Elizabeth Costello Study Guide

Elizabeth Costello

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

NOTE: This study guide refers to the novel Elizabeth Costello by J.M. Coetzee: Penguin Books, paperback, 2004 edition.

Elizabeth Costello is a novel about an Australian author who has achieved some fame from her writing. Twice divorced and the mother of two children, she is dedicated to her life as a writer. As the novel opens, Elizabeth is set to receive a major literary award with a substantial cash prize. Her son John assists her through her travels. During the ceremony, Elizabeth gives a speech on Kafka's story about an ape speaking to a room of academics. The crowd is unsure of her speech at its end. Nevertheless, they applaud.

Elizabeth is later invited to join a cruise ship and give a lecture on the contemporary novel. While she is on board, she encounters a former lover, an African writer named Emmanuel Ergudu. He, too, is lecturing on the ship. He discusses African writers and their difficulty in reaching an audience in the Western world. Elizabeth challenges Ergudu's position that he needs to reach audiences outside of Africa. She notes that writers write for their respective audience, be they English, Russian, or American.

When Elizabeth is invited to another speaking engagement, she shocks her audience by comparing animal slaughter to the Holocaust. She later has a somewhat better experience when she discusses how animals are viewed through the lens of poets. She tries to make sense of her understanding of the topic, finding herself confused by her own opinion at times.

After twelve years, Elizabeth goes to visit her sister Blanche who is a nun living in Africa. They spar during her visit, both questioning the belief system of the other. Blanche rejects the academic world, especially the humanities, in favor of the Church. Elizabeth defends the humanities and the Ancient Greeks. The sisters part ways at a stalemate. However, when Elizabeth returns to Australia, she cannot leave the conversation with her sister alone. She writes to Blanche to tell her that she is wrong about the humanities and what the humanities can teach people. After sending the letter to her sister, she remembers more about the story she detailed about sitting for an old man who was a painter. She remembers posing for him partially nude and later going to visit him in a nursing home and sitting at his side partially nude.

Elizabeth is later invited to speak at a conference on the problem of evil. She prepares her lecture, citing the work of Paul West, who has written about the executions of the men who would have assassinated Hitler. She objects to his work and how he invited the darkness of the subject matter into his life. When she learns that Paul West will be speaking at the same conference, she considers citing different material. Instead, she confronts Paul West and tells him that she will be speaking about his book. She is reminded of a time in her life when she first encountered evil herself, when a man savagely beat her and set her clothes on fire.

After contemplating the nature of immortals and their dalliances with mortals, Elizabeth ventures into a type of purgatory where she must defend her belief system in order to pass through the gate. Since she does not know what she believes, she is sent to stay in a dormitory where she can spend time preparing her statement. Her first appearance is a hearing. It is a failure, and she must try again. The novel concludes before Elizabeth learns the result of her second hearing.

Chapters 1-2

Summary

In Chapter 1, "Realism," the narrator contemplates a bridge and the idea that regardless of how the bridge is made, it has been crossed into something of an existential question that will permeate the novella. Biographical information is given about an Australian writer named Elizabeth Costello. Born in 1928, she is currently 66. The year is 1995. Twice married, she has a child by each husband and has written several books, including nine novels. She is most famous for her fourth novel The House on Eccles Street, published in 1969. In it she took the character Marion Bloom from James Joyce's Ulysses and made herself the main character of her own story. She is en route to pick up the Stowe Award from Altona College, which comes with a $50,000 prize.

As Elizabeth travels with her son John, he coaches her through the necessary elements of the trip. She must attend the award ceremony in order to receive the prize. John does not think his mother can manage the trip without his assistance. Elizabeth wears her "lady novelist's uniform" (4) in blue. Her hair is greasy. John feels distant from his mother. He feels that her career took her from him. He appears in some of her books. They meet Teresa, a professor from Altona College, before driving to the college. Teresa makes small talk about previous recipients of the prize; Elizabeth is not impressed. Instead, she assumes that the woman is trying to get her to speak critically about another author. After they arrive, Elizabeth tells John that he had "quite a tete-a-tete" (7) with Teresa. John learns that his mother is likely to have received the Stowe Award because she is an Australian author and 1995 celebrates Australia.

During the interview portion, Elizabeth leads the questions and answers to what she has already rehearsed. After being asked about her character Marion Bloom, she is asked if she sees women "as prisoners of marriage and domesticity" (13). She defers to women of a different time being prisoners, in particular the era of her character living in Ireland in 1904. The narration soon skips to the evening's award ceremony. She is presented with her award and gives a speech called "What is Realism?" (16). The narrator skips the part of her speech about fame. She references an unnamed story ("A Report to an Academy") by Kafka about an ape giving a speech. He has learned to mimic the humans to fit into their society. When her speech concludes, applause is slow to start, but "swells" (20). Dean Brautegam makes an announcement about refreshments. An audience member attempts to ask Elizabeth a question. But, Elizabeth does not want to answer questions. She is led off stage, leaving people asking questions about what was going to be asked. Elizabeth goes to her room for the night.

John meets with Susan Moebius who has written a book on Elizabeth. When she suggests that Elizabeth is an important writer, John asks if his mother is regarded as a "key writer for all of us…or just for women" (22). They discuss the implications of her gender on her writing. Susan suggests that Elizabeth can only write her characters through the lens of a woman. He asks her if men and women "live parallel lives" (23) will

they ever be able to meet? They go back to her hotel room. As they fool around, their conversation about gender and authorship continues. John does not think his mother's speech was successful. Susan explains that contemporary audiences have tired of hearing about Kafka. He defends his mother's place in literary history because she has been "measuring herself against the masters" (26). He regrets their conversation, fearing that he is overstepping his bounds.

The next morning John wakes feeling sad. He meets his mother, and they prepare to leave. Downstairs at the hotel, John meets with Susan and she reveals that she is married with a child. Susan gives Elizabeth a signed copy of her book Reclaiming a History: Women and Memory (29). Elizabeth sits for another interview and leaves the book behind; John takes it. When his mother says she prefers that people not give her books, he decides to take the book. He later asks his mother why she spoke about realism. She explains that "Kafka's ape is embedded in life. It is the embeddedness that is important, not the life itself" (32). They make their flight.

In Chapter 2, "The Novel in Africa," Elizabeth meets X, someone she has not seen in a long time. They have a conversation. He suggests that Elizabeth go to work giving lectures on a cruise line. He arranges the discussion with the cruise liner. With the travel arrangements having been made, Elizabeth is asked to give a course on contemporary literature and meet with passengers for discussion in return for her travel and an honorarium. On the ship, she encounters Emmanuel Egudu, an African writer whom she considers a "poseur." Egudu considers himself in "'habitual exile'" (37) because of the political nature of his writings. Like Elizabeth, he is offering a course on the ship about The Novel in Africa (37). When Elizabeth speaks about the future of the novel during her course, she illustrates how past holds more interest and appeal than the future" (38). She argues that this is because people lack the foundation of a common story of the future. As she speaks, she wonders if she believes what she is saying.

During Egudu's lecture, she observes from the back row. He speaks about the global system and the effects of outside people on the culture and politics of the continent. He claims that the only way to make a profit from writing is to craft books for use in schools. He questions the audience as to why he is talking to them instead of in his homeland writing. He pointedly states that he is earning money, which he is unable to do as a writer in Africa. He teaches in America, writes reviews in Europe and America, and lives without a fixed location to call home. He discusses "negritude" (43) a mid-twentieth century movement that suggested that that it defines and "binds all Africans together and makes them uniquely African" (43), including those who left during the African diaspora. A woman in the audience asks Egudu why the work of African writer Tutola has not been translated into English. He explains that there was no need because Tutola writes in English, but "not standard English" (46) and that his writing would be considered more in the oral tradition.

At dinner that evening, Elizabeth invites Egudu to join her and a couple, Shirley and Steve from Manchester. Shirley suggests that writers in the oral tradition should go directly to audio recordings instead of print. He acknowledges the merit of the idea, but he thinks it would be more "like idolatry" (50) to have the voice recordings. She explains

that the English write for the English and Russians write for Russians, but that the "African novel is not written by Africans for Africans" (51). He acknowledges her comment. However, she feels like if they were alone, she would be compelled to slap him. The dinner conversation continues, and Elizabeth thinks about how Egudu has not written a relevant novel in a decade. Soon after, she bids them all goodnight and goes to her room.

In the morning, she finds the ship has stopped. She goes up to one of the decks and finds that passengers are watching King penguins in the water. After breakfast, Elizabeth and other passengers take a boat to land to explore Macquarie Island. Elizabeth and a Russian woman talk while admiring an albatross. Elizabeth asks what she sees in Egudu, suggesting that they spent the previous night together. They speak partially in German, and Elizabeth thinks back to a time in Kuala Lumpur when she and Egudu were lovers.

Analysis

As the novel opens, the narrator gives the reader biographical information about the title character Elizabeth Costello. She has achieved some fame for her work, introducing the theme of the Writer and Authorship. Her most notable novel is one that borrows a character from one of the one most famous novels in English literature, Ulysses. In doing so, Elizabeth has placed her writing in front of one of the most highly-regarded authors. This establishes her intent to achieve greatness in her literary career.

From the opening paragraph, the author introduces the concept of a bridge: "It is a simple bridging problem" (1). This alerts the reader that Elizabeth has a destination by the novel's conclusion. However, reaching the destination will be problematic.This foreshadows the difficulty that arises for Elizabeth when she is asked to write a statement in the final chapter of the novel.

