning his attempts to understand philosophy because the lessons do not begin at the level that he would eventually like to achieve.

The theme of communication is further explored through the relationship between David and his teacher Senor Leon. Senor Leon has a very fixed idea about what communication means, believing that there is one standard way to read, write, and count and that any variation is a sign of learning difficulties or behavioral problems. David surprises Simon by revealing that he has been able to communicate in these standard ways all along, demonstrating to the reader that David's eccentricities are a sign of advanced communication abilities rather than some sort of deficiency. It is the world around David that is not advanced enough to understand the way he wishes to communicate with them, but the school authorities believe that it is David who is not intellectually advanced enough to properly communicate with his teacher and fellow students.

## Intuition and Rationality

The themes of intuition and rationality are explored in the novel in a way that shows both concepts to be subjective and relative, depending on different characters and



different circumstances. When Simon and David first arrive in Novilla, they are treated by the people there in a very rational way: they need somewhere to stay, so they are provided with somewhere to stay; Simon needs work so he is given a job; they both need money so someone lends them money. However, both Simon and the reader feel on an intuitive level that there is something missing in the very rational and formal way that Simon and David are treated by others in Novilla.

Simon's primary way of communicating his dissatisfaction with this rational and cold approach to life is his argument with Ana about sexual attraction. Ana argues that there is no rational reason for Simon to connect his appreciation of her physical beauty to a desire to have sex with her. She claims that the two things are separate and that Simon's insistence on connecting them is irrational. Simon's attitude to sexual attraction is more intuitive. He believes that is something mysterious that does not need to be explained or defined, but should be appreciated for the pleasure, joy, and gratitude that it creates. Because beauty, joy, and pleasure are things generally considered to be positive in our world, the reader naturally sides with Simon during the course of this argument. However, when Simon applies his intuition to his relationship with David, a different perspective on this approach to life is offered.

When Simon suggests that sexual attraction and romantic love are a matter of intuition and emotion, it does not seem like an unreasonable suggestion. Later, Simon meets Ines and intuitively feels like she must be David's mother, despite having no rational reason for believing that this is true and no evidence to suggest that she will take good care of David when she does become his mother. This decision reveals the flaws in Simon's attitude to sex and romance. Simon's sexual attraction to Ana has no connection to whether or not he and Ana have personalities that combine well with each other or whether or not they will have a positive impact on each other's lives. His attitude towards Ana is entirely intuitive.

The flaws in this perspective become glaringly obvious when the same approach is applied to the care of a child rather than to sexual attraction. An attitude that previously seemed romantic and intuitively right suddenly seems irrational and irresponsible in a different context. This is reflected in the changing depiction of Elena and Alvaro, who had previously seemed cold and lacking emotional depth. When Simon gives up his relationship with David, it is Simon who seems cold and the others who seem intuitive and genuine, especially Alvaro when he tells Simon that his actions "ignore the urgings of the heart" (94).

## Mind and Body

Simon's character flaw is his inability to move his attention away from the body and instead allow himself to more fully explore the nature of the mind. Initially, Simon's concern with his bodily needs is depicted as understandable and sympathetic. When he and David arrive in Novilla, Simon is concerned about the lack of variety in their diet, believing that bread will not be enough to sustain either him or David. This concern echoes the Bible verse from Matthew 4:4 which states "Man shall not live on bread



alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.” Simon intuitively senses that – as it is written in the Bible – bread is not enough to sustain a human being. However, Simon mistakenly believes that the answer to this problem lies on the level of the body. He seeks to make David’s diet more nourishing by asking Alvaro where he can buy meat and taking David to a grocery store where they purchase an array of fruits and vegetables.

The Bible verse implies that it is not a varied diet that will supply the extra sustenance humans need on top of bread, but the word of God. This sentiment is echoed throughout the novel, when Simon consistently seeks answers on the physical level of the body, rather than pursuing them in a spiritual or religious way. Each time Simon takes action to correct his bodily circumstances, his worldly conditions become worse. Simon is not satisfied with his family relationship with David, Fidel, and Elena so seeks out a new mother to take care of David. This results in Simon losing his apartment and his relationship with Elena, as well as the destruction of David’s friendship with Fidel. Simon fails to seek spiritual meaning in his work on the docks, instead focusing on the physical pointlessness of the labor when so much of the grain is wasted when it is eaten by rats. In an attempt to improve the efficiency of the work of the stevedores, Simon suggests that they cut out the human element of the work and replace themselves with machines. Although this achieves the work quicker and more efficiently, it also increases the amount of physical harm that the workers are subjected to, as shown through the accident where Eugenio knocks Simon overboard after losing control of the crane.

