

Evita: The Real Life of Eva Peron Study Guide

Evita: The Real Life of Eva Peron by Nicholas Fraser

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Plot Summary

Evita: The Real Life of Eva Peron is a short biography of one of the most important political figures in recent Latin American history who has been transformed into a cultural symbol through popular musicals and movies over the last several decades. The purpose of the biography is to separate the myth of Evita from the reality. While the authors give credit to Evita's genuine accomplishments, they are careful to expose her real humanity, failures and eccentricities rather than treating her as a romantic heroine of the people, as many regard her in Argentina.

Eva Duarte was born one of five children who were the offspring of a relationship between her father, Juan Duarte and her mother, Doña Juana, who served as his mistress. Duarte had several other children with his wife and left Evita's family penniless. She grew up in modest poverty until her older siblings were old enough to work regularly. While Evita seems to have led a relatively unremarkable childhood, she always had dreams of becoming an actress, which led her to move from her hometown of Junín to Buenos Aires. She started from literally nothing to build an acting career. Evita's career was mildly successful, as she landed a handful of movie roles and leading roles in radio soap operas.

It was not until Evita met Juan Peron that she began her rise to her present iconic status. Peron was a Colonel in the Argentine military when they met and head of the Department of Labor. Unlike the corrupt conservative government he served under, Peron tried to organize the working classes into unions and Evita became involved in the organization. When a successful military coup brought Peron to power, Evita was still under thirty and had blossomed into a beautiful young woman who, while naïve, had a powerful presence and a strong personality.

During Peron's rule, Evita learned more about politics. While she always promoted absolute obedience to Peron, she fought for the poor and marginalized in Argentine society, frequently responding to direct requests from the poor in person. Through her work with the working classes, her reputation quickly grew. While many in the Argentina elite came to despise her, the people grew to adore her. When she created her Foundation for the poor, she became enormously popular. She gradually improved her speech-making ability and began to inspire increasing devotion. When she became sick with uterine cancer, the people mourned for her and her speeches became increasingly impassioned, spiritual and apocalyptic. When she died, the entire country entered a period of mourning.

Evita's history does not end with her death, however. Her body was heavily embalmed and placed on public display until Peron was overthrown and exiled. It was then moved around for years as she became a symbol of the lost era of Peronism to both its enemies and proponents. The Peronist guerillas who sprung up in later decades used her as a symbol of their political agenda. When Peronism died back, Evita began to grow into a pop culture figure due to popular media. *Evita: The Real Life of Eva Person*, explains the history of these events in detail, making careful effort to separate the true

and the false and to carve a middle ground between the ideologies of her supporters and detractors.



Chapter 1, The House of Doña Juana

Chapter 1, The House of Doña Juana Summary and Analysis

Evita was born in the city of Los Toldos, outside of Buenos Aires. Her father, Juan Duarte, was important in his neighborhood and was forty-three when she was born. He had been married previously and had had three daughters. He left Evita's mother, Juana Ibarguren, to work as an estate manager in Los Toldos. Doña Juana was Duarte's mistress and met him when she was perhaps fifteen or sixteen. When Juana's children were born, Duarte's wife often visited them. Juana and Duarte had five children: Blanca, Elisa, Juan, Erminda and then Eva Maria or Evita. Juana adopted the Duarte name. She was both envied and despised in her village. Evita's birth certificate has been lost but she was baptized on November 21st, 1919.

In the beginning of 1920, Duarte, who was not much interested in fatherhood, left his farm and Juana, going back to his first family. Juana was impoverished. When Eva Maria was six, Duarte was killed in a car accident and Juana could not attend the funeral until she protested, because the legal wife would not let them enter. Evita never spoke of her illegitimacy, instead cloaking her childhood in grandiosity and mystery; she would never have forgotten the funeral, however. Evita often had fits of rage that her family did not understand. While her family had enough to eat, they had little else. As a student, she was quiet, well-behaved but average. By 1930, Elisa, Evita's oldest sister, got a job in Junín, twenty miles away, so the family moved. Juana sewed and eventually Blanca became a teacher and Juan became a traveling salesman. In school, Evita grew up spurned by other students, since their parents told them not to speak to her due to social disapproval of her mother.

