The Defense Study Guide

The Defense by Vladimir Nabokov

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

Ten-year-old Aleksandr Ivaonich Luzhin, having proven too difficult for his governess, begins school. He is miserable and anti-social. The boy's father, convinced that Aleksandr will be the sort of gifted child that he writes about in his novels, is discouraged to hear academic reports indicating that his son is listless and apathetic. As the son of a famous author, Aleksandr is tormented by his peers. His misery persists until a chance encounter with a violinist introduces him to the game of chess.

Aleksandr begins ditching school to take chess lessons. His parents discover his truancy and put a stop to it, but in the meantime, the boy has become quite adept at chess. The father, having learned that his son has secretly been playing chess, puts Aleksandr's skill to the test. He is impressed, enlisting the aid of several skilled chess players to challenge his son. They are all defeated. Citing his newfound genius, Aleksandr refuses to return to school. His parents insist otherwise. The boy falls ill and is sick for quite some time.

Many years pass. Aleksandr begins playing chess tournaments at fourteen. For a time, the father travels with him, but eventually he abdicates his son's care to a clever man named Valentinov, who then abandons Aleksandr after just a few years. Nearly thirty years pass. The father dies, feeling abandoned by his son. Aleksandr, now a grandmaster visiting Germany for a tournament, strikes up a romance with a young Russian émigré.

Aleksandr proposes marriage, but the girl's mother doesn't care for the uncouth chess player. In the tournament, he plays extraordinarily well, but pushes himself too hard. A continuance is called during Aleksandr's game with Turati, his nemesis, after which he experiences a psychotic break and falls unconscious. Aleksandr wakes in the hospital, where a psychiatrist tells him that he must avoid chess from now on. He is released into his girlfriend's care. Her family rents him an apartment in their building.

Aleksandr recovers, spending a great deal of time with his fiancée's family. He and his fiancée are wed. The new wife does her best to distract Aleksander from thoughts of chess. A family friend of his wife visits from Soviet Russia. The visitor proves overbearing, monopolizing most of the wife's free time. With his wife distracted, Aleksandr finds it more difficult to resist thoughts of chess. By chance he stumbles upon a chess set and arranges it to the setup of the game with Turati.

With the visitor finally gone, the wife tries to engage Aleksandr with politics, subscribing to political newspapers and inviting intellectuals to gather at their apartment. Aleksandr shows little interest. Instead, he becomes convinced that he sees repeating patterns in his life, something akin to chess strategy. Someone or something is playing a game against him.

Despite his wife's intervention, Aleksandr is tricked into hearing a proposition from his old mentor Valentinov. Aleksander returns home in a highly agitated state. He explains

to his wife that he has no choice but to leave the game. With that, he locks himself in a room, breaks a window and climbs out to the ledge. By the time the others force their way into the room, Aleksandr has already leaped to his death.

Chapters 1 and 2

Chapters 1 and 2 Summary

As the book opens, Luzhin senior reports to his wife that he has just broken the news to their ten-year-old son that he is to begin school on Monday. Young Luzhin has been a handful this summer, tormenting his governess and disengaged from his lessons. His parents have put off telling the boy of his enrollment, fearing that he will throw a tantrum. Now faced with the reality of being placed in a classroom, the boy is most struck by the idea that he will now be referred to as "Luzhin," a name he solely associates with his father.

Set to make their annual move from country to city, the family arrives at the St. Petersburg train station. Young Luzhin is petulant, ignoring his parents' efforts to cheer him up. Overcome by ennui, the tearful boy soon flees into the nearby woods. There he cries and plays among the trees, eventually sneaking back to the family manor to hide among the junk in the attic. Scarcely an hour passes before the boy's parents find and retrieve the boy, a black-bearded peasant carrying him forcibly down from the attic to the awaiting carriage.

Chapter two opens with Luzhin senior contemplating his son's future. As an author, he writes about headstrong young men who later blossom into talented artists, and he imagines a similar destiny for his son. Hoping to hear an affirmation of this belief, Mr. Luzhin visits his son's teacher. The teacher reports that, while young Luzhin has some ability, he is also afflicted with a kind of listlessness. Seeing his son among his peers, the father notes the boy's reluctance. Luzhin senior makes an attempt to socialize with his son, but the child shows little interest.

Young Luzhin is anti-social. During recess, he sits by himself on the woodpile. He is convinced that others look upon him with hate and derision. Such is his unhappiness that the boy is unable to concentrate on his lessons. At first, the other children obligingly torment Luzhin, calling him "Tony" from his father's book series "Tony's Adventures." They soon lose interest, however, and finally begin avoiding him altogether.

Despite his father's concern and curiosity, young Luzhin will share nothing of his school life. He is impenetrably sullen, meeting both parents with scorn. Though surrounded by books, many written by his father and dedicated to him, Luzhin will read only the likes of Jules Verne and Arthur Conan Doyle. Frustrated that young Luzhin never brings home any friends, Luzhin senior takes it upon himself to invite a few of his classmates to the boy's birthday. Luzhin ignores his guests but is fascinated by the hired magician. The boy acquires a magic kit of his own but sadly shows limited talent for prestidigitation.

Young Luzhin's report card is less than impressive, his teacher noting the boy's lethargy and apathy. Luzhin, however, has taken an interest in theoretical mathematics, fascinated by the juxtaposition of wonder and logic. He also finds temporary enjoyment

in doing jigsaw puzzles, admiring the way that precise shapes come together to form a single image, and resenting when his father suggests that a particular piece might go somewhere where obviously it should not.

Chapters 1 and 2 Analysis

There is no indication that young Luzhin has, or has ever had, friends. Since he is also without formal schooling, it seems likely that Luzhin has had few opportunities for social development. Never having had a peer to consider, the young man is predictably self-centered. The narrator refers to the child only by his surname, suggesting that young Luzhin has yet to establish his own identity. The woods represent a "natural" world, as opposed to the constructed society that Luzhin finds unfathomable.

At school, Luzhin is miserable. He doesn't understand the social workings of his peers; therefore, what he does not understand, he fears. Sensing his "otherness," his classmates are obliged to torment him, legitimizing Luzhin's fears. The boy's low affect towards his parents, however, combined with his love of math, puzzles, and regular patterns, suggests that young Luzhin may suffer from a form of autism.

Comparing young Luzhin to one of his father's characters implies that the boy himself is a work of fiction, another one of his father's creations. This suspicion is supported by Luzhin's seeming lack of having a name of his own. The boy's name, Luzhin, is one which he shares with his father. The father even tries to "write" the cast of his son's friends, inviting several children to the boy's birthday party without young Luzhin's consent.

Luzhin is drawn to structure. He admires the way jigsaw puzzles come together to form a cohesive whole, preferring the objectivity of the puzzle to the subjectivity of the human interaction represented by parents and peers. This foreshadows Luzhin's eventual downfall, as he comes to expect the world to operate with the same objective, black-and-white logic of a game or a puzzle.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

The narrator suggests that the day is rapidly approaching when young Luzhin's life will become focused on one thing to exclusion of all else. Luzhin senior, in memoriam of the one-year anniversary of his father-in-law's death, hosts a musical evening in his apartment. Uncomfortable among the guests, the boy creeps away to his father's shadowy office, where he is soon discovered eavesdropping on a violinist's telephone call. The affable violinist, referring to the father's chess set, suggests that the boy learn how to play. Luzhin senior soon arrives to collect the musician. The violinist departs, but not before making a few more complimentary remarks about chess.

Young Luzhin wakes the next morning, inexplicably excited. During their morning stroll, Luzhin senior hints that his son should take up music. After breakfast, Luzhin notes some unusual tension between his father and his aunt, culminating with his aunt crying. Later, at the boy's request, Luzhin's aunt begins to teach him chess, but the lesson is cut short - the pieces knocked to the floor - by the unexpected wrath of the father. The father sends his son to his room. Confused, Luzhin junior retreats with his father's boxed chess set, leaving his father and aunt to quietly argue behind closed doors. It is revealed that after that day, the aunt would never again visit.