The author addresses the themes of gender and relationships throughout the novel. Elizabeth's introduction involves detail about her personal life. She is twice divorced and has a child by each husband. Elizabeth has a relationship with her son John, but she does not appear to have one with her daughter. The relationship between mother and son has its challenges. There is distance between the two, but they are involved in each others lives. John feels that his mother needs him. During her trip to receive her award, John feels obligated to be there for her. He has likely observed changes in his mother's behavior as she has gotten older, but he takes the perceived masculine role of protector with his mother. Observations are also made about Elizabeth's appearance. She is aging. Her hair is greasy, and she wears her "lady novelist's uniform" (4). The image of Elizabeth is passable. There is nothing noteworthy or attractive about her appearance. She is as she is and that is good enough. At her age it is as if she is not required to be regarded as anything else.

Elizabeth exhibits control during the interview. She knows that she wants to control what she can. Her rehearsed answers are easy for her. They make it less likely that she will

be caught unaware. The interview is her opportunity to demonstrate how she can manage control, which is something that she struggles to hold onto as the novel progresses.

When she gives her lecture, however, the situation changes. Talking about Kafka and realism does not land with the audience. The audience offers applause at the end, but it is perfunctory. There is distance between Elizabeth and her audience. She may have once been regarded as relevant, but her relationship to an audience has changed. As Susan later tells John, it is “America, the 1990s. People don’t want to hear the Kafka thing yet again” (25). Elizabeth’s thoughts on Kafka’s essay may have once been intriguing or thought-provoking to an audience, but the ideas being posited are not new. Elizabeth may not be fully invested in discussing Kafka with the audience, so much as she wants to be in a conversation with Kafka. Much like borrowing a character from James Joyce, Elizabeth puts herself next to Kafka. While Elizabeth may not be drawing direct comparison to herself and those writers, she does engage with the writers through their work.

There is a question as to whether or not Elizabeth is a great writer or a great woman writer. Elizabeth rejects the latter category. She wants to be one of the greats. While she may not directly express this, her son John does so for her. When he spends the night with Susan Moebius, John talks about his mother. He regrets some of the things he says to Susan, sensing that he may have betrayed his mother in the conversation. At the heart of the conversation is whether or not Elizabeth is regarded as a great writer or a great female writer. It is not the 'great' that is at issue, but whether or not it needs to be qualified by gender.

John and Susan’s discussion addresses a possible impasse – a place without a bridge – and that is how men and women “live parallel lives” (23) and thus can never intersect. Susan states that Elizabeth can only write a male character from the perspective of a woman, but the inverse is true as well. The issue at hand is how in this context, the issue of men writing female characters is not in question. The issue is how Elizabeth has been able to tackle writing male characters.

The next morning, Susan tries to give her book to Elizabeth. This demonstrates Susan’s desire to be part of the literary conversation with Elizabeth. She has written about Elizabeth and tries to engage her, but Elizabeth is reluctant. Elizabeth appears to be interested in interacting with male authors rather than females. John ends up taking the book. He may be interested in Susan’s insights into his mother’s writing, or he may be being polite to Susan. His motivation is unclear, outside of a desire to make the situation easier for his mother.

Chapter 2 finds Elizabeth on a cruise ship. She is on the cruise as a guest lecturer. Instead of seeing Elizabeth busy at work on a new novel, she is traveling and speaking about contemporary fiction in general.

During her time on the ship, she encounters a former lover, Emmanuel Egudu. When the two see each other, it is clear that they have a history with each other, but the level

of intimacy between them is not revealed until the close of the chapter. Prior to learning this about her relationship with Egudu, Elizabeth is critical of him, his writing, and how he manages his career. She thinks about how he has not produced a notable novel in some years and is busy lecturing and teaching. Egudu is engaged in the literary community, but he understands that he is not grounded anywhere. He lives in "temporary accommodations" (43), teaching and lecturing wherever he can.

Egudu is like Elizabeth. They are both writers, and each is perceived as having a specific writing voice. Elizabeth (as a woman) and Egudu (as an African writer) are outsiders in the literary community. They differ in how they manage these perceptions. Egudu is passionate about the voice of the African writer, and he expresses his frustrations. Elizabeth challenges his frustration by suggesting that he write for other Africans just as British and Russian authors write for their respective countrymen. This is not enough for Egudu, but it also is not enough for Elizabeth. As an Australian, she does not seem interested in writing solely for Australians. As a woman, she is not interested in focusing solely on reaching women either. Elizabeth is frustrated. She bristles at Egudu's arrogance, wondering if "In Africa what one takes to be posing, what one takes to be boasting, may just be manliness" (36). She does not respond to him favorably, but this may be because she sees similarities in herself.

Elizabeth was once attracted to Egudu, as they were lovers when they were young. Now, however, she does not see him as successful enough to be worthy of her admiration. When she questions the Russian woman about what she sees in Egudu, Elizabeth is not looking to see if the woman will discuss his writing. She wants to know why she is attracted to him. Elizabeth may well be asking the question of herself. She cannot see what she saw when she was young. This develops the theme of the past and how Elizabeth rejects it, foreshadowing her behavior in later chapters.

It is fitting that the interaction between Elizabeth and Egudu occurs on a cruise ship. They are in a remote part of the world – nearing an island between Tasmania and Antarctica – but they are in transit. The cruise ship serves as a bridge of sorts. There is a set course, but they are not at their starting or ending position. It is as if they are stuck on a figurative bridge, connecting them when Elizabeth may reject the idea of how they are alike.

Discussion Question 1

How does the way John treats his mother influence the reader's expectations of Elizabeth's character?

Discussion Question 2

Why does John ask whether his mother is considered an important writer or an important writer for women?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Susan give Elizabeth a copy of her book?

Vocabulary

bequest, gird, amiable, abscond, autonomous, impromptu, ruminations, voracious, oblique, indulgent, engendered, tedious, malice, benefactors, adherents, ingenuousness, perpetuity, transience, monologue, pious, illustrious, mimicry

Chapters 3-4

Summary

Chapter 3 is titled “The Lives of Animals” and is subtitled “ONE: The Philosophers and the Animals”. It opens with John waiting for his mother at the airport. Two years have passed and he is struck by how old she looks. She is visiting Appleton College to give a lecture and is staying with John, his wife Norma, and their children. John has kept his mother’s identity a secret at the college because he wants to succeed on his own merit, without her reputation and success. Elizabeth and Norma do not like one another. As Elizabeth begins her lecture, she acknowledges her previous lecture on Kafka and seeks to clarify her intention.

As John watches her, he thinks about how stifled her delivery is. This counters the strength of what she tries to accomplish. She begins to lecture on animals being led to slaughter for food, but spares the audience garish detail. She begins to compare leading animals to slaughter to the Third Reich and the slaughter of Jews. With regard to the German people she explains that “they lost their humanity, in our eyes, because of a certain willed ignorance” (64). She goes on to question whether those who knew about the camps and did nothing were even human. She questions her own ability to ascertain reason. As she continues, she reference Srinivasa Ramanujan, a notable mathematician who died at aged thirty-three whose proofs have not been proven, despite the possibility that they are accurate.

Elizabeth continues to speak about Red Peter from the Kafka story on which she previously lectured. The lecture posits that Kafka may have read Wolfgang Kohler’s monograph “The Mentality of Apes” (71). While she does not need to prove that Kafka read it, she likes to think that he did. She discusses Sultan, an ape, and what he may or may not think while he is in captivity. As she continues her lecture, Norma tells John that Elizabeth does not know what she is talking about.

Then, Elizabeth turns her attention to Nagel, a philosopher, who asked about being a bat. Norma grows impatient and laughs when Elizabeth concludes that she is “dead and alive at the same time” (77). This is after she attempts to puzzle through knowing what awareness a corpse may have. She returns her focus to victims of the Holocaust and how the Germans, Poles, and Ukrainians did not know what was occurring. She ends her lecture with stating that people can get away with just about anything because there is no consequence.

Norma attempts to get the attention of the Dean of Humanities during the question and answer session. John cuts her off. Norma insists that Elizabeth needs to be stopped. John prevents her from asking a question and another person prompts Elizabeth to clarify her comments about whether animal experimentation should be stopped. She explains that she does not want “to enunciate principles” (82) and comments on how

people can tell is animals are playing with humans. She would like to think that the animals in the labs are playing, but they are not.

At a dinner later, there is an empty seat. John is curious about the menu accommodating an Islamic cleric or Jewish rabbi by not serving pork and how the university will handle his mother's vegetarianism. He would have preferred that his mother had not come. Fish is served along with an eggplant fettucine. Others from the university begin to discuss eating preferences and religion and what animals are deemed unclean. Elizabeth suggests that gods were invented to allow humans to eat other creatures, which places the blame and guilt for killing animals elsewhere. Elizabeth asks Norma is she has read Gandhi's autobiography, which Norma has not. Elizabeth begins talking about the autobiography until Norma interrupts and asks the point of her tangent. Elizabeth suggests that Gandhi's vegetarianism "condemned him to the margins of society" (88). Another man at the table counters that Ghandi chose to be a vegetarian because of a promise made to his mother. The dinner concludes. Elizabeth continues to sort her thinking, explaining how she identifies thinking and understanding.

Chapter 4 is titled "The Lives of Animals" and is subtitled "TWO: The Poets and the Animals." Elizabeth has gone to bed for the evening, and John and Norma are talking about the lecture Elizabeth is giving tomorrow. Norma struggles to make sense of Elizabeth's logic, particularly which "rational accounts are merely a consequence of the structure of the human mind" (91) and that humans cannot compare their thought process to animals because of the lack of a shared language. She tells John it is oversimplified. They discuss whether a squirrel has a world view and agree that a squirrel does, but it is limited. She asks about the missing guest at the dinner. It was Abraham Stern, a poet, who refused to attend in protest.