Evita grew up with some knowledge of culture, paying attention to movies. She often fantasized about living in other places. Her family grew richer over time as her older brothers and sisters held down jobs. At fifteen she had a boyfriend named Ricardo and went to dances with him and other well-behaved boys. She'd get a job or get married like Blanca and Elisa did. But Evita had another path to take. She often recited poetry and acted; she continually wished to be an actress as she grew up. One day, when a tango singer, Agustin Magaldi, performed in Junín, Evita is said to have fallen in love with him. When she was introduced to him, she asked him to take her to Buenos Aires. He resisted so she sneaked into his train compartment and became his mistress. However, this story does not seem historically plausible on further examination. Probably Evita prodded her mother to help her visit radio stations until they found a program that needed a young girl. Evita told sob stories to the producers until she got a job. In any event, Evita found a way out of Junín and wanted to be a star, entering Buenos Aires in 1935, living on her own at fifteen.



Chapter 2, Buenos Aires

Chapter 2, Buenos Aires Summary and Analysis

When Evita moved to Buenos Aires, it had grown to contain more than two and a half million people, making it the largest city in South America. The Federal Government was located there, as were many major industries. The city was full of migrants of distinct ethnic communities. The country's middle class was formed by second and third generation immigrants. Above them in class was the Oligarchy, the aristocratic families who owned massive amounts of land in the countryside. They lived incredibly lavish lives.

The dominant ideology of the period was still 19th century liberalism, affirming separation of church and state, free trade, and encouraging European immigration. The Argentine constitution was built on the American one. In 1912, the Radical Party, which spoke for the Argentine middle class, won by a large margin after universal male suffrage was passed. World War I was good for Argentina, as it benefited from trade. It flourished during the 1910s and 1920s, fighting no wars and growing economically. But it was destroyed by the Great Depression. There were riots and the Conservatives took power in 1932. Corruption became prevalent and the police state expanded. It was no longer a real democracy. Anyone who opposed the Oligarchs was purged. Nonetheless, during that period Argentine culture flourished.

Evita lived in a small, cheap lodging house in a tiny room until April 1935, when she got a job as a maid with a comedy company. She played a few parts over the next year or so. When one of the actors tried to manipulate her into having sex with him, however, she quit. From there she had only temporary jobs. Working as an apprentice at these jobs was often expensive and only for girls of lower classes. But she worked hard and gained roles, including a part in a play called *The Children's Hour*. She even got a few small parts in films. Later she worked in a company where the main actress liked her and taught her to speak on stage.

However it happened, Evita decided to start presenting herself in a different way; she probably did not do this knowingly. In 1937, Evita was hardly an actress, but by 1939 she was very successful. She started hanging around media trying to get mentioned. She appeared in a few magazines and played some roles on popular radio show soap operas. In 1940, she had two small movie parts. During this entire period, she only visited home once. When Juan moved to Buenos Aires, he helped her organize her own acting troop and brought some of his sponsors he had developed through his own experience in the broadcast business. By 1943, after working with this group for two years, Evita was one of the best-paid radio actresses of the period. She ran the company well and was very reliable.



Chapter 3, The Colonel and the Actress

Chapter 3, The Colonel and the Actress Summary and Analysis

The Conservatives fraudulently won elections in 1932 and 1939. But by 1943, their corruption had become almost unmanageable. By the 1943 election, a military coup occurred and the new dictatorial government imposed restrictions on the entire country, including the media, which affected Evita. Argentina was neutral during World War II, with different social groups taking different sides, though the elites who controlled the government were on the side of the British.

In January 1944, an earthquake completely destroyed the Andean town of San Juan. A fund for the city was raised by the Secretary of Labor in the military government, Colonel Juan Domingo Peron. He wanted to use an artistic festival to raise money and use popular actors and actresses to collect donations. It was in this time that Evita and Peron met. When they met, Evita was nervous and trembling. She carried a collection box for the festival and the two talked afterward until the wee hours of the morning. Peron was a handsome man, taller than most Argentinians, with a movie actor's smile. At forty-eight, he was a widower and emerged as the only member of the government who became a figure of public interest. Evita started to accompany Peron to public functions.

It is hard to get a sense of Peron's personality, since he was such a politically controversial figure. Those who supported him found him generous and brilliant, whereas those who opposed him thought he was a coward and tyrant. While Peron was regarded as a dictator, he seldom wielded all the power he had and used it erratically. There were a series of Perons with different personalities, it often seemed.