Simon seeks spiritual fulfillment through bodily sensations and is disappointed when his physical actions do not provide him with philosophical breakthroughs. This is explored through Simon’s many failed sexual encounters in the novel. Simon destroys the positive elements of his relationship with Elena due to her lack of sexual passion for him. He seeks sexual fulfillment by applying to become a member at a brothel in Novilla, but on his membership application he lists spiritual reasons for applying rather than physical needs: “I crave beauty, which in my experience awakens awe and also gratitude” (139).

Simon’s preoccupation with the body over the mind is most overtly symbolized by his actions when he attends The Institute. He spurns the chance to develop his mind in the philosophy class, instead being more interested in the chance to see Ana naked in the Life Drawing class. He rejects the opportunities offered to him to enliven his intellectual life, but pines for seasoning to enliven the food he eats in the canteen.

## Parenthood

The nature of parenthood and who should have the responsibility for the care of children is a central concern in the novel. Although to all intents and purposes, Simon plays the role of David’s parent when they both first arrive in Novilla, Simon is consistently at pains to point out that he is not the boy’s father. He uses various different names to explain his relationship with David, including uncle, godfather, and guardian. However, when pressed by Daga to explain his relationship with David, Simon provides a





response that (although once again refusing the word “father”) defines him as a parental figure for David: “As for me, I may not be his father but I care about him. Care about him and care for him and take care of him” (184).

Simon’s refusal of the label “father” or “parent” is connected to his inflexible attitude towards gender and the roles that men and women should play in the world. Simon is attached to the rigid belief that because female bodies provide care and sustenance for children before they are born, it is inevitable and inarguable that women must also be the primary caregivers for children after their birth as well. For Simon, women are either objects of his sexual attraction or providers of life and subsequently care for children. He is unable to see himself as fulfilling these roles in life because he is a man. Elena attempts to make him see reason when she gives her own interpretation of the nature of parenthood and its lack of connection to gender: “A child needs a mother’s womb to come into the world. After he has left the womb the mother as life-giver is as much a spent force as the father. What the child needs from then on is love and care, which a man can provide as well as a woman” (104).

Simon’s obsession with the need to find a woman to replace him as the primary parent for David leads to the destruction of all that was positive about their lives together in Novilla. Simon loses his apartment, David loses his friendship with Fidel and his lessons with Elena, and David is exposed to the corrupting influence of Daga once the positive influence of Simon is removed from his life. Simon allows Ines to take over his duty of care towards David for no real reason other than that she is a woman. After he makes this decision, he continues to believe he was in the right despite numerous alarming suggestions that Ines is not caring for David properly by not teaching him to read and write, refusing to cooperate with the school, and exposing him to the company of men like Daga. In contrast, David’s most positive experiences of being cared for by adults come from men: most notably Simon, but also Alvaro who watches over David at the docks while Simon is working and teaches the boy how to play chess.



# Styles

## Point of View

The novel is told in the third person, present tense, from the perspective of Simon. This point of view is used to initially guide the reader towards sympathizing with Simon when he first arrives in Novilla. The people and the culture of Novilla are very strange and unfamiliar and the reader's confusion about their customs and behavior is reflected in Simon's own confusion as he struggles to make a life for himself in this new world.

One of the limits of Simon's perspective is that at some point – for reasons that are never made clear to the reader – all of the characters in the novel lost their memories of what life was like before the present moment. They were “washed clean” (19) as Ana puts it. This means that although the reader is able to discover new things about the present day through Simon's point of view, the past and how Simon and David arrived where they did remains shrouded in mystery, as does everything that happened in Simon's life up until the start of the novel. It is made clear that Simon, as well as everyone else in the novel, is under a number of misapprehensions including confusion between the German and English languages and the belief that Don Quixote was written by an author called Benengeli.