The next morning, John arrives at school to find a letter written by Stern to Elizabeth. The letter details how he objected to her thesis of a reciprocal comparison of Jews and cattle. John takes Elizabeth to the seminar room for her next lecture and then goes for department meetings. He returns to find his mother talking about how animals are used in poetry to represent human characteristics. She cites Rilke's "The Panther," Ted Hughes' "The Jaguar," and "Second Glance at a Jaguar" (95), as she discusses how the cage figures in the poems differently. Hughes' poem is in response to Rilke who is viewing the cage as nonexistent because he is not mentally there.

A student asks about Hughes having a sheep ranch and how he may be raising sheep for poetry or for sale. Elizabeth directs the conversation to understanding Hughes' predilection for abstraction. Elaine Marx, referencing Swift's Gulliver's Travels and the "utopia of reason" (100) asks if Elizabeth thinks a species can live without some form of cruelty. Elizabeth discusses Swift's "A Modest Proposal" as well as "Gulliver's Travels". She references herself as an ex-colonial, and explores the idea that Swift used Gulliver as a lone traveler. The Houyhnhnms test whether Gulliver is a "god or a beast" (102), but humans do not.

After the lecture, John walks with Elizabeth to his office. They discuss poetry as a play on words. John challenges her vegetarian position by asking what would happen to a jaguar if it only ate soybeans. She counters with by stating humans will not die from vegetarianism. She compares the treatment of animals to prisoners of war. John asks what she wants and she does not have an answer, just that she does not ignore what she sees in the world.

Later, Elizabeth takes part in a debate opposite Thomas O'Hearne, a philosophy professor. They debate human rights and animal rights, with O'Hearn questioning how the animal-rights movement does not see itself historically, and how the Western world's view is in opposition to how other cultures conduct themselves. When it is Elizabeth's turn, she suggests that Western culture apologize for how animals were industrialized. O'Hearne concludes his debate with admitting that people want to live with animals, but do not want to hold the same position in the community with them. Elizabeth gets her final chance to speak and she reminds O'Hearne that he may think that death means nothing to animals because they do not comprehend it (111). She does not want to agree with O'Hearne on principle.

That night, John and Norma are in bed together discussing his mother. He tells her that she is leaving soon. John takes her to the airport the next morning and can tell she is upset. When she begins to cry, he holds her and tells her "It will soon be over" (115).

Analysis

At the start of Chapter 3, the reader learns that John has attempted to keep his mother's identity a secret from the university where he works. It is not out of shame, but rather out of an attempt for John to stand on his own accomplishments. In this way, he is much like his mother. While she wants to be recognized for her writing, he wants to be recognized as well.

John is critical of his mother, particularly in her delivery when she is speaking. He has never found her to be a compelling speaker, even when he was a child. The reader also learns that John is married with children and that his wife Norma does not get along with Elizabeth. It is possible that John is more readily critical of his mother because of Norma's influence. How and when John is critical of his mother is key, however. John can acknowledge her faults or weakness when he is observing them on his own. When Norma is critical of or laughs at Elizabeth, John is counters or stops her. He defends his mother and does not feel it is Norma's place to be critical of her. John stops Norma when she tries to ask a follow up question after Elizabeth gets confused during her lecture and discusses the awareness of the corpse. Just as John does not want Norma to embarrass Elizabeth, he does not want to be embarrassed by extension.

During Elizabeth's lecture, she compares animal slaughter to the Holocaust. Comparing meat eaters to Nazis is an extreme comparison and it is not well-received. She attempts justification for what she says and questions humanity in the process. Her vegetarianism is not religiously motivated, so she is not attempting to proselytize and

impart her belief in vegetarianism. In attempting to justify her point, she brings up her Kafka lecture, which was similarly not well-received. She attempts to connect Kafka's to the monograph "The Mentality of Apes" (71) by Wolfgang Kohler to further the point she is trying to make, but it is clear that Elizabeth has lost her train of thought. She explains to her audience that she is not bound by scholarship to prove that Kafka read Kohler. It is enough that she is connecting them, positing that Kohler may have influenced Kafka. By connecting these two men, she has inserted herself in their possible conversation. This illustrates the theme of Writing and Authorship.

It is clear that Elizabeth's confusion increases as she goes along. By the time she concludes her lecture by stating "we can do anything and get away with it; there is no punishment" (80), she has gone to an extreme. Yes, acknowledging the horrors of war is something that humanity must reconcile, but Elizabeth seems to push it further. For these people there is no existential crisis. Perhaps her lack of faith or ability to turn to religion has shaped her perception. What happens in this life happens is all that there is. There is no penalty in the afterlife, just as she does not see a penalty in this life. At this juncture, Elizabeth's ideas on faith are more inferred than directly expressed, but her perception foreshadows her interactions with her sister in a later chapter, as well as foreshadowing how she will contend with a purgatory-like situation later in the novel.

At the dinner following the lecture, Elizabeth questions whether or not gods are a human invention to give permission to do things that may not be desirable, such as killing animals for food. Many animals are carnivores or omnivores. They kill for food without any permission from a higher power. For Elizabeth, the conscious choice of killing for food is what bothers her. She also questions whether or not animals can truly be perceived as engaging in play with humans. As the discussion continues, Elizabeth gets increasingly more confused. She seems to struggle with relating to the people around her, further alienating them instead of trying to find a compromise. As she discusses whether or not humans can ascertain whether an animal is playing, it indicates Elizabeth's struggle to read people.

When Elizabeth continues to argue her point and references Gandhi, she is faced with the counterpoint of Gandhi not choosing vegetarianism as a social cause, but rather because of a promise made to his mother. This explanation is reasonable, but it does not fit Elizabeth's narrative. She has cherry-picked the facts she needs to make her argument instead. Perhaps this reflects Elizabeth's skills as fiction writer overpowering how she defends her arguments when she cannot create the story that serves her. At the conclusion of Chapter Three, Elizabeth recognizes and is perplexed by her confusion and misunderstanding. She appears to want complicated arguments, but struggles with understanding the ambiguity.

When Norma and John discuss Elizabeth, Norma recognizes the difficulty that Elizabeth is having. When Norma talks about the "consequence of structure" (91), she knows that the braid wants to make sense of what it does not understand. It is as if Elizabeth is in a perpetual state of this. In order to make sense of it, she fills in with her own facts to make sense of it. John is stuck between Norma and wanting to defend his mother. He may even be able to see that he is somewhat like Elizabeth as well.

The image of the bridge is repeated in Chapter 3. There is the passage of time with the two years between the last time John saw his mother as well as the image of John waiting for his mother. It can be seen again during Elizabeth's lecture when she states that she is "dead and alive at the same time" (77) when she is discussing what type of awareness a corpse may have. The final way in which the symbol of a bridge is used in at the end of the chapter when Elizabeth is with her son. She is upset and John tries to comfort her, telling her that "It will soon be over" (115). Elizabeth is emotionally fragile and is having difficulty connecting with people and with her ideas. In this way, she is figuratively trapped on a bridge, unable to commit to either side.

The second lecture that Elizabeth gives during her visit is better received. By using the poems by Rilke and Hughes, she uses examples of what she is trying to do, which is to be in conversation with the great authors. The two poems that she cites by Hughes speak directly to the poem by Rilke. Here she can demonstrate how the conversation is conducted. The theme of gender is explored by how the poems in question are written by men, and Elizabeth, as a woman, is an outsider observing their conversation. Further, when a male student asks a question about Hughes, she is distracted from her point by another male entering the conversation.

The theme of humanity is demonstrated by Elizabeth's debate with Thomas O'Hearne. They discuss human and animal rights. Elizabeth suggests that the Western world "should be at the forefront of trying to atone" (107). She does not offer solutions and further reasoning. It may be that she wants atonement herself. Perhaps she wants to make up for what she may have done in the past or attempt some greater understanding. But it is more likely that Elizabeth has chosen a platform to explore and bring to people's consciousness. This is her opportunity to do something that matters and makes her relevant. If she is frustrated over being recognized for a book she wrote decades earlier, she may be searching for something else for her legacy. She does not seem to know how to go about doing it, but she is making an effort. Like she tries to explain to John, she does not "want to sit silent" (104). She understands the argument that O'Hearne makes during their debate, but she is so desperate to be recognized (and defeat a male voice in the process) that she rejects his argument on principle when she knows he is correct about animals not understanding death.

Discussion Question 1

How does Elizabeth's comparison of animal slaughter to the Holocaust shape her character?

Discussion Question 2

What does Elizabeth mean by wondering "what thinking is, what understanding is" (90)?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Elizabeth refuse to “share reason” with O’Hearne?

Vocabulary

demonstrative, jejune, allegory, abattoirs, trawlers, capitulation, reparations, denunciation, reverberates, correlates, degradation, polemical, gibber, cadre, tertiary, amanuensis, monograph, vicinity, pangs, sadistic, indignant, corollary, substrate, benign, rostrum, deference, rissoles, tithe

Chapter 5

Summary

Chapter 5, titled “The Humanities in Africa,” is divided in nine sections, marked with Roman numerals. In Section I, Elizabeth goes to visit her sister, whom she has not seen in twelve years after their mother’s funeral. Her sister Blanche became a nun and is now known as Sister Bridget and lives in Africa. They have tea and small talk. Elizabeth views her sister as a stranger to her children. Section II finds the two women at a graduation ceremony where Blanche is speaking as an “honorary graduand” (119). She speaks about the humanist movement and how textual criticism was invented to study the Bible. Scholars were servants to the teachings of Christ. She wonders why the humanities did not become an area of study until the fifteenth century instead of a period of time closer to the Bible’s creation. She also questions how biblical scholarship got lumped with Greek and Roman antiquity without controversy or debate. Blanche suggests that the studies of humanities is dying and is being replaced by reason or modern technology, but leaves that for another discussion.