Juan Peron was born in Lobos, in the province of Buenos Aires, on October 8th, 1895. He joined the army in 1915 which was, at the time, still heavily influenced by its German connections. When he graduated from military school, he worked his way up the ranks. In 1926, he became captain and returned to Buenos Aires. His first wife was a teacher named Aurelia Tizon but she died of uterine cancer in 1938. He visited Europe between 1938 and 1942 to study military tactics and returned in 1942. He believed that European democracies were in their decline, as did many Europeans. He was a fascist and an opponent of communism since he believed these were the only options. Peron was a major figure in the 1943 coup and was given a high post; he was quite ambitious.

However, rather than quash unions as Secretary of Labor, he encouraged their formation. He granted workers many privileges. These labor union members became the first Peronists.

When the festival was over, Peron asked Evita to work with him in the Labor Department to have someone who could relate to female workers. However, for the first



year and a half they lived not as coworkers but as Colonel and mistress. Evita continued her radio work. It was at this time that Evita started bleaching her hair blond for acting parts. When performers in the broadcast industry formed a union in May 1944, Evita became president. Evita became the spokeswoman for many workers in the country, giving speeches written by her scriptwriter at the end of her programs. The nightly programs dealt with Peron's policies and made him look like the sole leader of the new worker's movement. Evita was convincing as she spoke in ordinary language. Movement leaders started to meet in Peron's apartment. Evita said little at those meetings at first and knew nothing about politics. She was simply Peron's first and greatest supporter.

Peron became vice-president in January 1943, even though opposition within and outside the Army was growing against him. Evita began to help Peron discern who his friends were. Gossip about the couple began. Many started to believe that Evita was a prostitute at this time, which involved attributing a mysterious past to her. Evita's career continued to improve, however. She often went to galas, award ceremonies and trade union meetings without Peron. The untruths told about her, however, began to affect her. It helped her structure her own self-perception and allowed her to alter her history. In 1944, Evita appeared in her last film, *The Prodigal*. Her acting career was over and her career with Peron began.



Chapter 4, 17 October 1945

Chapter 4, 17 October 1945 Summary and Analysis

Argentina, under Allied pressure, declared war against the Axis powers in March 1945. While many in the upper class were happy, those who supported neutrality felt betrayed. Peron's power was growing and all the major parties seemed united in opposing him. It was at that time that they started to say that he was a fascist and a Nazi. And indeed some of those who met him found him to be ruthless and foolish. All the while, Evita's stature grew and she even started to take part in some political meetings. The members of the Peronist movement grew over time and the military government began to lose credibility. A massive demonstration by all parties but the military government and Peronists (between 250,000 and 500,000) showed that the military government had little support. As World War II ended, it looked as if the country would be torn apart by Civil War. Ultimately Peron became so divisive that the military government forced him to resign; Evita lost her acting roles as a result.

But Peron did not depart quietly and made great promises of higher wages to the people. The military officers with whom Peron served were furious. He spoke to large rallies with Evita at his side. Peron, Evita and his advisers considered leaving the country but instead went to a small island just outside of Buenos Aires. Days before, Peron had been the most powerful man in the country. But the Army soon came for Peron and took him back to Buenos Aires in custody. However, Peron still had union support; all was not lost for him.

Evita was now alone in Buenos Aires; Peron was in prison. She organized for his triumphant return, working as his surrogate. For those who loved her, she was faithful and suffering; for those who hated her, she was a scheming woman who dragged Peron back to power. Either way, Evita saved him from defeat. While Peron was in prison, Evita came into her own as a leader, but she was hated and had no police protection. Evita easily could have left Peron but did not. A few days later, union walkouts began on Peron's behalf. They attributed their increased gains to Peron. His old staff at the Department of Labor was still behind him as well. Evita was pivotal in organizing the strike.

The morning of October 17th, workers simply refused to go to work. They protested for Peron's release. The city's transportation system was now understaffed and overwhelmed. His support was massive and Peron was asked to form a cabinet by officials who saw that he would eventually come to power. He was released from a military installation where he was being held and addressed an enormous crowd of 200,000 people. President Farrell appeared and embraced Peron. The next day the workers celebrated; they had entered into politics as a class, non-violently and effectively. They would never again be ignored. The opposition painted the demonstration as a conspiracy of Peron's followers. The bond formed between Peron and the workers would last for thirty years.