Young Luzhin's geography teacher is out with a cold, leaving the students with free time. Envious, the boy watches as two classmates play a game of chess. Most of the game plays out, with Luzhin just beginning to grasp some of the strategic nuances, when a bully slaps him on the back of the head and flips the board over. Once again, the pieces tumble to the floor. The following morning, Luzhin skips school to visit his aunt. Afterward, he wanders in the park until it is time to return home. The narrator implies that young Luzhin has left his father's chess set with his aunt.

Luzhin's truancy quickly becomes a problem. At first he misses a day here and there; finally, he misses a week. The teacher calls home. Luzhin junior is tight-lipped in the face of his father's interrogation. Where does he go? What does he do? The boy will say nothing. Luzhin's mother despairs, declaring that her son "cheats" as badly as her husband. Luzhin's father is frustrated and ridden with guilt.

Chapter 3 Analysis

It's no coincidence that Luzhin first learns of chess from a musician, nor that Luzhin's father would like his son to become a musician. Here begins the parallel between chess and music. There is a sense that Luzhin is a musician and that chess is somehow an aural performance. Later, as a grandmaster, Luzhin will think of chess in musical terms. Like his musically gifted grandfather, Luzhin will "see the notes" in his head, eventually

learning to play in his mind. Twice in this section, however, chess games are interrupted and overturned, suggesting that chess, unlike music, must exist physically in the world.

Luzhin's obsession is in bloom, his already-faint presence in the world growing dimmer still. The more Luzhin plays, the less he cares about the societal obligations of school and family, until finally he is unable to conceal his mounting truancies. This demonstrates that young Luzhin's priorities have changed. Chess is now his purpose. Parallel to this plot is his father's infidelity. Luzhin senior has made a similar choice, albeit with a woman rather than with chess.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Summer has returned. Unable to visit his aunt, young Luzhin satisfies his hunger for chess by looking at game diagrams in magazines. He fondly recalls his recent period of truancy. His aunt proved terrible at chess, eventually introducing the boy to a more adept player, an older gentleman who often delivers flowers to his aunt. The older gentleman opened up a whole new game for the boy, teaching him strategy, tactics and notation, and was amazed at how quickly young Luzhin learned to play.

Locked in his grandfather's former study, perusing old magazines, young Luzhin no longer needs the board in front of him. He can plan entire games in his head. The boy's father attempts to enter the study, forcing the child, whose ears burn with embarrassment at having been caught indulging his guilty pleasure, to allow him entry. Luzhin senior is momentarily suspicious, suspecting that his son has been looking at pornography. Luzhin senior asks his son to join him in looking for red mushrooms. He does so, but tags along indifferently, never looking at the mushrooms.

Luzhin's mother is bedridden after twisting her ankle and remains in bed even after she has recovered. Luzhin's father, much to his wife's sorrow, makes every excuse to spend the day in town. The boy has no further use for his magazines and must now resort to playing dull, unfulfilling games in his head. Without chess, young Luzhin tries in vain to amuse himself, wandering about and rummaging through the house. His convalescing mother makes an effort to spend time with the boy, but Luzhin coldly rejects her, complaining that she smells of medicine.

Luzhin's father returns from the city much later than expected, complaining that he missed the train. He is in high spirits, which makes his wife suspicious. Over dinner, young Luzhin notes that his father is paying undue attention to him. Later, after his mother goes to bed in apparent disgust, Luzhin senior, with a mocking gleam in his eye, offers to teach his son to play chess. The boy is embarrassed, but agrees, admitting that he's learned to play some "at school."

Father and son manage to salvage an old, makeshift chess set from storage and the two play several games. Luzhin senior loses repeatedly and is stunned and amazed by the seeming transformation of his son. He doesn't yet know what to make of the boy's genius. Now fearing that he will be caught with his father's stolen chess set, young Luzhin buries it in the yard.

Luzhin senior invites a chess-playing doctor over to challenge his son, half hoping that the boy will find defeat. Young Luzhin wins with ease. At long last, Luzhin senior learns that his boy is a child prodigy after all, but the realization weighs heavier than he had imagined. The doctor returns several more times, nurturing the boy's talent. Each time

his son plays, Luzhin senior watches with a mixture of fright and joy, praying for a loss, but elated with each win. The doctor is unable to win a single match.

Things begin moving quickly for young Luzhin. He gives an impressive performance at a chess club. He defeats his geography teacher in a game. The boy then defeats a succession of chess masters provided by his father. Young Luzhin's picture appears in a St. Petersburg magazine. Unable to face the ridicule of his talent, the boy does not return to school. His parents plead with him to return; Luzhin senior even threatens to take away the boy's new chess set.

Frustrated with his parents, young Luzhin runs away to his aunt's house only to find that she is presently leaving for a funeral. The old gentleman has passed away. Angry at being disallowed the warmth of his aunt's home, and at her tears, young Luzhin walks home through the snow. Soon after the boy falls into a week-long fit of delirium in which he dreams of chess and the players of chess.

Past and present become muddled. Luzhin the boy recovers, having grown taller during his illness. He goes abroad with his father, visiting a German resort in the hopes of getting away from chess. Now, suddenly a forty-something man, the formerly young Luzhin visits the same resort, telling an unnamed young woman about how he and his father unwittingly stumbled upon a chess tournament there nearly thirty years before. The woman quietly listens as Luzhin speaks, giggling at his eccentricities.

The perspective shifts back to Luzhin's youth. The boy has become a stranger to his mother; she no longer sees the little boy she knew. Young Luzhin discovers, much to his shame, that his father has been having an affair with his aunt. Days later, a telegram arrives in the mail announcing his mother's death. His father, Luzhin senior, cries in disbelief.

Chapter 4 Analysis

Luzhin's aunt receives flowers often enough that young Luzhin is able to study chess under the flower delivery man. This begs the question: Who is sending the aunt flowers? The most obvious answer is that the flowers are from the boy's father. This creates yet another parallel between father and son, comparing the father's infidelity with the son's chess-inspired truancy. The agent of the father's indiscretion is also the agent of the son's learning of chess.

It is apparent here that the mother has been all but abandoned by her family. Her son doesn't wish to remain in her presence. The husband, meanwhile, is having an affair. When the mother leaves the dinner table in obvious disgust, the husband seemingly makes no apparent attempt to address her upset. The mother's unwillingness to rise from bed, despite her recovery, is likely symptomatic of severe depression. The men in her life are too preoccupied with themselves to notice that the mother is wasting away.

Luzhin senior has long fantasized that his son would bloom into a child prodigy. Faced with the possibility of this, however, he is now plagued with anxiety. With each victory,

his expectations grow. If the young Luzhin were to lose, then his father would find some relief in doubt; however, since his son continues to win, the boy's potential grows. There is also the matter of how his son's genius has manifested. Luzhin senior had hoped that his son would grow into a gifted musician. Chess is not something that Luzhin senior understands or appreciates.

Young Luzhin's talent only serves to widen the rift between himself and the rest of the world. More than ever before, he now fears the ridicule of his peers. He's objectively different. As a chess genius, he can argue that school is less necessary. After all, he doesn't need an education to find a good job; he can always make a living playing chess. Thanks to his talent, young Luzhin finally has something to fear losing, as well as a means to hide. The boy's sudden collapse is a testament both to the depth of his fear and to the breadth of his obsession.

Nabokov is prone to shifting perspective between characters. Here the perspective shifts between past and future, giving "now" a decidedly subjective feel. Young Luzhin's story becomes the recollections of adult Luzhin. The intervening years, those in which he played the most chess, become indistinct. The intervening years seem to have passed in a dreamlike slumber, with many of the details lost upon waking.

Chapters 5 and 6

Chapters 5 and 6 Summary

The now-adolescent Luzhin tours the Russian chess circuit with his father. He is now managed and tutored by a slick gentleman named Valentinov. Luzhin Jr. performs exceedingly well, taking on all comers and sometimes multiple opponents at once. He even plays blind.

The narrator explores the attitudes of Luzhin senior. The aging man feels that his fame and talent are winding down. As time passes, he sees less and less of his son. Alone and lonely, Luzhin decides to write a new book about a chess-playing child prodigy. He decides that this boy will die young, never growing into the distant, neglectful man that his son has now become. Luzhin senior fritters away his time, writing very little. Finally, one day, while collecting mushrooms, he is caught in a sudden downpour. He takes to bed and, after a long uncomfortable illness, dies.