Section III begins with the end of Blanche’s speech, which appears to be met with confusion. After the ceremony, they attend a luncheon, where Elizabeth meets Professor Peter Godwin, who teaches English Literature. They discuss humanities at the university and he tells Elizabeth that Blanche wants more faith in God than man. Elizabeth tells him that she differs greatly from Blanche. They discuss D.H, Lawrence and Elizabeth calls him a “false prophet” who “promised a form of salvation” (127), worshiping “dark gods” (127). The Dean realizes who Elizabeth is and is excited to that she is there. This makes Elizabeth somewhat guarded and reveals another dimension to the sisters’ relationship. Blanche claims that she does not need books to illustrate what evils humans are capable of. Another man at the table explains that is the Church had admitted how their belief systems have had to confront the possibility of translation issues, but that their present debate would be null. Blanche defends the Church and suggests other scholars were merely wanted to understand their world in relation to their present. The Dean silences Blanche with a tap on her knee.

In Section IV, the sisters return to the hotel. Elizabeth wonders about Blanche’s resentment toward the humanities. They discuss the matter further and Blanche is concerned with “Hellensim as an alternative religion…to Christianity” (131). The argument confuses Elizabeth because Hellenism is obscure. Blanche defends her position, positing that Hellenism tried to provide salvation, but failed because it could not connect with regular people. Her sister’s stubbornness of position surprises Elizabeth.

Section V finds Elizabeth in Marianhill on her last day in Africa before traveling back to Melbourne the next morning. She understands that this is the last time she and her sister will see each other. They visit a chapel and Elizabeth is introduces to Joseph, a local wood carver, who makes only crucifixes. She asks if he makes an art for the tourists and he says no. In Section VI, Elizabeth talks with Blanche about the extent of

Joseph's collection of crucifixes. Considering how Joseph carves the same suffering imagine a man repeatedly, Elizabeth questions what that may do to Joseph's mindset. Blanche is offended by her use of the word man. They discuss what might have happened to Joseph if he had been encouraged to become an artist instead of remaining a craftsman. Elizabeth thinks he would have had a fuller life, but Blanche asks who is the most likely to be welcomed by Jesus: Blanche, Joseph, or Elizabeth. Elizabeth wants to know why the image of Christ needs to in agony, when the Greeks would not have made statues in such an image for worship. She tells her sister that she finds the crucifix "backward, as medieval in the worst sense" (139). They continue to debate the Church and the Greeks and Blanche defends her position by discussing the future of Africa and its reality. The people who come to her seek her help to shoulder their burden.

In Section VII, Blanche tells Elizabeth the driver will arrive at noon to take her to the airport and asks her if she will be attending Mass before she leaves. Elizabeth agrees to and Blanche tells her a film crew making a film about Aids from Sweden will be there. During the Mass, Elizabeth feels faint and tells Blanche she needs to leave. Blanche encourages her to stay. Elizabeth wakes up in an unfamiliar room and blames the heat. In Section VIII, the driver arrives to take Elizabeth to the airport and the sisters make their goodbyes. Blanche tells Elizabeth to remember that the people do not want austere statues, but a reflection of their own suffering. Elizabeth questions whether her sister wants her to admit defeat. Blanche tells her that she choose the "wrong Greeks" (145) and that she should have gone for the "ecstatic instead of the rational" (145).

Section IX takes place a month later when Elizabeth decides to write a letter to Blanche. She explains about meeting Mr. Phillips, a painter who could not speak because of a laryngectomy. They communicated with notes. Elizabeth sat for him. One day he told her that he would like to paint her in the nude. She returned to her pose and then opted to take off her blouse and bra. She explains that she was in her forties and that her breasts were not youthful. She never told their mother about the painting. She is writing to Blanche to explain that she was not finished with their debate. She asks her sister if she remembers the term cock-teasing, and comments on her behavior in front of Mr. Phillips. While she sat for him, she felt like she "was of the immortals" (149).

She explains about the Correggio paintings of Mary of Nazareth as she breast feeds the baby Jesus. Elizabeth wonders who Coreggio's model was when he painted it and how she may have aroused the painter. She tells her sister that in their discussions they talked about "humanism and the humanities…but skirted: humanity" (150). She concludes her letter by telling her that the point of the humanities is to understand the meaning of being human. She closes the letter and then thinks about a time when she visited Mr. Phillips in a nursing home. Elizabeth slipped into his room about a month after the painting was complete. She had held his hand and called his name. She returned the next Saturday and then began to do so on a regular basis. One Saturday, he wrote a note complimenting her breasts and thanking her.

On her next visit, she went into a small alcove and removed her dress and bra and returned to his side, thinking "what consenting adults get up to behind closed doors is

no one's business but their own" (153). On a different Saturday, she put her hand on the bed cover and stroked. When there was no response, she put her hand under the blanket to undo his pyjamas and attempted oral sex on him until he responded. She wonders why there is a divide between her and Blanche and thinks about how she does not want her sister to die without responding.

Analysis

Chapter 5 gives more insight into Elizabeth's character as well as expanding on the themes of relationships, the past, and humanity.

Elizabeth travels to see her sister Blanche receive an honorary degree. Blanche gives a speech during the ceremony and discusses textual scholarship and the Church. It is clear that Blanche holds the position that the Church is responsible for the study of the humanities. The way an academic studies a literary text is rooted in how the Bible was studied. She is not comfortable with the fact that biblical scholarship is somehow connected to the study of the Ancient Greeks and Romans. This is likely puzzling to her given the fact that the Ancient Greeks and Romans were polytheistic cultures and the Catholic Church is monotheistic. Further, as is demonstrated during her later discussions with Elizabeth, the Church is able to comfort the suffering by being able to relate to those who suffer.

The debate between the sisters begins at the luncheon after the graduation ceremony. It has been twelve years since the sisters last saw one another. That was on the occasion of their mother's funeral. While the sisters appear to have similar dispositions – both are apt to debate and hold steadfast in what they believe is correct – there is not much indication that they are close. This may be because of the distance between them; Blanche lives in Africa, while Elizabeth lives in Australia, but there may be more to it. Since there are similarities in their personalities, it is possible that they reject what is similar about them when they see it in the other. Elizabeth is surprised by her sister's stubbornness, which is one of Elizabeth's traits.

By this point in the novel, it is clear that Elizabeth is actively struggling with committing to an opinion. She makes every attempt to defend the position she begins wish (as she did in earlier chapters), but finds that she does not know what she genuinely thinks once she has had an opportunity to reflect on the subject matter and the counterargument offered. When she debates with Blanche, she is better able to maintain her focus. Elizabeth is bothered by Blanche's position that she does "not need to consult novels" (131). This must be a source of consternation for Elizabeth because the novel is what most defines her. Blanche's statement nullifies her need to seek approval from her sister. Blanche may care for her sister, but her statement diminishes her.

Elizabeth recognizes the distance between them as sisters. As a nun, Blanche is spirit whereas Elizabeth can be regarded as animal or of the earth. Just as they debate the Church and the humanities, they debate themselves and the different paths they took as women.

At the luncheon she remarks that Blanche has “truer sisters, sisters in spirit” (126). That conversation turns toward D.H. Lawrence and the “dark gods” (127) Lawrence’s work advocated. Aligning the distance between the sisters and Lawrence makes sense given the letter that Elizabeth later writes to Blanche. In the letter, she details some aspects of the relationship with Mr. Phillips. Elizabeth has to know that Blanche would judge her sister when learning about her sister posing semi-nude. But this open act of sexuality is meant to confront Blanche. Elizabeth can represent the Greeks and the good life, and as she states, make her feel like she “was of the immortals” (149). The Church may offer Blanche immortality via the afterlife, but Elizabeth takes ownership of immortality in that moment. It may not last, but she can hold that experience over her sister. When Elizabeth asks Blanche if she remembers the phrase “cock-tease”, it indicates a shared knowledge and indicates a time when Blanche was not a nun and was perhaps interested in exploring her sexuality. Elizabeth’s experience with Mr. Phillips is not when she is young woman; she is in her forties. In effect she is recapturing her youth as though that this experience also contributes to her feelings of immortality in that moment. What Elizabeth does not include in her letter to Blanche, but that is remembered and relayed by the narrator, is what happened with Mr. Phillips in the nursing home.

It is likely unsurprising that Elizabeth would revisit her semi-nude pose. That was an action that connected Elizabeth and Mr. Phillips. What may strike the reader as out of character for Elizabeth is when she performs oral sex on Mr. Phillips. Thinking of him in the nursing home does not give the impression of a sexually vibrant man. He is in a vulnerable state, which gives Elizabeth power. He does not resist and there is indication that they are consenting adults, but her act is one of power. That does not mean that she is overpowering him, but rather that she uses her power to make him feel something, to experience a lost sexuality. This also allows Elizabeth to express herself sexually as well. She may have lost that element of herself and in this moment she can reclaim.

The experience also connects to how Elizabeth references the paintings by Correggio in which Mary of Nazareth is seen breastfeeding the baby Jesus. Mary nourishes the baby and there is power in this. While Elizabeth is older and her children have grown, she can make the comparison and understand her own power in that moment.