The reader's sympathy with Simon's point of view starts to lessen after he makes the decision to give up his parental role in David's life and persuades Ines to be his mother despite knowing nothing about her. Whereas Simon's perspective on earlier events was easy for the reader to sympathize with, this apparently irrational and unexplained action makes the reader question Simon's point of view for the rest of the novel.

## Language and Meaning

Although the novel is written in English it is repeatedly stated throughout the narrative that the characters are communicating with each other in Spanish. This is shown to the reader through the use of Spanish words such as *stevedore* and the occasional use of whole phrases in Spanish: “Conviene que yo diga la verdad” (224), “Yo soy la verdad” (225).

The characters communicate with each other in Spanish but not all of them speak Spanish with the same degree of fluency. Simon complains that it is impossible for him to “express my heart's feelings because all human relation have to be conducted in beginner's Spanish” (106). Simon's status as a beginner level learner of a new language is symbolic of his lack of philosophical and spiritual understanding. Just as Simon struggles to express himself in the unfamiliar Spanish language, he also struggles to articulate his deeper longings and emotional needs because the answers he's seeking lie on a different level of understanding to the one his brain usually engages in.



The fact that none of the characters are speaking their native language means that the philosophical debates between the adults in the novel sound childish and underdeveloped. For example, Eugenio contends that if Simon had no work he would have to spend his “days sitting on a public bench with nothing to do” (110) and Simon counters “But what of football?” (110). These simplistic philosophical arguments are symbolic of the limited viewpoint of the human consciousness.

## Structure

The novel is told in a straightforward chronological order. The structure is cyclical in that it begins and ends with Simon and David arriving in a new location and Simon uttering the words “We are new arrivals” (1 and 277). When Simon and David arrive in Novilla at the start of the novel, the reader has no understanding of the world they live in or the personalities of the characters. This is no longer the case when they plan to once again become new arrivals at the end of the novel. By this point, it is clearer to the reader that Simon is trapped in a cycle of only meeting his and David’s physical needs, consistently neglecting the spiritual growth of both himself and the boy. For this reason, when Simon first states that they are new arrivals, the phrase contains hope and the possibility of a successful new life. When the phrase is repeated however, it is more ominous and suggests that the characters are trapped in a negative cycle and doomed to go on repeating the mistakes of their past.

The sense of time in the novel is very much focused on the present moment and on the future. The characters engage in their day-to-day activities and make plans for the future such as meeting at the football match, attending a class at The Institute, or beginning school. The element of time that is completely missing is the past. None of the characters can recall their own histories, so they never speak of the past. Eugenio even argues that “history has no manifestations. Because history is not real. Because history is just a made-up story” (115). In the world of *The Childhood of Jesus* there is no such thing as history, only the present and the future.



## Quotes

As for your Spanish, don't worry, persist. One day it will cease to feel like a language, it will become the way things are.

-- Alvaro (chapter 2)

**Importance:** Alvaro's attempt to calm Simon's worries about the quality of his Spanish functions on two levels. On a literal level, it demonstrates that Alvaro is a kind man and that, like everyone else in Novilla, he is extending goodwill towards Simon. On a metaphorical level, Simon's difficulties grasping Spanish are symbolic of his difficulty adapting to the new way of thinking and behaving that is accepted as normal by the people of Novilla.

Benevolence, I must tell you, is what we keep encountering here. Everyone wishes us well, everyone is ready to be kind to us. We are positively borne along on a cloud of goodwill. But it all remains a bit abstract. Can goodwill by itself satisfy our needs? Is it not in our nature to crave something more tangible?

-- Simon (chapter 7)

**Importance:** Despite the fact that no one treats Simon and David unkindly when they arrive in Novilla, both Simon and the reader sense that there is something wrong. Their treatment feels shallow and not backed up by any heartfelt warmth or depth of feeling. Simon is correct in his feeling that there must be more to life, but he searches for this meaning in the worldly plain rather than on a spiritual level.

Is he hoping to seduce her, because in memories that are not entirely lost to him seducing one another is something that men and women do?

-- Narration (chapter 7)

**Importance:** Simon begins to question whether his own thoughts, feelings, and ideas might actually be as automated and shallow as the "goodwill" which he encounters in Novilla. Although Simon feels that his desire to seduce women is natural and the way things should be, other people who he encounters find his attachment to this particular kind of relationship absurd.