Chapter six begins. Luzhin Jr. is once more a forty-year-old man in the company of a young Russian woman. She inquires about his childhood, but notes that Luzhin seems bored with this line of questioning. The woman is surprised that Luzhin isn't more affected by his father's recent death. She wonders why, if his relationship with his father was so tepid, Luzhin would return to the same resort that he and his father once visited together.

The woman thinks back to her first impression of Luzhin: gloomy, unfashionable, and yet somehow compelling. Through word of mouth she quickly discovered that Luzhin is a famous chess player whose father had recently passed away. He is on his way to Berlin from Paris to play in a chess tournament to be held two months time. If he wins the tournament, Luzhin will challenge the world champion.

The woman is attracted to Luzhin's uncouthness. A stylish debutante, she herself is attractive, though not beautiful. The woman chances to meet Luzhin when several items fall from his jacket through a hole in his pocket. She aids in the items' recovery and attempts to strike up a conversation. Despite Luzhin's disinterest, and in part because of it, she finds him compelling.

The woman thinks back to her Russian schooling, and how the new Soviet bureaucracy halted her classes. She recalls playing tennis with a shy, young officer who would later lose his arm in the civil war; the description is very similar to the "quiet boy" from Luzhin's class. Her reminiscence is soon crowded out by her inexplicable romantic attraction to Luzhin, whom she continues to characterize in her mind as an artist.

Seated beside the woman, Luzhin is exhausted from giving blindfolded chess demonstrations. Valentinov has long since abandoned Luzhin, finally deciding that he is no longer a prodigy. Luzhin had been hurt by this abandonment, but with a kind of

melancholy inertia, he had thrown himself into touring chess tournaments. Luzhin has been living by rote ever since. Though still regarded as a grandmaster, Luzhin believes he is past his prime.

Luzhin is disappointed that the woman isn't prettier, but is proud to be spending time with a real live person. His thoughts flutter between chess and vague notions of love. Luzhin and the woman part on awkward note. The next day he barges into the woman's hotel room and, in a sudden fit of emotion, insists that she be his wife. Although she is very fond of Luzhin, the woman has difficulty picturing the awkward man as part of her wealthy, conservative family.

Later, the woman introduces Luzhin to her dubious mother, making certain to point out his celebrity status. Her mother is nonplussed by Luzhin's "boorish" manners, but the girl is charmed despite herself. She is confused, not entirely certain what she's gotten herself into, knowing only that she is enthralled by this puzzle of a man.

Chapters 5 and 6 Analysis

Luzhin's father, like his wife before him, finds himself abandoned. Time has robbed him of potency. Whereas once he was the author of his son's story, now he is little more than a footnote. Young Luzhin is now the only Luzhin. The father has become irrelevant. He seems to take little pride in his son's success, and so his writing is compromised by resentment, by a desire to write his son's adulthood out of existence. Luzhin senior would rather his son have died in childhood than accept him for what has become.

Like most of the characters in The Defense, the Russian woman - the very woman who will become Luzhin's wife - is without a name. This suggests a kind of non-personhood. The characters are less individuals than they are functions, defined by characteristics and relationships, much as chess pieces. Luzhin's mother is simply "mother," defined by the role she fills. Seen in this light, people are fungible. Luzhin's father can be replaced by Valentinov. Luzhin's mother can be replaced with a wife.

The Russian woman, much like Luzhin's father, prefers to see Luzhin as an artist. She romanticizes the man's dysfunctional behavior, seeing his actions as the eccentricities of brilliance. This mindset sets her up as an enabler. The Russian woman is poised to insulate Luzhin against his own shortcomings, thus ensuring that he never has to confront his many deficiencies. This relegates Luzhin to the role of a small child, rather than an equal.

Luzhin objectifies the Russian woman, regarding her more as possession than as a person. He first compares her to a prostitute and is disappointed that she isn't prettier. Luzhin also shows a marked lack of curiosity concerning who she is as a person, never asking her any questions about herself. When Luzhin proposes marriage, he doesn't ask for her hand; he tells her that they are to be wed.

Chapters 7 and 8

Chapters 7 and 8 Summary

Luzhin is a frequent visitor to the woman's family. The future mother-in-law still cannot grasp Luzhin's personality or profession. She imagines that he must have terrible, hidden dimensions behind his boorish exterior. Luzhin seems largely disinterested and disengaged, failing even to keep up his end of a conversation. The mother is very concerned for her daughter's future. She is surprised, however, when Luzhin formally requests her daughter's hand in marriage. The mother has her reservations, but the daughter insists that it is no business of her parents. The engagement, now formalized, picks up speed.

Chapter eight begins. Luzhin visits his fiance's home, oblivious to the unconcealed disapproval of his future mother-in-law. He is enamored by the familiar, old-fashioned Russian aesthetic of the home. The future father-in-law makes the mistake of trying to talk to Luzhin about chess, inviting an unwanted lecture on the game.

The next day, having just won a tournament match, Luzhin is pleased to see his fiancée among the spectators. He all but ignores his fiancée's mother, also present, in an effort to woo his fiancée. Luzhin brushes aside his fiancée's doubts about their future together. She tries to convince him to get some rest. It occurs to Luzhin that, while his fiancée seems very devoted, he has yet to share a proper kiss or embrace with her. The next day, before his match, Luzhin sends his fiancée away, preferring that she not watch him play. Turati, Luzhin's nemesis, continues to pace Luzhin's success.

As the tournament wears on, day by day, Luzhin is increasingly unable to sleep. His head throbs with chess. After a particular hard day of play, an exhausted Luzhin visits his fiancée's house only to find himself unexpectedly alone in the face of her mother's disapproval. Luzhin has begun to see his life in terms of chess: moves, countermoves, set and match. He sees chess pieces represented in common objects.

Luzhin's fiancée is convinced that chess will not exhaust him, that he will one day blossom beyond chess. Her father thinks Luzhin is a fanatic. Her mother, similarly, feels that Luzhin is losing his mind by the hour. The family has frequent guests, but Luzhin regards them as beneath consequence.

One day, Luzhin's fiancée must rouse him from a deep meditation on chess. He is momentarily disoriented, unsure whether or not she is real. She is concerned for his health, but reports that critics agree he has been playing extraordinarily well. Luzhin assures her he'll be fine and lays down to rest. He wakes an hour later, believing his fiancée's presence to have been a dream, and plays chess for the remainder of the day. That night, exhausted and barely conscious, he takes a taxi home. He dines with his fiancée's family while utterly disconnected from reality, feeling that everything is a dream.

Critics term Luzhin's recent games as immortal. His strategies have been bold and brilliant, but Turati's playing has proven comparable. The tournament will be decided between these two men. Luzhin wakes late for his final match, still half-disconnected from reality. Reality solidifies later around the chess table.

Strangely, though playing white, Turati does not begin with his famous opening, the opening for which Luzhin has long-prepared. Turati proves an aggressive, formidable opponent. The play goes back and forth, with neither man having the advantage. Suddenly, on the verge of some grand, horrible epiphany, Luzhin accidentally burns himself on a forgotten, burning match. He cries out, and, despite Luzhin's protests, an adjournment is called.

Luzhin is exhausted and now completely broken from reality. He is scarcely aware of where he is and to whom he is speaking. Someone tells him to go home. Luzhin is taken by a sudden sense of urgency, fearful that he will again be afflicted with images of chessmen. He asks a passerby for the location of "the woods," wandering in the direction indicated. Luzhin becomes confused, tumbles to the ground and loses consciousness.

Chapters 7 and 8 Analysis

Luzhin continues to demonstrate a marked lack of curiosity with regard to other people, so much so that he isn't able to feign enough interest to engage in small talk. He also shows little evidence of empathy, being incapable of detecting his future father-in-law's disinterest in chess. This all bespeaks of a certain childish self-centeredness. Luzhin has not yet learned to consider the feelings of others.

There are whole dimensions of human interaction to which Luzhin appears oblivious. He doesn't understand, and thus does not take seriously, his fiancée's doubts. His future mother-in-law he regards as a complication, an irritant. Luzhin's mind is more preoccupied with his own wants and needs than in the wants and needs of others. That he begins to see the world in terms of chess makes perfect sense. Luzhin's mind is a logical, but simple mechanism that turns on gears of means and ends.