As the chapter concludes, Elizabeth seems to have regret over the letter she sent to Blanche. Elizabeth may not regret its content, but rather her own intent to finish her argument with her sister. She feels that they did not address how the humanities teach about being human. Perhaps, if they had conducted this part of their discussion in person, they may have come to an agreement of some kind. There is no indication that Blanche responded to the letter or will ever do so. Elizabeth is concerned that Blanche will “die in a foreign field and leave me with an answer” (155), but what is the answer that she wants? Does she want to continue the debate? Does she want to be told that she is right? Or is she just desperate to connect with her sister and does not know how? Like her experience with Mr. Phillips, there may be a need to return to her youth, to feel alive and full of possibility. This develops the themes of the past and relationships. Further, her exclamation at the end foreshadows how her own death will leave her

without answers. Elizabeth may be the one who leaves Blanche behind without answers, instead.

Discussion Question 1

What does Elizabeth and Blanche's relationship reveal about their characters?

Discussion Question 2

Regarding their personal philosophies, how are Elizabeth and Blanche at odds with each other?

Discussion Question 3

How does Elizabeth’s reflection on her relationship with Mr. Phillips relate to how Elizabeth communicates with others?

Vocabulary

vocation, conferral, wimple, eminent, ambit, dispensation, linguistic, antagonism, rubric, ermine, ecumenicism, umbrage, fatalist, scribal, xenophobic, acacia, exiguous, dragooned, piety, idiosyncrasy, homily, despondent, alcove, flaccid, agape

Chapters 6-7

Summary

Chapter 6 is titled “The Problem of Evil.” Elizabeth is going to Amsterdam to participate in a conference about preventing evil in the world. After her lecture about animal slaughter being compared to the Holocaust, she received bad press, with one newspaper reporting: “PRIZE-WINNING NOVELIST ACCUSED OF ANTI-SEMITISM” (157). She thinks that she should have known better. The topic agreed upon for her lecture is “Witness, Silence, and Censorship” (160).

At the hotel, she first sees the program for the conference. Her bio lists her as “author of The House on Eccles Street” (161), as if she has had no other accomplishments as she has gotten older. She recognizes the name of Paul West on the list. She has recently read one of his books on Nazi Germany and Hitler’s would-be assassins. She has used his book as a reference in her lecture. She has considered changing the source, but she cannot find a suitable replacement. At the very least, she contemplates altering her position.

She thinks about a time when she was nineteen and in Amsterdam. She met a dock worker named “Tim or Tom” (165), and they went to a bar and then to his room at a rooming house. She has never had a one night stand and as they start to fool around, she changes her mind and tells him she cannot go through with it. He does not rape her; instead he beats her profusely, strips her clothes off of her and sets them on fire. Naked, she hid in the bathroom until he fell asleep. She grabbed what she could of her clothes and ran away. She stayed with a friend, but never told anyone about the attack. She regards it as her first experience with evil. She regroups and thinks again of Paul West. They are both novelists and she wonders if she differs from West. She thinks that at her stage in life she would rather do good than tell a story, but suspects Paul is the opposite. When she reflects on the horrors of the war, she thinks about how horrible it was for Hitler to have existed and why people keep resurrecting him when he is dead.

The next morning, she imagines introducing herself to Paul West and informing him that she will be commenting on how she believes he has exploited evil to create his book. When she does introduce herself to Paul West, she tells him that her lecture focuses on him and his book. She tells him that writers should avoid the atrocities as described in his book. She believes that writers can be affected by what they write because writing them could influence the writer. He does not respond to her and she continues talking. She tells him that she is not seeking permission or offering an apology, but she is warning him.

When she begins her lecture, she speaks of places that should be avoided and feels that West’s book is set in such a place and that she does not think Mr. West should lead his readers there. She concludes her lecture with “death is a private matter; the artist should not invade the deaths of others” (174). During a Q and A, a man asks how

Elizabeth knows that Paul West is affected by his writing and that he hopes that Paul will have the opportunity to respond to her accusation. Elizabeth realizes she should not have come to the conference. She tries to defend her position, reiterating that Paul came in contact with darkness when he wrote his book.

She later thinks of how her body looks in comparison to the photos of the women from the concentration camps. She realizes that “those women were in most cases not as old as she, merely haggard from malnutrition and fright” (178). She continues to puzzle through what to make of it all. She compares the atrocities of the Nazis and to the Romans and how they executed people. She understands that she should not have come to the conference because she is not sure what she thinks anymore.

Chapter 7 is titled “Eros.” The narrator explains that Elizabeth met an American poet named Robert Duncan in 1963. She would have liked to have had an affair or secret child with him. Duncan was in no way interested in Elizabeth. She thinks of Duncan because a friend has sent her a book about Eros and Psyche written by Susan Mitchell. One of Mitchell’s poems details Eros and Psyche in bed together, with Eros breaking apart like “a bird shot in flight” (184) when they climaxed together.

Elizabeth contemplates gods in literature and how they interact with mortals and how the humans treat them. She considers Anchises' and Aphrodite’s affair and how uncommon an experience it is for a mortal and an immortal to achieve intimacy. The only similar occurrence in Christianity she can think of is the Immaculate Conception. She wonders if people can fully understand the concept of a god. Elizabeth is getting older and reading less, which is a common occurrence. Then, the narrator discusses love, death, and immortals and how the gods are considered omniscient. Elizabeth wonders what the gods see in a human and then she experiences “a vision, an opening up, as the heavens are opened up by a rainbow when the rain stops falling” (192).

Analysis

Chapter 6 finds Elizabeth attending a conference on evil, suggesting the themes of humanity and the past. Elizabeth has run into some issues following her lecture about animals at the Holocaust. She feels as though she should have known better than to have given the lecture. This speaks to her self-doubt and continuing difficulty in understanding her position on issues. Instead of running away from the problem, she has opted to go ahead and attend another speaking engagement. A topic is agreed upon between the conference and Elizabeth. This is likely an attempt to keep Elizabeth on task, but the topic gives Elizabeth a fair amount of latitude. “Witness, Silence, and Censorship” (160) is her topic, and she is once again going to reference Nazi Germany.

She has been preparing for the lecture and is caught off guard when she learns that the author of one of the books that she planned to use in the lecture is also speaking at the conference. She feels that Paul West exploits the horrors of war for personal gain in his book. She considers using a different source because of Paul’s presence, thinking that easing up on her thesis may be a good option as well. These options demonstrate again

how Elizabeth waivers in what she thinks. These are reasonable thoughts to have. She may not want to disrespect a colleague.

Elizabeth chooses not to change her thesis. She does, however, confront Paul West prior to giving it. She puts him on notice. In this moment, she directly challenges a male author that she has felt in competition with throughout her career. In effect, Paul West symbolizes all male authors. While Paul West does not respond to Elizabeth, she makes an interesting observation: if writing can make one better, can it also make one worse? Elizabeth is comfortable asking the questions, but understanding where she stands on an issue can be cluttered. It does not seem to make sense that someone who used the horrors of the Holocaust in a previous lecture would then argue that another novelist has done something questionable by exploring those themes. This develops the themes of relationships (with regard to writing and other authors) as well as writing and authorship.

How Elizabeth reacts and relates to the subject at hand is peculiar. She condemns Paul West for exploiting the horrors of the WWII in his novel, but puts herself in direct comparison with the photographs of women who suffered during the Holocaust. While she does not outwardly speak of this observation, she still thinks about how her nude body looks comparable to the women in the photos. Her experience, of course, is much different. The women in the photo do not look like they do because of the natural aging process of the body, but because of abuse, neglect, and starvation. Elizabeth knows that there is a difference between herself and them, but she regards herself as a victim in some capacity.

The lens through which Elizabeth sees herself is likely tinted by the memory she had of her attack when she was younger. She has buried this memory, but regards it as “her first brush with evil” (165). The attack she suffers is brutal and dehumanizing. In that regard, it is a logical comparison that she would see herself as similar to ones who suffered the brutal dehumanizing during the Holocaust. Elizabeth has a connection to pain and suffering, and she rejects it. Just as she preferred the Greeks' appreciation of beauty to the image of the crucifixion. Because of her humanity, Elizabeth wants to put the past and all its horrors behind her.

She also compares the savagery of the Nazis to the executions in Ancient Rome. In comparing them, she asks why the Romans aren’t reviled like the Nazis. Is it because of the time that has passed? Is it the distance contemporary beings have from antiquity? It is an interesting comparison. History remembers and focuses on different elements of the Roman Empire than Nazi Germany. Ultimately, Elizabeth decides that she should not have come to the conference. She is out of place because of her indecision and lack of clarity.

Chapter 7 finds Elizabeth contemplating gods and mortals and their relationships. She thinks of gods instead of God, but grapples with how best to understand the relationship between mortals and immortals. For a mortal to make love to a god, such as Psyche and Eros, it confirms the existence of god. Elizabeth does not understand why the gods are interested in the mortals. Perhaps she questions this because she feels

disconnected from other humans. If as a writer, she wants to achieve immortality through her work, then why should she interact with those she does not view as equal?

Elizabeth's death is inferred from this chapter when she has "a vision, an opening up, as the heavens are opened" (192). Because she is one who has questioned the concept of religion and its relationship to humanity, she wonders what the gods see in humans. She does not know what she believes. This demonstrates the theme of humanity. It also sets her up for being at the mercy of being conditioned to make something up for it to make sense, to create a fiction, which is further explored in the next section.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Elizabeth confront Paul West?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Elizabeth think that the artist should not invade the deaths of others" (174)?

Discussion Question 3

Why is Elizabeth concerned with gods and mortals?