He trudges back to the docks feeling that something has expired in him, feeling like an old man. He had one great task, and that task is discharged. The boy has been delivered to his mother.

-- Narration (chapter 11)

**Importance:** Simon focused his mental energies at the start of the novel on caring for David and finding the boy's mother. Having succeeded in his quest, he finds that his life has less meaning after he gets what he wants than it had when he was still striving towards a goal. However, the lesson of this incident (that happiness must be found in present circumstances, not chased after as if something is always missing) is lost on Simon.



Indeed," says Alvaro. "But it does rather ignore the urgings of the heart, doesn't it?"  
-- Alvaro (chapter 12)

**Importance:** Earlier in the novel, the reader has been encouraged to sympathize with Simon's perspective and his sense that the "goodwill" he encounters and the lack of passion in Novilla is unsettling and abnormal. After Simon gives up his role as caregiver to David, the tables turn and the reader and the other characters begin to question Simon's lack of emotional attachment and his insistence that his relationship to David is unimportant.

A child needs a mother's womb to come into the world. After he has left the womb the mother as life-giver is as much a spent force as the father. What the child needs from then on is love and care, which a man can provide as well as a woman.  
-- Elena (chapter 13)

**Importance:** Elena points out to Simon that his belief that David needs to be cared for by a woman has no basis in rational fact. Just as with his attitudes to sex, Simon is trapped in an old way of thinking in which women are superior care givers to me, despite the fact that it is clear to the reader that David was better cared for by Simon than he is by Ines.

We are not stupid. If we had needed to be saved, we would have saved ourselves by now. No, it is not we who are stupid, it is the clever reasoning you rely on that is stupid, that gives you the wrong answers.  
-- Alvaro (chapter 14)

**Importance:** Simon believes that his superior knowledge and intellect make him better able to understand the nature of the work on the docks. Alvaro tries to convince Simon that it his own perspective that is flawed and that he is arrogant to assume that his way of thinking would be better for all of the other men too.

Abstract. He has an abstract relationship with me. A relationship with someone who care for him in the abstract but who has no natural duty of care to him.  
-- Simon (chapter 15)

**Importance:** Simon defines his relationship to David in emotionally cold terms, similar to the detached attitude that Elena and Ana have used to discuss sex. Although Simon initially seemed justified in his puzzlement over Elena and Ana's lack of passion in their lives, the numb and cold way with which he describes what appeared to be a warm and loving relationship between father and child shows that Simon, too, is suffering from a lack of depth to his interactions with other people.

As for me, I may not be his father but I care about him. Care about him and care for him and take care of him.  
-- Simon (chapter 21)

**Importance:** When Senor Daga appears to be becoming a rival father figure for David,



Simon intervenes and finally reasserts his duty of care towards the boy. Although still denying the fact that he is David's father, Simon here lists everything that a father does and feels about a son.

I don't see why Ines should want another child, Elena. She has the boy. He came to her as a gift, out of the blue, a gift pure and simple. A gift like that ought to be enough for any woman.

-- Simon (chapter 22)

**Importance:** Once again, Simon is able to see the flaws in other people's thinking much more clearly than he is able to see the flaws in his own thinking. What he says here about Ines could apply equally to himself: Simon gave away his relationship with David for no good reason, making his own life less fulfilling even after complaining that his life lacked meaning.

Writing from left to right, forming the letter clearly but slowly, the boy writes: Yo soy la verdad, I am the truth.

-- Narration (chapter 26)

**Importance:** The obsession with worldly concerns and the standardization of forms of communication shown by the adults in his life, means that David's special gifts and belief in himself as a divine being goes unnoticed and unremarked upon by the other characters and, ultimately, unproven during the course of the novel.

True there is a man in the book who calls himself Don Quixote and saves people. But some of the people he saves don't really want to be saved. They are happy as they are. They get cross with Don Quixote and shout at him. They say that he doesn't know what he is doing, he is upsetting the social order.

-- Simon (chapter 26)

**Importance:** Simon is able to explain Don Quixote's delusions about his place in the world to David, but is not able to see that this is the way that Simon himself has been behaving in Novilla: believing that his own way of seeing is superior to those around him and that it is up to him to rescue Elena from a passionless existence and save the other stevedores from the pointlessness of their work.