There is a sense that Luzhin's genius comes at a price. The better his playing becomes, the less able he is to function in the world. The in-laws have the right of it: Luzhin is single-minded and mentally falling apart. The fiancée, on the other hand, continues to romanticize Luzhin's obsession, seeing Luzhin simply as an artist sacrificing for his art, convinced that one day he'll grow beyond the bounds of chess. She doesn't fully comprehend how fundamentally broken Luzhin is.

On some level, Luzhin already realizes that his chess obsession is killing him. When he loses consciousness, he is attempting to flee thoughts of chess. The woods represent his childhood, before he was gripped by obsession. Interestingly, Luzhin's childhood was far from idyllic. It may be that Luzhin has adopted a revisionist view of his

childhood, placing a higher value on such memories because they are of a time before chess took over his life.

Chapters 9 and 10

Chapters 9 and 10 Summary

Two drunken men stumble down the sidewalk. Gunther, being the more intoxicated of the two, leans on Kurt. They are leaving a party. The two men encounter their comrade Karl, from the same party, slumped down beside the sidewalk. Karl asks that they call him a cab, and they oblige. Unfortunately, in their drunkenness, they put Gunther in the cab instead of Karl. The remaining two men continue down the sidewalk, where they mistake Luzhin's unconscious form for their friend Pulvermacher

The men search Luzhin for identification and find the card with his fiancée's address written on it. Kurt and Karl hail a cab and load Luzhin into the vehicle, piling in beside him. The two men get out at the home of Luzhin's fiancée and, as people emerge from the house, they do their drunken best to explain the circumstances of finding Luzhin. They carry Luzhin into the house. His fiancée's mother is secretly pleased by the idea that Luzhin is drunk; it seems to her like something a normal person would do.

Luzhin's fiancée has been worried sick about him, but her father has been assuring her that Luzhin has plenty of friends to give him a ride home. She realizes that Luzhin isn't drunk, and feels indignant on his behalf. The fiancée feels guilty, thinking she should have kept a closer eye on him. Luzhin is admitted to the hospital, where his unconsciousness persists. The fiancée, meanwhile, pays the bill and handles the logistics of his stay. She searches his room for any items he might need, digging through a bewildering assortment of odd-and-ends, junk and chess-related items.

The fiancée stops by the chess café to retrieve Luzhin's cane, where she notes that the tournament is preparing to resume. She opts - with some satisfaction - not to tell them of Luzhin's fate. Later, Kurt and Karl stop by her home to apologize for their uncouth appearance the night before and to check on Luzhin. Someone from the tournament also stops by and is crushed to hear that the game may not be finished. Later, the newspapers report that Luzhin had a nervous breakdown. Experts study the game, but no one can say for certain who would have won.

The fiancée's parents spend breakfast trying to convince their daughter to call off the wedding. She won't hear of it, refusing to abandon Luzhin, storming from the room in tears. Luzhin remains unconscious, his fiancée dutifully at his side. Finally, the fog parts and Luzhin begins to remember. He remembers burying something beneath a set of trees. He feels comfortable, peaceful, as he stirs awake.

Luzhin gradually returns to himself, to the world. Shadows become people. Whispers become voices. A friendly psychiatrist explains to Luzhin that chess is an unhealthy influence and, with the doctor's help, Luzhin suppresses all thoughts of Turati, the tournament, and of chess itself. The psychiatrist encourages Luzhin to revisit his

childhood. Many of his memories of childhood have fled. Those that remain are of plants, trees and things of nature.

Luzhin's fiancée remains by his side during his recovery, encouraging him to forget about chess. She sees in Luzhin an odd sort of sophistication that she can't quite understand, as if he is possessed of latent knowledge and class. The fiancee's parents discuss the problem of the upcoming wedding. The father is resigned to its inevitability, now seeing that his daughter is committed. The mother is convinced, however, that her daughter doesn't truly love Luzhin.

Chapters 9 and 10 Analysis

Again, other people impose an idea of Luzhin upon him. He is a drunk. He is Pulvermacher. No one is aware of his true distress. Nevertheless, in this case, the assigned identify isn't far off the mark. Drunk or no, Luzhin has collapsed from overindulgence. Even after the men realize that Luzhin is not Pulvermacher, they decide "he still has to get home." Luzhin, regardless of who he is, is still a human being, and is therefore due the same consideration that anyone might be due.

The fiancée fails to address Luzhin's underlying problem. Her fiancé's chess obsession borders on an addiction. She is offended that others might mistake Luzhin's unconsciousness with drunkenness, even though his obsession is very similar to alcoholism. He not only wants to play, but is compelled to play. Luzhin isn't in control. The fiancee's attitude toward the tournament suggests that she is unwilling to acknowledge Luzhin's culpability in his own predicament. She sees him as a victim rather than as an addict.

Luzhin's first memory upon waking is of himself, as a child, burying his father's chess set. While the symbolism, on the surface, seems to suggest that Luzhin is moving on, the circumstances of the event say otherwise. Young Luzhin buried the set to hide a secret. With the psychiatrist's assistance, Luzhin suppresses the problem without actually addressing it. Somewhere inside of him chess remains buried, waiting to be unearthed. One can only avoid a topic for so long.

The future mother-in-law is right to be suspicious of her daughter's heart. There is little to suggest that Luzhin's fiancée truly loves him. She admires his talent, is concerned for his well-being, and is certainly wrapped up in the romanticism of his genius, but strangely absent are thoughts of romantic love and passion. Indeed it would appear that her feelings toward Luzhin are more motherly than loverly.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

Luzhin is fitted for several new outfits. He moves into a new place on the second floor of his fiancée's building, where the landlady complains that he routinely forgets to perform simple tasks. Luzhin, uncomfortable in his new apartment, is anxious to be wed, but the fiancée's mother continues to be skeptical, concerned at how much money Luzhin has cost the family and convinced that her daughter does not love him. The fiancée rents an apartment for herself and her future husband.

The fiancée notes that Luzhin's appearance and behavior have become much more agreeable. She delights in his ability to conduct the simple, everyday tasks common to most adults. Luzhin's future father-in-law tries to tactfully impress upon Luzhin that, while he is happy to help him out for the first year of his marriage, he must thereafter support his own household. Luzhin is bewildered by the subtleties of social interaction. In this coming days, despite being generally content, he can't help but feel that something is missing. On the eve of his wedding, Luzhin dreams of Turati.

Luzhin is swept up by beauty of the wedding ceremony. Everything floats by like a dream. His mother-in-law and father-in-law are properly cordial and respectful. With the ceremony and subsequent revelry finished, husband and wife take a cab back to their apartment. Luzhin is exhausted. His wife takes a bath, admitting to herself that it is a delaying tactic. She emerges some time later find Luzhin has fallen asleep in a state of partial undress. Beside him in bed, the new bride has trouble falling asleep. Her thoughts are preoccupied with her "match" and the discomfort she felt during the wedding.

Chapter 11 Analysis

Luzhin is broken. He can't function in society. Chess has, until now, been his sole crutch. He has no employable skills, little grasp of conventions and few social graces. He is baffled by behaviors that most people take for granted. Luzhin is also surrounded by enablers, people who ensure his continued incapacity by insulating him from want. The best that Luzhin can manage is to mimic behaviors that others deem acceptable. Inexplicably, both his future wife and father-in-law expect Luzhin to eventually, and completely spontaneously, become functional.

Luzhin is not an agent. He scarcely even participates in his own wedding. The experience flows past him like water. He is taken home. He is put to bed. The new wife, meanwhile, has begun to doubt her match. She begins to wonder whether or not her sympathy toward Luzhin is enough to sustain her emotionally. There is an emptiness in her that a woman should not feel on her wedding night.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

The honeymoon trip abroad is postponed, owing to the in-laws' desire to have their daughter close by for the first few months of the marriage. While looking at a globe with his wife, considering where to travel, Luzhin is confounded by the haphazard way that the continents are arranged. Realizing that Luzhin has already traveled extensively, his wife is hesitant to offer the city-names lest she incite thoughts of chess. Luzhin amuses himself by teaching himself to type and listening to records.