Vocabulary

covert, sentimentalists, disputation, malign, consigned, pragmatic, illimitable, manifold, ineluctably, reticence, similitude, etymology, talisman, contend, tenaciously, harangued, banality, gibes, contrivances, prudent, prurient, bestrode, irremediably

Chapters 8 and Postscript

Summary

Chapter 8 is titled “At the Gate.” Elizabeth is in a square asking if someone can open the gate for her. It is hot and a man sits at a table with a fan, writing. He asks her to make a statement. She does not understand and he explains that she needs to write what she believes. Elizabeth does not think she can do it and instead offers to make up a belief. When she turns in her statement, it is rejected. She asks to peak through the gate to gauge whether or not she should bother. The man explains that there is a dormitory for those who take a long time to submit a worthy statement. She arrives in the dormitory and sees a bailiff and judges. She stands before them at her hearing. She explains that she is a writer, acknowledging that they may consider her a writer in the past tense. She explains that she is not a cynic and one of the judges asks “You are not an unbeliever then” (201). She explains that “unbelief is a belief” (201). The man invites her to continue.

Then, Elizabeth is asked about children and Tasmanians and how she feels about their slaughter. She is confused and agitated. She tells them that she believes that she is a secretary, meant to record the voices that speak through her. She defends herself by comparing beliefs to ethics and how there must be more to it than ethics. She tells them that she considers herself an instrument for all, not merely those who have suffered greatly. The panel tells her they will get back to her with their decision. She returns to the dormitory. She cleans up in the washroom. When she returns to the room, she sees a younger woman who is also petitioning. Elizabeth wonders if people are all just waiting for judgement. Her thoughts turn to Kafka and how “the gate, the sentry, are straight out of Kafka” (209), but “she is no devotee of Kafka” (209) and is confused.

The next morning she makes another attempt at a statement. She thinks about humans cleaning their bodies with blood and how the capability of trying to understand their existence. She thinks of Odysseus descending into the kingdom of the dead and the violent imagery and wonders why she is thinking of it. A woman sits next to her while she is working on her statement and asks if she is writing her confession. She corrects her that it is her “statement of belief” (212) and the woman says they call them confessions. Elizabeth disagrees that it would be called a confession in English, but may be considered so in another language. She wonders about how everyone is able to speak English and whether it is a trick of her mind that she can understand other languages in this place. Elizabeth tells her that she is putting in her statement that being a writer forces her to suspend belief. The woman suggests that it may be impossible to know what one believes because it is buried in the heart. She figures that if she is stuck in this “simulacrum” (215) at least it is lovely.

She returns to the courtroom and finds the same bailiff, but a new board panel. She reads her statement which details her place of birth and the weather and climate of rural Victoria where she grew up. She details a story of frogs that arrive after torrential

downpours. People wonder where they come from, but they burrow under the soil in the dry riverbeds and go dormant. When the rains come, the frogs appear to come back from the dead. She tells the panel that she believes in the frogs because they are real. The woman on the panel asks her if she believes in life. She responds: “I believe in what does not bother to believe in me” (218). One of the judges tries to clarify and wonders if she has changed her story from the previous hearing and who the true Elizabeth Costello is. She tells the panel that she can be both because she made both statements and they are accurate. The board dismisses her and she passes by her gate and sees the gatekeeper writing. She tells him she had her second hearing, but she does not think it went well. He tells her that everyone has the opportunity. She asks him how he knows and whether or not he has seen other people like her. He tells her “we see people like you all the time” (225).

The novel concludes with a “Postscript.” It is a fictitious letter to Francis Bacon from Elizabeth, Lady Chandos, dated September 11, 1603. She writes that Bacon should have received a letter from her husband Philip and that she worries Bacon will think it was written during a crazed moment. She discusses sorrows and what she has endured with him. She thinks that she is living in a time of sickness. Her husband tells her that “all is allegory” (229). She asks for Bacon to save her and her husband and to tell her husband that it is not time to die. She cannot reach her husband and closes the letter with “Drowning, we write out of our separate fates. Save us.” (230).

Analysis

Chapter 8 finds Elizabeth in limbo, a bridge to the afterlife. It is best describes as purgatory. She is reluctant to write a statement. As has been the case throughout the novel, Elizabeth does not know what she believes. She has become increasingly isolated in this regard. At this juncture, she is confronted by the unknown. She has no way of knowing what lies on the other side of the gate. It could be heaven or hell or nothing or Ancient Greece. There simply is no way of knowing. In essence it reflects Elizabeth.

She is required to write her statement, and while Elizabeth is a writer, this presents a challenge for her. She does not understand what she is supposed to write. This is a woman who has made her life’s work creating fiction. This is why she opts to create “an imitation of a belief” (194). What she has written in all of her works may have been a reflection of her thoughts and ideas and even self, but she has been able to maintain distance from those ideas. She gives ideas and actions to a made up character or reinvents a character as she did with Marion Bloom. Now, she must commit to being the person that thinks in such a way and that is uncomfortable for her. This addresses the theme of writer and authorship.

During her first appearance before the board, she tells them that she is like a secretary for voices. It is her job to convey what is being said. Where she attempts to challenge herself is when she states that she is “open to all voices” (204). She is now willing to let

even the evil voices flow through her. That is her sacrifice or atonement. The board rejects her statement.

As she copes with this development, she thinks of literature. Blanche may have rejected the novel, but the written word is where Elizabeth's spirituality lies. She thinks of Odysseus and the kingdom of the dead. The imagery is dark and bloody, certainly not what most would be thinking about when considering the afterlife. This is opposition to how Elizabeth's thoughts would be expected to go. Given her fondness for the Ancient Greeks and the beauty of the statues, this is the opposite direction. This is the scene that haunts her. Perhaps Elizabeth's resistance to the afterlife is perpetual suffering and this is too much for her to bear. If she rejects it, however, she may not have to confront it. So she continues to deny a belief.

The board questions Elizabeth's position, but she defends herself by stating that she can create what she believes without committing to a belief. She has continually demonstrated her reluctance to be wrong. She does not handle opposing viewpoints. It is as if challenging her ideas makes her weak. This is evidenced by her reluctance to participate in Q & A sessions as well as refusing to acknowledge any agreement with O'Hearn. It may be that her academic experience has conditioned her to accept that an impasse can be reached without a definitive opinion or viewpoint.

Elizabeth states that she "cannot afford to believe. That in my line of work one has to suspend belief" (213). Again, this addresses that Elizabeth is restricted by her experience with fiction. She is tasked with making her readers believe the world she creates. Given that she is not creating this world, she remains reluctant to doing so.

When she regards her surroundings – regardless of how real it is or not – as lovely, she has made peace with the fact that she could stay there. Yes, she asks the man at the gate whether or not she will ever be able to get through the gate, and he tells her that "we see people like you all the time" (225). This line can read as one of comfort and also as one that does not. It may encourage her that eventually she will figure it out and get through. It may also indicate that she is going to be stuck where she for eternity. Because she can recognize that it is pleasant there, she has made peace with her fate.

When Elizabeth wonders if all the people around her are "petitioners awaiting our respective judgements" (208), Elizabeth is wondering how much she has in common with the others. She wants to know if she if different, if she is special. Is she worthy to be among the gods?

Perhaps, like the ancient Greeks, she would have preferred to be able to interact with the gods while alive. It is not a focus on the afterlife or Christ or atonement, but interaction. She would rather be in conversation with gods than at the mercy of them. This would elevate her status as a writer and her legacy would make her immortal. For Elizabeth that may be a more suitable afterlife.

The novel concludes with a postscript in the form of a fictionalized letter. The Elizabeth in the letter writes that her husband has suggested that "all is allegory" (229). An

allegory is a story that has a moral or a hidden meaning to be interpreted. If Philip is correct and this has all been allegory, then Elizabeth's fate is left to interpretation. She may be at the mercy of the gods or the mercy of her mind. She may be forever stuck on a bridge, or she may find her way to other side. Returning to the opening of the novel, the narrator states "Let us take it that the bridge is build and crossed, that we can put it out of our mind. …We are in the far territory, where we want to be" (1), and like Elizabeth and her writing, it is a place to create and interpret meaning.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Elizabeth tell the panel that she is "open to all voices, not just the voices of the murdered and violated" (204)?

Discussion Question 2

What might become of Elizabeth given that the gatekeeper tells her "we see people like you all the time" (225)?

Discussion Question 3

What are the implications of the statement "all is allegory" (229)?

Vocabulary

serge, ablution, gulags, phylum, bereft, cynicism, credo, interim, edification, tribunal, rhetoric, plebiscite, feigned, evince, obsequiousness, laves, furrow, verisimilitude, corporeal, empyrean, simulacrum, vapid, ignominy, laden, innumerable, anagram, affliction, contagion, wayfarer, rapture

Characters

Elizabeth Costello

Elizabeth Costello is a successful author who is in her 60s. She is twice married and has two children. It appears that she has more of a relationship with her son than with her daughter.

Elizabeth's most famous novel is The House of Eccles Street, which was published in 1969. In it, she borrows the character Marion Bloom from James Joyce's Ulysses. She is resentful that the focus of her literary career is a book that was written early on in her career.

She is interested in academic discourse and the exchange of ideas in the humanities. A discussion about the Church and the humanities leads to a rift between Elizabeth and her sister Blanche. Elizabeth is indecisive and struggles to commit to a clear position on what she thinks or believes.

Her relationships are distant, and she is somewhat cold. She holds a deep belief that to avoid suffering there should be no reliving of certain events such as the slaughter of animals, the acknowledgement of a violent, long ago personal attack, or the reality of the horrors of war.