The wife's sole focus in life is to keep Luzhin distracted from thoughts of chess. She attempts to preoccupy his mind with art, theater, and a zoo. While watching a motion picture, Luzhin cannot help but comment on the implausibility of a chess game depicted in the film. The wife is relieved that Luzhin does not seem overly agitated by the intrusion, though he does comment on it as they leave the theater.

While looking for things to give to charity, Luzhin stumbles upon his old tattered jacket. Ignoring his wife's protests, Luzhin dons the now-snug garment, charmed by its familiar comfort. It occurs to Luzhin that the jacket seems heavier on the left side, but, even though he knows the pockets are empty, he does not investigate.

The newlyweds attend a ball, entering arm-in-arm. As one of the few non-dancers, Luzhin feels self-conscious. Husband and wife lose track of one another. The wife tries to locate her husband, but is continually distracted by other guests. She is saddened by the idea that everyone seems taken with the "movie people," but are unaware that there is a chess genius in their midst. One Russian filmmaker in particular, whose description bears a passing resemblance to Valentinov, seems particularly obnoxious to her.

Luzhin sits smoking in a chair, hidden behind a column. A nearby, fellow non-participant engages him in conversation. Luzhin soon discovers that the man is Petrishchev, one of his old classmates. Heedless of Luzhin's growing panic, the man begins to reminisce, trying to remember Luzhin's first name (mistakenly recalling it as "Tony," the name of one of his father's characters) and the name of the "quiet boy." The man eventually recalls that Luzhin left school to take up chess.

Luzhin, on the verge of panic, flees the conversation. He tracks down his wife and begs that they leave the ball. Fearing for his mental health, she immediately agrees. Later, safe in the car, Luzhin is able to breathe easy. He doesn't understand why the meeting upset him as it did. He considers that it might be because Petrishchev tormented him as a child. Luzhin sees the encounter as a repetition of something he has encountered before, a familiar pattern.

Chapter 12 Analysis

The wife cannot insulate Luzhin against chess. Chess is pervasive. It's not a question of if, but of when - and once an image enters his consciousness, the wife has no say in what Luzhin does with it. Luzhin, for his part, continues to be drawn to "left brain" activities, preferring logical, systematic pursuits. He isn't engaged by thoughts of travel; instead, he is distracted by the shapes of the continents. He doesn't care about writing, but merely with the operation of the typewriter. Luzhin's mind is designed for chess, and so he naturally gravitates to patterns of logic.

Luzhin's old coat represents his lingering love of chess. He wants to wear it. He finds it comfortable. He notes the extra weight, but is unwilling to investigate. This suggests that Luzhin is, on some level, cognizant of the fact that there is a chess set hidden in the lining. On the one hand, he wants to wear the garment. This suggests that he is still yearns to play. On the other hand, he doesn't want to find the chess set. This suggests that he understands that his obsession is killing him.

Petrishchev represents the past from which Luzhin cannot escape. Petrishchev remembers Luzhin as the awkward, lonely child who eventually became a chess genius. He remembers Luzhin as the son of a writer. These are all things that chess allowed Luzhin to escape. Now, as an adult, Luzhin is no closer to understanding the boy he was. This encounter is a metaphorical return to the anxiety of his youth.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

The newlyweds take their morning stroll, walking past an ice rink. They run into another Russian couple, the Alfyorovs, and exchange brief pleasantries. Deciding to take a different route than usual, the couple passes a former residence of Luzhin's father. The wife questions Luzhin about his father's estate and is saddened when he replies with vague disinterest. She suggests that they visit his father's grave, but Luzhin complains that it is cold and far.

The winter weather worsens. Fortunately, the Luzhin apartment has central heating. The in-laws visit as Luzhin tries his hand at sketching. Though he has paints, he finds that he has little talent with them. They tend to be messy, sloppy and easily ruined. Luzhin prefer the clean line of drawing, though, this too, he has little talent for beyond drawing simple, geometric shapes.

While Luzhin looks for thumbtacks to hang up his latest cube picture (again briefly noting the odd weight on one side of his jacket), the mother-in-law tells her daughter that a family friend is visiting from Soviet Russia. Convinced that her childhood acquaintance, now a young mother, is likely unhappy under Soviet rule, Mrs. Luzhin says she would be happy to entertain her.

Mrs. Luzhin and her Soviet visitor greet one another with compulsory flattery. Secretly, the visitor believes that Mrs. Luzhin has grown quieter, paler and plumper, whereas Mrs. Luzhin feels that her visitor has, in the intervening years, grown more confident and interesting. The visitor brags about her young son Ivan, takes every opportunity to compare Europe unfavorably with Soviet Russia, and is generally outrageously condescending toward her host.

The Soviet guest is already aware of Luzhin's reputation as a grandmaster of chess, and has also heard of Luzhin from the very aunt who originally taught him to play, but she is curious to know Luzhin's political leanings. Their conversation is cut short when Luzhin unexpectedly cries out from an adjoining room. Mrs. Luzhin finds her husband in a state of enraptured excitement, but he won't explain why. The wife, at the request of her guest, takes the visitor out to shop for clothes.

Luzhin is elated. He overhead something in his wife's conversation that again made him feel like a chess player. Luzhin now understands the combination, the repeating pattern, that he first took note of at the ball. With the realization made, the elation quickly diminishes. Something bothers him. He sees the pattern, but he doesn't understand why it fills him with such dread. Having now recognized it, however, he hopes to understand its purpose well enough to be free of its stratagem. The only alternative is to quit the game.

Little Ivan, the visitor's young son, proves brooding and temperamental. The Soviet visitor, with her childish behavior and engorged sense of entitlement, distracts the wife from her husband's changing demeanor. The weather improves, prompting the wife to insist that, as soon as their troublesome guests depart, they will visit the grave of Luzhin's father.

Left alone with little Ivan, Luzhin does his best to amuse the child. After making several dubious attempts, he finally extracts the object, that mysterious weight, from his jacket. It's a small leather-bound chess set. He sets up the chess set exactly as it was during his final moments with Turati. The entire world falls away. Luzhin is absorbed solely in chess. Ivan, now fussing, knocks over the lamp, plunging the room into darkness. Luzhin, once more alert and hearing voices approach, thinks of how best to hide the set.

The visitor departs, convinced that Luzhin is some kind of "dunderhead." The wife is pleased to have her gone. Luzhin, his thoughts are haunted with chess, looks for a place to hide the small chess set, but to no avail. It remains in the lining of his jacket.

Chapter 13 Analysis

Luzhin has unresolved issues with his father. Like the chess set hidden in his jacket, Luzhin is avoidant. He shows no interest in his father's estate, nor does he want to talk about his father. The plan to visit his father's grave will come up repeatedly, but there will always be an excuse not to go and pay his respects. There is a sense that Luzhin resents his father, perhaps because Luzhin senior surrendered his son to the crafty Valentinov.

Without chess, Luzhin is like a child. He can't survive on his own. Rather, Luzhin relies on the watchful care of his wife. Now that she is distracted by the Soviet visitor, Luzhin is left more to his own devices, for good or ill. The visitor, meanwhile, represents the outside world intruding on the delicate balance of Luzhin's life: society, politics, and economics. Though she is disgusted by the visitor's attitude, the wife's interests are stirred; she dares to think of a world beyond merely caring for Luzhin.

Luzhin's grasp on reality is loosening. He has begun to see the world in terms of repeating patterns. He has convinced himself that someone or something is playing a game against him, trying to defeat him. Not only is Luzhin's world a threatening place, it's actually arrayed against him. As with Turati's opening, Luzhin's mind is preoccupied with understanding the pattern well enough that he can pose a defense against it. This dynamic smacks of narcissistic paranoia.

Little Ivan behaves similarly to a young Luzhin. He is temperamental and inconsolable, responding only to candy. To tame the child, Luzhin instinctively turns to chess. In so doing, his mind immediately returns to the game with Turati. This suggests that Luzhin's mental process is stuck. This is the true unsolved pattern, the unfinished game.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

The Soviet visitor is gone, but her abhorrent political opinions still trouble the wife's mind. She knows that the woman is wrongheaded, but she's at a loss to explain why. Before now, she has unthinkingly subscribed to her parents' politics. The wife notes that her husband has returned to his original sullen self. She wonders whether or not politics would prove an interesting diversion.

The wife subscribes to several Russian newspapers, both émigré and Soviet. She worries that, since many of the papers have chess sections, they might catalyze a bad dynamic in Luzhin, but decides not to edit them. Unbeknown to his wife, Luzhin takes great interest in these articles, memorizing them at a glance and pondering them in his mind as his wife reads aloud editorials.

The wife is bored by the newspapers. The émigré publications are diverse and vitriolic, but in the Soviet papers she feels a numbing bureaucratic coldness. She recalls a recent incident when she and Luzhin were given the runaround while trying to acquire a necessary document. The wife selects articles for her husband to read aloud, but when he does so, he merely decodes the contents, betraying no sign of interest.

The wife, thinking that people might prove more interesting than newspapers, resolves to invite a group of freethinkers and intellectuals to her home. Luzhin tries to remain vigilant, hoping to gain insight into the repeating pattern of his life, but he is continually distracted by the chess puzzles in the newspaper.

Still feeling as though a game is played against him, Luzhin stays on the fringe of his wife's gathering. The guests are many and varied. An actor admires Luzhin's reputation even as he considers hitting on his wife. A fast-speaking journalist tries to cram torturous ideas into as few words as possible. A plain-looking man rarely speaks, but listens with intensity. After brief silence over tea, the group eventually breaks into an argument over the merits of a particular author.

As everyone is leaving, still bickering amongst themselves, one of the guests, an actor, tells Mrs. Luzhin that a man from the movie business asked for her telephone number. He does not, however, mention the man's name. With everyone gone, the wife finds her husband still seated at the table. Looking at his sullen form, she despairs at an endless future of Luzhin's ennui.

The trip to the cemetery is again postponed, this time so the Luzhins can acquire their passports. Luzhin, in an attempt to explain away his recent low spirits, invents a toothache. The wife makes an appointment with the dentist. Despite having taken a sleeping pill, Luzhin spends a nigh-sleepless night thinking of the awful stratagem being arrayed against him. He imagines himself a pawn on a chess board.

The following morning, while Luzhin still sleeps, the wife receives a call from Valentinov. She's never heard of Valentinov, as Luzhin never speaks of his acquaintances. Valentinov urgently demands to speak to Luzhin, but pointedly avoids explaining his business. She explains that Luzhin is busy. He leaves his number.

The wife mentions Valentinov's name to the actor who recently attended her gathering. He explains that Valentinov was Luzhin's chess mentor. Hearing this, the wife resolves not to tell Luzhin of Valentinov's call. Instead, she calls and leaves a message with one of Valentinov's associates: Luzhin will be ill for an indefinite period and will therefore be unable to meet him.

With their trip abroad looming, the wife notes for the first time how unhappy her parents are. She recalls all the terrible things they said of Luzhin. Luzhin, meanwhile, to his shame, has been preoccupied with thoughts of chess. The author juxtaposes images of Luzhin getting his visa with Luzhin visiting the dentist.

In the hopes of breaking the invisible pattern of his life, Luzhin tries something entirely unorthodox: He lies about needing to return to the dentist. Instead of going to the dentist, Luzhin visit a hairdresser where he unsuccessfully attempts to purchase the wax bust, depicting comic and tragic masks, in the window. Without warning, Luzhin is confronted by Valentinov.

Valentinov, ushering Luzhin into his limousine, explains that he would like to use Luzhin in an upcoming film about a chess-player. Luzhin is momentarily overcome by thoughts of chess, but he senses a trap. There is no movie, he realizes. The movie is just pretext. Once Valentinov is distracted by other matters, Luzhin flees and quickly boards a familiar streetcar.

At home, the wife is worried sick. She knows Luzhin hasn't been to the dentist. Luzhin is highly agitated, pacing mechanically around the house, ignoring his wife's desperate attempts to communicate with him. She reminds Luzhin that guests are about to arrive. Luzhin stops pacing, empties his pockets, and bows to his wife, explaining that he must leave the game. Though distraught, the wife goes to greet the guests. Luzhin locks himself in a room, breaks a window and clambers up and outside to the ledge. Voices call to him from outside the locked door. By the time they get the door open, Luzhin is gone.

Chapter 14 Analysis

A rift grows between husband and wife. As her perspective broadens and matures, his continues to narrow. Newspapers represent a world of interest, but Luzhin has eyes only for chess. The newlyweds have no common ground beyond the wife's desire to see her husband healthy. Luzhin is self-absorbed, either unwilling or unable to engage his wife in political discussion. She, meanwhile, is developing an interest in politics that she rationalizes as therapy for Luzhin. Neither is connecting with the interests of the other.

The wife's confusion over political rhetoric parallels Luzhin's own confusion regarding day-to-day existence. She sees sinister patterns in the way that politicians speak, just as Luzhin reads adversarial patterns in his life. Unlike Luzhin, the wife doesn't take it personally. She may not understand or like the political world, but she doesn't think it is arrayed against her. Luzhin can't even conceive of the world his wife considers. He's stuck in a game against himself.

Luzhin's paranoia not only makes it difficult for him to have meaningful relationships with his new family, it also makes it hard for him to form new relationships. He sees others as potential pieces in the game played against him. Luzhin spends the entire party masquerading as a normal person. He's not participating—he's performing, playing a game, looking for the design behind the pattern.

After the party, the wife is disappointed to see that Luzhin is sullen. Disappointment speaks of expectations unmet. Despite substantial evidence to the contrary, she believed that the party would prove enjoyable to Luzhin. This suggests that she knows Luzhin about as well as he knows her. The wife wants to believe that Luzhin can be normal and happy, and so she's willingly bought into Luzhin's performance.

The action has pitched into a downward spiral. Luzhin is frantic to conceal his decaying mind. Valentinov, meanwhile, has chosen this time to move in. On the surface this coincidence perhaps seems contrived. How could Valentinov knows that now is when Luzhin is at his weakest? There is also a sense, however, that these paths would inevitably cross. Luzhin yields to chess as water yields to gravity. Valentinov just provides the downward slope.

The wife thinks of her husband as a child, believing him unable to withstand the manipulation of Valentinov. Her decision not to convey Valentinov's message demonstrates that she does not regard her husband as an equal. She acts toward Luzhin as something more akin to a mother, taking agency on his behalf, deciding where he will go, what he will do and to whom he will speak. Whether or not Luzhin could learn to take such responsibility himself is unclear, since he is never given the opportunity.

Two future events are postponed: visiting the grave of Luzhin's father and the trip abroad. These events represent past and future. There is a sense that the newlyweds are stalled out in a kind of purgatorial now, unable to move forward and unable to look backward. This parallels Luzhin's fear that he is caught in a pattern from which he cannot escape. The overarching mood is one of doom. Matters grow worse, without any sign of potential improvement.

Ultimately, Luzhin decides that the game is unwinnable. He can't decipher the pattern of his life. The board presents no winning strategy, no hope. Still constrained by his "game" precept, Luzhin simply decides to give up. While horrifying, this decision represents a rare moment of agency for Luzhin. He not only undertakes this action independently, but also despite opposition. In his final moments, Luzhin takes control of his life, deciding his own fate.

Characters

Aleksandr Ivaonich Luzhin

Luzhin is the main character of the novel, a man who does not fit into his society and is lost and isolated in himself. Until the very end of the novel, Aleksandr is referred to exclusively by his surname of Luzhin. This causes some confusing language in the early parts of the novel during which the father still lives, as father and son are both identified by the surname. This parallel proves more than textual. Luzhin's obsession with chess corresponds to his father's sexual proclivities. It isn't until just after his death that Aleksandr is referred to by his full name, posthumously separated from his father.

As a child, young Aleksandr is moody, ill-mannered and thoughtless. He is indifferent, often cold toward his parents. Fearing his frequent tantrums, Aleksandr's parents tend to treat him delicately. At school, he shuns the company of other children, convinced that they wish him harm. Until he discovers chess, Aleksandr finds few joys in the world, none of which involve interacting with other people.

Aleksandr is strongly "left brained." He prefers mathematics, logical patterns, and geometric shapes. He is unsettled by things which serve no purpose or which seem haphazard or ill-conceived. Aleksandr demonstrates little or no talent for creative pursuits, abstractions and social interaction. As the story progresses, Aleksandr goes slowly mad, trying to find logical patterns where none exist.