John Bernard

John Bernard is Elizabeth's son. He works at Appleton College and is married to Norma. They have two children.

He is protective of his mother. He believes that she needs him in an effort to navigate speaking engagements. He prevents Norma from challenging Elizabeth because he does not want his wife embarrassed.

He has a one night stand with Susan Moebius the night his mother receives the Stowe Award. They debate the merits of his mother's writing and her place in the literary canon.

Susan Moebius

Susan Moebius is the author of Women and Memory. She meets Elizabeth and John at the Stowe Award ceremony. She believes Elizabeth to be an important female author. During her one night stand with John, they discuss the female lens through which Elizabeth writes and how that affects character.

She attempts to give Elizabeth a signed copy of her book, which John ends up taking.

Emmanuel Egudu

Emmanuel Egudu is an African writer who is lecturing on the same cruise ship as Elizabeth. When they were younger, they were lovers.

He believes in the importance of the African voice and the oral tradition in literature.

Norma

Norma is John's wife and the mother of his children. She holds a PhD in philosophy and does not get along with Elizabeth.

Joseph

Joseph is the wood carver whom Elizabeth meets while visiting her sister in Africa. He carves intricate renderings of Christ suffering on the Cross.

Blanche/Sister Bridget

Blanche/Sister Bridget is Elizabeth's sister. She became a nun and moved to Africa. She is a true believer and believes that the Church has more to offer than the humanities because it can commiserate with suffering and it offers comfort to common people. She sees her sister Elizabeth for the first time in twelve years when Elizabeth goes to see her receive an honorary degree.

Because Elizabeth is not comfortable with Sister Bridget, she continues to refer to her sister as Blanche.

Mr. Phillips

Mr. Phillips is the older painter for whom Elizabeth sits. She sits partially nude for him and does so again when he is in a nursing home. While at the nursing home, she also performs a sexual act upon him.

Tim or Tom

Tim or Tom is the man who beat Elizabeth and set her clothes on fire after she decided not to have sex with him. She cannot remember his exact name.

The Man at the Gate

The Man at the Gate is the man who guards the gate when Elizabeth is in the afterlife.

Symbols and Symbolism

Son

Elizabeth's son John symbolizes the difficult relationship she has with her legacy as a writer.

Belief System

Elizabeth's lack of a belief system symbolizes her self-doubt and inability to come to terms with what she may or may not believe.

Lectures

The lectures symbolize the distance Elizabeth keeps from others, including herself. This is seen in her inability to commit to what she thinks, understands, and believes.

Cruise Ship

The cruise ship symbolizes Elizabeth's journey through the novel. She is in perpetual motion, traveling to different locations.

Bridge

The bridge at the opening of the novel symbolizes how Elizabeth ends her journey in a purgatory-like setting. She is in a perpetual state of attempting to cross.

The Award

The award Elizabeth receives in the beginning of the novel symbolizes how her notable accomplishments are behind her. The novel moves her away from her success rather than toward new ones.

Nun

The fact that Elizabeth's sister Blanche is a nun symbolizes Elizabeth's inability to commit to a belief system. Her continued disagreements with her sister show her reluctance to believe.

Conference on Evil

The conference on evil symbolizes Elizabeth’s own struggle to make sense of evils in the world from Nazis to Romans to animal slaughter to the attack she suffered as a young woman.

Susan Moebius' Book

The rejection of Susan Moebius’ book symbolizes Elizabeth’s reluctance to engage with women authors, preferring to confer with male authors.

Crucifix

The crucifix symbolizes Elizabeth’s aversion to suffering.

Settings

Altona College Auditorium

The auditorium is at Altona College. It is where Elizabeth receives the Stowe Award. During her acceptance speech, she discusses Kafka and realism.

Cruise Ship

The cruise ship is where Elizabeth reconnects with Emmanuel Ergudu. It makes a stop at Macquarie Island, which is located in the Pacific Ocean between Australia and Antartica.

Appleton College

Appleton College is where John works and Elizabeth gives her lectures on The Lives of Animals. Her lectures compare animal slaughter to the Holocaust

Elizabeth also discusses the Rilke and Hughes poems at Appleton College.

Africa

Elizabeth travels to Africa to visit her sister Blanche. Blanche has lived as a nun for many years. It is in Africa where Blanche receives an honorary degree and the sisters debate the Church and the humanities.

The Gate and Dormitory

The gate and dormitory are where Elizabeth is stuck at the end of the novel after her death. Elizabeth claims it is lovely. It is a purgatory-like place between life and the afterlife.

Themes and Motifs

Gender

The author uses the character Elizabeth Costello to demonstrate how women authors must work harder to be perceived as important writers in the world of literature and not important only in the world of women authors. This is a struggle that hovers over Elizabeth at all times. She wants to be considered relevant and revered in the literary community. Her desire to be part of the overall conversation is explicitly detailed by her son John when he is with Susan Moebius. He asks Susan a question about her perception of his mother's career: “Don’t’ you think that is what she has been doing all her life: measuring herself against the masters? (26).

The House on Eccles Street, Elizabeth's most famous novel, is most likely in contention during John's conversation with Susan. The novel develops the character of Marion Bloom, who is the wife of Leopold Bloom in James Joyce’s Ulysses. Elizabeth is in direct conversation with Joyce, one of the most enduring and respected male authors. She has positioned herself to be talked about in conjunction with greatness.

While Elizabeth never matched the success of that novel, she continues her hand in asserting herself among the men. When she lectures or speaks at dinner parties, her observations are made in conjunction with male writers. She cites Franz Kafka, Rilke, Ted Hughes, Peter West, and others. This is the arena in which she wants to be included. As a result, she rejects conversation with women in her literary discussions. She dismisses Susan Moebius and leaves the book behind that Susan left for her. She distrusts Teresa’s motivations. She is in opposition to her son’s wife Norma, and she is even in conflict with her sister Blanche.

As a woman she is also confronted with the vanity associated with aging. She discusses posing for Mr. Phillips in her letter to Blanche. She describes her body by saying that she “was forty then, I had two children behind me, they were not the breasts of a young woman” (148). She is aware of the aging process and how it may or may not influence how she connects with others. In detailing her exploit with Mr. Phillips, she is able to hold an aspect of her sexuality over her sister. Because Blanche is a nun, she is regarded as a non-sexual being. Elizabeth can be a “cock teas[e]” (149).

Her gender and sexuality are also confronted during the violent attack she endured when she was a young woman. She allowed herself to be picked up by a dock worker, exploring part of her sexuality. When she changed her mind, it sent the man into a rage. Instead of raping her, he exuded his power over her to demonstrate the weakness and vulnerability of her gender.

Relationships

The author demonstrates Elizabeth's isolation through her relationships with others. Like the bridge referenced at the novel's opening with the "bridging problem" (1) to her position in purgatory at the close of the novel, Elizabeth is in some way removed from others.

From the biographical information given by the narrator, the reader knows that Elizabeth was married twice, but there is no mention of the men and their identities. She had a child with each of the men. However, there is only a passing reference to her daughter, and she has a strained relationship with her son John. In understanding his relationship with his mother, he realizes that "she denied him, therefore he denied her" (5).

While John is able to help his mother while she is traveling, he sometimes wishes that she had not come. They are not warm toward each other. Nevertheless, he does offer her comfort when he sees she is visibly upset at the end of Chapter 4. "He inhales the smell of cold cream, of old flesh. 'There, there,' he whispers in her ear. 'There, there. It will soon be over'" (115).

Elizabeth's relationship with her sister Blanche is explored in more depth. The sisters have not seen each other in the twelve years since their mother died. Elizabeth travels to Africa to see Blanche receive an honorary degree. The two engage in a pleasant conversation when Elizabeth arrives, but it is not long before their discourse begins. Blanche is committed to her faith. Elizabeth, advocating for following the paths of the Ancient Greeks and celebrating art and the good life as opposed to suffering, is ready and willing to challenge Blanche. Even after the sisters have parted, Elizabeth does not end their discussion. She writes to Blanche to continue her point.

Her letter gives some insight into a different Elizabeth. While Elizabeth is not outwardly portrayed as a sexual being, she does tell her sister about sitting semi-nude for an artist named Mr. Phillips. It is empowering for Elizabeth, prompting her to admit that she felt she "was of the immortals" (149) while doing so. Most of Elizabeth's relationship with Mr. Phillips relies on her initiating the sexual nature during their interaction. She makes a point that they are "consenting adults" (153), but Elizabeth does exhibit power during their time together.

Another relationship that Elizabeth struggles with is her relationship to her legacy. Perhaps, one of the reasons why she cannot commit to a belief at the conclusion of the novel is because the belief will define her. She is not prepared to let go over what may be thought of her.

Writing and Authorship

The author explores writing and authorship as metafiction in the novel. Metafiction takes a work of fiction or different conventions in fiction and discusses or analyzes them in a separate work of fiction. This is demonstrated in several instances including Elizabeth's

use of the character Marion Bloom from Ulysses, the Rilke and Ted Hughes poems, Elizabeth's speech on Kafka and realism, and her lecture referencing Paul West.

As a writer, Elizabeth has achieved fame and success. She has a reputation, and she is respected. However, she has not produced any new material of note. Her legacy is left in question as her speeches and lectures leave colleagues unsure of what to make of them. This is paralleled with Emmanuel Egudu, whom Elizabeth criticizes for not having written much of anything. Egudu lectures and teaches, too.

Elizabeth resists question and answer sessions following her lectures. When questions are asked, she struggles to respond, often leading her to question her own opinion. She would rather have the last word and control the outcome of the lecture as best she can.