Luzhin's Wife

Luzhin's wife, whose name is never given, is a twenty-five-year-old émigré Russian debutante. She is compassionate to a fault, unable to abide pain in a world that she sees as being so conducive to happiness. She's pretty, but not beautiful, smart, but not brilliant. Luzhin's wife is educated, well-read and loves poetry. She's also independent and, while she respects her parents, she doesn't allow them to run her life.

First and foremost, Luzhin's wife needs to be needed. She is drawn to her future husband by his tragic-air. He is clumsy, careless and helpless. She romanticizes him in her mind, building him up as the artist who sacrifices for his art, giving of his health to make something of worth. She provides for him the structure he so desperately craves, ordering his life such that it makes some kind of sense.

As the story unfolds, it is apparent that Luzhin's wife suffers from an unspoken dissatisfaction. After Luzhin's breakdown, she throws herself into his recovery, determined to keep his thoughts from chess. When little progress is made, however, she considers that there might be a kind of happiness more fulfilling than mere compassion. Looking at her still-sullen husband, she begins to wonder if she can spend the rest of her life confronting such ennui. In a sense, she is freed by Luzhin's suicide.

Luzhin's Father

Luzhin's father is an author. He writes books about young men, for young men, and has high hopes that his son will one day prove himself a genius.

Luzhin's Mother

Luzhin's mother is a nervous, melancholic woman. She feels rejected by her aloof son and betrayed by her cheating husband.

Luzhin's Aunt

Luzhin's aunt teaches Luzhin the basics of chess. She is also having affair with Luzhin's father.

The Old Gentleman with Flowers

The old gentleman with flowers is a friend of Luzhin's aunt. He serves as Luzhin's chess mentor, helping the young prodigy to unlock his full potential.

Luzhin's Grandfather

Luzhin's grandfather, recently deceased at the beginning of the novel, was a gifted and renowned musician.

Valentinov

Valentinov is young Luzhin's coach and caretaker for a time. Touring the world with the boy, Valentinov exploits the boy for his skill and fame.

Luzhin's Father-in-Law

Luzhin's father-in-law is a wealthy businessman who made fortunes in both Russia and Germany.

Luzhin's Mother-in-Law

Luzhin's mother-in-law is a woman of style and sophistication. She has great difficulty accepting Luzhin's unrefined manner.

Turati

Turati is grandmaster chess player and is comparable to Luzhin in skill. Luzhin spends a great deal of time trying to devise a defense for Turati's opening strategy.

Kurt and Karl

When Luzhin loses consciousness after a nervous breakdown, the drunken revelers Kurt and Karl, mistaking the fallen chess-master for a fellow reveler, take him home.

Black-Bearded Peasant

The black-bearded peasant is the man who forcibly carries young Luzhin down from the attic where he was hiding.

Young Luzhin's Teacher

Luzhin's teacher is concerned with the boy's apathy and lethargy.

The Doctor

The doctor is a chess enthusiast and an associate of Luzhin senior. Luzhin senior enlists him as an opponent for his son once young Luzhin's talent becomes apparent.

Quiet Boy

The quiet boy is one Luzhin's classmates. He eventually becomes an officer in the Russian army and loses his arm in the civil war. There is a strong implication that Luzhin's wife knew him as well, independently of Luzhin.

The Psychiatrist

The psychiatrist is the doctor who helps return Luzhin to the world after his nervous breakdown.

Oleg Sergeyivich Smirnovski

Oleg Sergeyivich Smirnovski is friend of Luzhin's wife's family. He is a freemason.

Mr. Alfyorov

Mr. Alfyorov is a Soviet Russian in Berlin. He criticizes Luzhin's weight gain, leading Mr. Luzhin to conclude that he is mean.

Mrs. Alfyorov

Mrs. Alfyorov is the wife of Mr. Alfyorov.

Khrushchenko

Khrushchenko is the man who took control of Luzhin's senior's estate upon his death. Luzhin Jr. was supposed to contact Khrushchenko at some point to claim some or all of the estate.

Soviet Visitor

The Soviet visitor is a young mother with aggressive political views. She proves herself selfish, obstinate and unreasonable.

Ivan

Ivan is the young son of the Soviet visitor. He is spoiled and petulant.

Russians

The Defense presents two kinds Russians. Soviet Russians are those who live under the new communist Russian government. Émigré Russians are those who live outside of Russia, potentially after having fled the Russian revolution.

Objects/Places

The Condemned Jacket

The "condemned" jacket is the old, worn jacket that Luzhin wore during his chess-playing days. It represents his dormant chess obsession.

School

At his the private school, young Luzhin is tormented by his peers and first sees chess played.

Magazines

Throughout the novel, Luzhin learns about chess from various magazines. Later, his games are immortalized in the same publications.

Berlin

Much of the story's events take place in and around Berlin, where many Russians have emigrated in the wake of the Russian Revolution.

The Boxed Chess Set

Young Luzhin steals the boxed chess set from his father's office.

Soviet Russia

Soviet Russia is the post-revolution Russia, now ruled by communists.

Woodpile

The woodpile is where young Luzhin sits during recess, apart from the other boys.

The Office of Luzhin Senior

In Luzhin senior's office, young Luzhin eavesdrops on a violinist and first hears talk of chess. This begins his obsession.

Black Silk Handbag

Luzhin's handbag is black silk with a busted latch. He predicts that one day it will spill out its contents.

Luzhin's Card

Luzhin is often so disconnect and absentminded that he must carry a card with his fiancée's address written on it.

Luzhin's Cane

Though Luzhin hasn't any need for one, Luzhin is seldom seen without his cane.

Themes

Obsession

The problem central to novel is Luzhin's obsession with chess. It isn't merely a hobby, something he undertakes for mere amusement. Rather, it is a compulsion. When Luzhin sees a chess game, or spots a chess diagram, he must apply himself to the problem. He does this without regard for circumstances, retreating into himself until the solution is found. For the first half of the novel, Luzhin is focused on how to defend against the opening strategy of fellow grandmaster Turati.

Luzhin's single-mindedness is isolating. Though he spends thirty years traveling the world to participate in a series of prestigious chess tournaments, Luzhin remembers only hotels, players and strategies. These thirty years fall outside of the story. They're never recounted, but often referenced. The implication is that these years are lost, not worth relating. The story suggests that Luzhin lived these years by rote, mechanically performing the ritual of his life.

Luzhin's mind pays a high price for his genius. The better he plays, the less rooted he is in reality, losing himself among the myriad of potential strategies. After his game with Turati, the culmination of several extraordinary games, Luzhin suffers a psychotic break. In trying to give up the game, Luzhin finds that he is compelled to apply chess logic to his waking life. This results in paranoia and, eventually, suicide.

Personhood

In The Defense, most of the characters are nameless. Instead they are referred to as the woman, the fiancée or the wife. Some characters are identified by descriptors such as the old gentleman, the doctor, or the quiet boy. For most of novel, the protagonist is known only by his surname of Luzhin, confusing his identity with that of his father. This trend reflects the protagonist's difficulty with empathy. Luzhin tends to see people in terms of use and function, much like pieces on a chess board.

Luzhin is not a fully functional adult. Without chess, he cannot support himself. He has no employable skills and few social graces. The social norms that others take for granted are mysterious to Luzhin. Nevertheless, society expects Luzhin to be a productive member, both independent and capable. Luzhin's breakdown gives him a momentary reprieve from societal pressure, but the expectation is that he will recover and eventually support himself and his new bride.

Society cannot accept Luzhin's incapacity. His wife is convinced, all evidence to the contrary, that Luzhin will eventually blossom into an intelligent, conscientious man. Luzhin's father-in-law explicitly says that, though he is happy to help out for a year, he expects Luzhin to afterward become self-sufficient. Under duress, Luzhin learns to nod

and smile, to mimic the signs of normalcy, but the performance is hollow. Luzhin has based his entire life on a game that he can no longer play. He has nothing else.

Failure of Love

While there are many relationships depicted in The Defense, there are few that one might characterize as warm or loving. As a child, Luzhin is, at best, indifferent toward his parents, typically regarding them with scorn. The father's perspective of his son is eclipsed by unmet expectations. The mother, meanwhile, seems to reach out to Luzhin only when she herself feels neglected. Once Luzhin discovers chess, it is as though he has no use for his mother and father. He becomes a stranger to his mother. He abandons his father.

Valentinov, Luzhin's surrogate father, is clearly only interested in Luzhin so long as he remains the "wunderkind." Nevertheless, Luzhin feels a pang of loss when Valentinov abandons him. As a middle-aged man, shortly after his father's death, Luzhin returns to the resort that he and his father visited many years before. It is perhaps superficial to say that he does this because he misses his father. It was at this resort that a chance-encountered tournament launched his chess career. Had he not participated, things might have turned out differently. He might have grown up, become "normal." Instead, Luzhin traded his father for Valentinov, ultimately losing him as well.

Luzhin doesn't know his wife and demonstrates a marked lack of curiosity about who she is. The wife, meanwhile, doesn't regard Luzhin as a person. She sees him as a project, something that she can fix and nurture. As Luzhin struggles with his obsession, as well as his many atrophied or deficient social skills, the wife persists in thinking that Luzhin will one day spontaneously blossom into a functional adult. Luzhin notes, early on, a lack of passion or intimacy from his wife. The wife, meanwhile, faces doubts. She begins to wonder whether or not compassion alone will sustain her. Neither partner truly sees the other, therefore making it possible for anything like love to exist between them.

Style

Point of View

Nabokov writes in a third person omniscient perspective. While events are described relative to the current character of interest, the perspective routinely shifts between different characters in the same paragraph. This transition can be abrupt and potentially confusing. The reader is privy to the character's thoughts and feelings; the narrative is colored by the character's point of view.

The narrative shifts not only from person to person, but also through time. Nabokov might, for example, begin by establishing an event, only to flashback to prior happenings that lead up to that event. The author will also jump forward in time, offering a glimpse of future events, only to return to the "present" to resume the original storyline. This gives the story a sense of simultaneity, with past, present and future used interchangeably.

The author, in addition to shifting the perspective through time, will also use a very explicit form of foreshadowing, wherein he simply states something that will happen in the future. This reminds the reader that the author is omniscient, already privy to future events. It also instills the narrative with an air of fatalism, suggesting that the characters are not possessed of free will; whatever they will or will not do has already been decided. Since this is literally true, the story only being readable as written, this also draws attention to the artifice of the work.

Setting

The events of The Defense take place in Germany and, to a lesser extent, Russia. The bulk of the novel takes places in Berlin, the principle characters being Russian émigrés outside of the new Soviet Union. The earliest sections take place in pre-Soviet Russia, focusing on the Luzhin household and the school of Aleksandr. Later chapters take place in Berlin, focusing on the home of Luzhin's in-laws. While none of the later chapters revisit the now-Soviet Russia, its political influence is strongly felt among the Russian émigrés in Berlin.

Occasionally, the setting is inflected, or even articulated, by an altered state. As Luzhin loses his grip on reality, the setting can seem hallucinatory or surreal. In the grip of a fevered coma, Luzhin's mind creates a setting of disjointed images, a chimera of past and present. As drunks make their way down the street, the sidewalk seems to shift and bend beneath their feet. This demonstrates that setting, as part of a subjective narrative, is itself far from objective.

In The Defense, there are several locations which are tangibly absent. Luzhin and his wife never make the planned visitation to his father's grave. The Soviet Union, though both implicitly and explicitly referred to, never serves as part of the setting. Every

location the Luzhins plan to visit while abroad remains distant. These missing locales have the effect of making the character's world feel like a bounded space, like a stage, or perhaps a chessboard.

Language and Meaning

The Defense is translated from Russian. As such, the phrasing and wording can seem odd or stilted to the English reader. Sentences are typically long and paragraphs few. Since much of the story takes place in Germany, a smattering of German, particularly in the form of place-names or titles, will also be encountered. Occasionally the author (or more likely, the translator) will explicitly refer to language conventions common to Russian which are not found in English. The text might mention, for example, that a character is speaking with the pluralized form of "you."

Chess metaphors abound. This is especially true as the narrative follows Luzhin, whose mind, both rigid and systematic, seems to naturally find articulations of chess in everyday life. As the story unfolds, the metaphors become increasingly oppressive. Chess becomes something dark and sinister, hiding in plain sight among objects. Luzhin eventually sees himself as a pawn trapped on a board, endlessly subject to a larger design against which he cannot defend.

Throughout the novel, chess is portrayed in terms of music. Moves are notes. Strategies are overtures. This language extends to the way that Luzhin himself is described. His future wife describes him as a "musician," and the tournament organizer refers to him as "maestro." All of this harkens back to Luzhin senior, who had hoped that his son would become a great musician, following in the footsteps of his grandfather. The implication is that, despite what his father may think, Luzhin has grown into a musician anyway.

Structure

The book is divided into fourteen chapters of unequal length. The earliest chapters focus on Luzhin's lonely, troubled childhood. His youth concludes with the discovery of his genius and the refinement of his talent. After, there is a gap of approximately thirty years during which, it is said, Luzhin is playing chess professionally. The tale then resumes with Luzhin in his early forties, telling the story of how he meets and marries his wife. The last chapters concern their marriage and Luzhin's struggles with his chess obsession.

The bulk of the novel takes place with Luzhin as an adult, spanning the two-month period from when he first meets his wife to his collapse after his game with Turati. Several months follow in which he recovers, relapses and eventually takes his own life. Interestingly, while the first part of the book spans several years, the rest of it covers only the months leading up to his death. In fact, most of Luzhin's life is unrecorded. With the exception of a few vague references, everything that happens to him between fourteen and forty is not recorded.

Nabokov handles Luzhin's transition into adulthood by offering a brief flash forward to Luzhin at age forty, then returning to Luzhin as a child. The story then resumes, but this time it has the feel of a flashback. The author peppers the narrative with foreknowledge, indicating that "now" has become "then." The story then, again, leaps forward to middle-aged Luzhin, and continues from that point. In this way, Nabokov vaults over Luzhin's adolescence and young adulthood.

Quotes

"Having cried his fill, he played for awhile with a beetle nervously moving its feelers, and then had quite a time crushing it beneath a stone as he tried to repeat the initial, juicy crunch."
Chap. 1, p. 22

"Luzhin senior, the Luzhin who wrote books, often thought of how his son would turn out."
Chap. 2, p. 25

"Combinations like melodies. You know, I can simply hear the moves."
Chap. 3, p. 43

"As the game proceeded, her pieces would conglomerate in an unseemly jumble, out of which there would suddenly dash an exposed helpless king."
Chap. 4, p. 55

"All the games in the old magazine were studied, all the problems solved, and he was forced to play with himself, but this ended inevitably in an exchange of all the pieces and a dull draw."
Chap. 4, p. 59

"His son's gift had developed in full only after the war when the Wunderkind turned into the maestro"
Chap. 5, p. 78

"Not once did Luzhin address a question to her, not once did he attempt to support a collapsing conversation."
Chap. 7, p. 113

"Thus Luzhin came back from a long journey, having lost en route the greater part of his luggage, and it was too much bother to restore what was lost."
Chap. 10. p. 160

"It's torn and dusty, goodness knows how long it's lain about."
Chap. 12, p. 193

"Just as some combinations known from chess problems, can be indistinctly repeated on the board in actual play—so now the consecutive repetition of familiar patterns was becoming noticeable in his present life."
Chap. 13, p. 215

"It was decided that every day after dinner they would read to one another aloud."
Chap. 14, p. 223

"'The only way out' he said. 'I have to drop out of the game.'"
Chap. 14, p. 252

Topics for Discussion

Why is it that most of the novel's characters do not have names? What does it say about those characters? What does it say about the story?

Since most of the characters are not given names, what is the significance of those who are named?

Suppose that Luzhin were allowed to finish his game with Turati; how might that have changed the story?

Did Luzhin and his wife love one another? Why or why not?

Why is Luzhin so indifferent about his father's death, unwilling even to visit his father's grave?

Why does Luzhin return to the resort that he and his father visited many years before?

When Luzhin first wakes from his fever, he recalls burying something at the foot of a tree. What is this significance of this image in the context of this part of the story?

Compare and contrast Luzhin's real father with Luzhin's "chess father" Valentinov? How are they different? How are they similar?