As the novel concludes, Elizabeth is tasked with one more writing assignment, her belief statement. She struggles with what to write because she does not know what she thinks. Before the close of the novel, she has written two different types of belief statements, which creates difficulty for her. The panel is not sure how to receive the conflicting statements. They reconcile them as being who Elizabeth really is as a person.

Elizabeth's writing has taken a toll on her personal life. Her writing took precedent, causing a rift between Elizabeth and her son. Presumably, it affected her relationship with her daughter as well, since the daughter is mentioned in passing and not further addressed in the novel by either Elizabeth or John.

Also, Elizabeth has difficulties with her sister Blanche. The sisters have taken very different paths in their professional lives, but both have chosen paths that greatly influence the way they think about life and humanity. Elizabeth continues their debate in the form of a letter. She wants the last word in the argument, but it is not until she puts pen to paper that she feels she can aptly discuss her view on humanity.

Past

The theme of the past is explored through the various intellectual discussions presented through the novel. The most obvious use of the past in through Elizabeth coming to terms with her legacy as a writer. Also, past relationships are mentioned. The relationships include when she and Egudu were once lovers, her involvement with Mr. Phillips, and the violent attack she suffered as a young woman.

When Elizabeth remembers the attack, she thinks of it as her "first brush with evil" (165). This memory surfaces during the time when she is prepping for the conference on evil and what to do about it. It also occurs at a time when she is looking at Paul West's book. She confronts West at the conference. Her warning means little to him. Elizabeth would prefer to have evil be in the past and forgotten, much as she has never spoken of the attack. West's book invokes Hitler, and the memory of the heinousness of the Third Reich disturbs Elizabeth. Thinking that the past should be studied to learn to

prevent it in the future does not apply to Elizabeth. Burying the memory of the past is preferred.

The most prevalent and likely the most important way the past is dealt with in the novel is through literature. Elizabeth, just as many authors do, writes in relation to other works, effectively holding a conversation with the other author. Elizabeth's best known novel borrows a character from Joyce's Ulysses. She references Paul West at the conference on evil, and she defends the Ancient Greeks in the debate with Blanche.

Elizabeth is not the only writer involved in the conversations. Susan Moebius has written a book about Elizabeth, which she tries to give to Elizabeth. She references Franz Kafka in her acceptance speech when she receives her award. When Elizabeth lectures about the poets and the animals, she cites two poems written by Ted Hughes. Hughes wrote the poems in response to Rilke's poem "The Panther."

Humanity

The author explores the theme of humanity to validate the humanities as a field of study. This builds on the theme of the past. During Elizabeth's visit with Blanche, the sisters debate the Church and the humanities. Blanche is not interested in finding answers through other humans' approaches to art, believe systems, and thought processes. She believes in God and understands people to want to feel included in their universal suffering.

Elizabeth rejects this idea because she wants to get past the suffering. By identifying with the Ancient Greeks, she sees the benefit in attempting to live the good life and appreciate beauty in art. She struggles with suffering, whether it be animals killed for food or the horrors of war.

The violent attack Elizabeth suffered as a young woman forced her to confront a dark side of humanity. The man who attacked her did so savagely and then burned her clothing. He wanted to inflict maximum physical and mental damage by shaming her as well.

An important part of humanity comes from the civilization of cultures, how they express themselves, what morals are important, and their favored belief system. Elizabeth likely wants to believe in humanity, even if coming to terms with it presents a challenge for her. It is not surprising that Elizabeth would find determining her own belief system difficult when she must write her statement. She may believe that animal slaughter is wrong, but she also knows that her son and his family are moral beings. Thus, her position does not work as an absolute. If Elizabeth identifies her belief system, then these types of caveats become problematic for her.

Styles

Point of View

The point of view of the story is through the experiences of the title character Elizabeth Costello. There is an omniscient narrator who picks and chooses what the reader has access to in the novel. Upon giving select information, the narrator will adjust the narrative with phrasing such as “we skip” (2), “there is a scene in the restaurant, mainly dialogue, which we will skip” (7).

As the novel progresses, the narrator becomes less involved in the story. Less commentary is provided that would take the reader out of the story, such as the above examples. Instead, the narrator continues to provide information about Elizabeth, her thoughts, and her experiences.

Elizabeth’s view is of an aging woman who is questioning her place. She is known for her older novels. She grapples with her relevance and standing in the literary world.

By the end of the novel, she continues to question her place in the world. She must come to terms with her belief system in order to move through the gate. While she is stuck in a purgatory-like place, she acclimates to it by suggesting that it is a pretty place to be.

Language and Meaning

The language is academic and formal. The author utilizes vocabulary consistent with academics and college graduates, likely with advanced degrees. The language used in the novel is appropriate to the characters as academics and writers. The language may challenge some readers.

The tone is set by the characters' dialogue. The characters speak to one another in a style of academic discourse. There is not much in the way of overlapping conversations or characters completing each others sentences. Instead, the speaker makes the address and then allows for the rebuttal. This makes the dialogue passages long and formal. A few, brief conversational exchanges exist, typically when John and Norma are speaking.

No slang or colloquialisms are used in the novel. The author uses British spelling, which appears in the edition referenced for this study guide. British spelling has been maintained in the quoted passages. Selected examples of the British spelling are as follows: cheque (3), honour (3), valour (5), programme (6), armour (7), neighbours (40), labour (42), fetuses (107), Aids [without all caps] (142), pyjamas (153), defenceless (156).

The novel also uses language to hold a conversation between authors and their books. Elizabeth's most famous novel pulls a supporting character from James Joyce's Ulysses and fleshes out her character. Elizabeth also conducts a conversation with other authors in her lectures, such as referencing Gulliver's Travels by Swift, Rilke's poem "The Panther," and poems by Ted Hughes, Robert Duncan, and Paul West.

Structure

The novel has 230 pages which are divided into eight chapters and a postscript. There is a Table of Contents at the beginning of the book, and each chapter has a title. Chapter 5 is divided into nine sections, identified by Roman numerals. Chapters 3 and 4 have subtitles.

A character in each chapter, usually Elizabeth, is participating in a speaking engagement. There is typically an audience, whether in an auditorium or around a dinner table. This type of structure makes each chapter similar to an essay.

The speaking engagements are presented in a linear fashion. While the novel is light on plot, it does follow Elizabeth from late middle age to her death.

Quotes

He is here, with her, out of love. He cannot imagine her getting through this trial without him at her side."
-- Narrator (chapter 1 paragraph 20)

Importance: The quote demonstrates John's dedication to his mother Elizabeth.

She inhabits her characters as a woman does, not a man."
-- Susan Mobeus (chapter 1 paragraph 135)

Importance: The quote gives perspective about how an author's gender may hold influence over their ability to write characters of a different sex.

She is not sure, as she listens to her own voice, whether she believes any longer in what she is saying."
-- Narrator (chapter 2 paragraph 18)

Importance: This quote shows how Elizabeth is becoming more aware of her indecision and inability to commit to a position.

A French or English writer has thousands of years of written tradition behind him…We on the other hand are heirs to an oral tradition.'"
-- Emmanuel Egudu (chapter 22 paragraph 39)

Importance: The quote indicates the responsibility that Egudu feels to communicate his voice and the experiences of his homeland in a tradition that is authentic to his culture.

Do I know what it is like for me to be a corpse or do I know what it is like for a corpse to be a corpse?'"
-- Elizabeth (chapter 3 paragraph 85)

Importance: This quote shows Elizabeth's thought process and how she gets confused trying to clearly state her position when lecturing.

Perhaps we invented gods so that we could put the blame on them.
-- Elizabeth (chapter 3 paragraph 142)

Importance: The quote illustrates Elizabeth's desire to counter any argument presented that challenges her own.

In the end it leads to total intellectual paralysis. You spend so much time respecting that you haven't time left to think.'"
-- Norma (chapter 4 paragraph 10)

Importance: The quote indicates Norma's observations of Elizabeth's behavior during

her lecture when talking with John. She recognizes Elizabeth's difficulties in a way that John resists.

Forgive me if I am forthright. You said you were old enough not to have time to waste on niceties, and I am an old man, too."
-- Abraham Stern (chapter 4 paragraph 38)

Importance: This quote is taken from a letter from Abraham Stern to Elizabeth after she equates animal slaughter to the Holocaust. His directness counters hers as they both cite their age in order to express their opinions.

But the question still nags at her: why this hostility on Blanche's part towards the humanities? I do not need to consult novels, said Blanche."
-- Narrator (chapter 5 paragraph 88)

Importance: The quote shows how personally Elizabeth takes Blanche's comments about novels. Just as Blanche dismisses the novel, she dismisses Elizabeth's opinions as well.

She too is not without curiosity about the intercourse of gods and mortals, though she has never written about it, not even in her book about Marion Bloom and her god-haunted husband Leopold."
-- Narrator (chapter 7 paragraph 4)

Importance: The quote demonstrates how Elizabeth is curious about the relationship between gods and man as she grows nearer to death. She wonders what the gods would want with mortals.

Unbelief is a belief. A disbeliever, if you will accept the distinction, though sometimes I feel disbelief becomes a credo too.'"
-- Elizabeth (chapter 8 paragraph 81)

Importance: The quote demonstrates Elizabeth's ability to use words to her advantage, navigating the nuances of the language.

All is allegory, says my Philip. Each creature is key to all other creatures.
-- Elizabeth C. (Post Script paragraph 7)

Importance: The quote demonstrates that the entire world is interconnected. The author and reader are connected by an allegory that serves as a bridge of understanding.