Chapter 5, Wife of the President

Chapter 5, Wife of the President Summary and Analysis

Peron and Evita were married four days later in a private ceremony with close family and friends. Evidence of Evita's past began to disappear. Her acting career was erased from history and their marriage certificate was partially falsified. Evita spoke of her past in vague terms.

Peron entered the presidential campaign without a party or campaign funds but he was supported by the Labor party soon thereafter. Socialists and communists opposed him. He wanted to increase middle-class support from the government and defend capitalism and democracy. Peron gave speech after speech advocating land reform against the Oligarchs. Evita never spoke, just appearing pale, blond and arresting. She often took care of campaign details when Peron was busy but many party leaders did not like her. In a nationally broadcast speech on February 12th, 1946, Peron said that he was merely fighting for social justice against his opponent, Braden, who he said was the representative of an alliance between Oligarchs and communists. The election on February 24th was the first open election since 1928. Peron won with 52% of the vote and his candidates won nearly all provincial governorships, senate seats and seats in the chamber of deputies. The country entrusted the government to him.

By and large, Peron picked a competent cabinet save giving Juan, Evita's brother, a post as Private Presidential Secretary. Juan served to increase his sister's power. Evita also refused to behave as a traditional wife, often dressing informally and making independent decisions.

Argentina was the richest country in South America at that time and one of the richest countries in the world. It had weathered World War II almost wholly untouched and was a creditor nation. It had a huge market for exports. Immigrants flowed in, among them many skilled workers, scientists and intellectuals. But the political structure of the country was still weak. Peron had to unite the Army and the unions but had great difficulty, as money ran out.

Peron proposed a five-year plan that would wholly change Argentina, proposing the nationalization of British-owned railways and utilities, new nationalized industries and quick industrialization with the leadership of the State. A series of comprehensive pension schemes would be implemented and a welfare state created. Labor would increase in power significantly. Peron and his staff worked hard and many started to come to Evita to ask for favors. She often came through. In this role, she became more comfortable speaking in public and started to deal with political issues first hand. Liliane Guardo, the wife of the majority leader in Congress, began to help her learn manners, on Evita's insistence. Evita could often be demanding, very insecure and afraid of failure. She also helped found a pro-Peron newspaper. The paper eventually grew to



circulate to 400,000 people, mostly housewives. Many women started to identify with Evita through affection and empathy.

Many started to criticize Evita's prominent role in the Peron administration. It is unclear how her influence grew so quickly. Peron probably let her expand her reach because his position was weak; he did not control the labor movement. Evita was one of the only people who could do the work needed in a way that did not threaten Peron because she was a woman and his shadow. For the opposition, everything Evita did came under suspicion. She also often became emotional and demanding and was mocked even by prominent officials. Arguably she acted this way because she was intimidated by the fact that she was an illegitimate child and somehow undeserving of her influence. She had no idea what to do with her power.



Chapter 6, Europe

Chapter 6, Europe Summary and Analysis

Evita would visit Europe in 1947; the Spanish government had invited her to visit in a non-official capacity. Italy and France were quickly added to her itinerary; Britain was added later. It is unclear why she was invited, but one reason is probably that it could have been dangerous for Peron to go himself. Evita wanted to go to defy the women of the oligarchy who thought little of her. Liliane accompanied her, as did her brother, among others. In some ways, Evita was sad to go but was also excited. She made sure her staff was under control. Generalissimo Franco welcomed Evita with open arms. The Spanish press discussed the visit but was censored so could not criticize her. But the New York Times estimated that her trip cost four million dollars. Evita acted as if she had been born a queen and decided then that she wanted to be an important historical figure. She created a stir in Europe, at first raising criticism for her lavishness when Europe was so impoverished; but public interest increased.

Evita next went to Italy and Rome; she met the Pope, toured the Vatican and appeared devout. The Pope and the Vatican officials warmly received her though many communists protested her as a fascist. Evita ultimately decided not to go to London; the royal family was too busy to receive her but she was in temporarily poor health and let that be the public perception. She next traveled to Lisbon and then to Paris. Evita fell in love with French clothing and dressed extravagantly. She then went to Switzerland though it is unclear why. On her return to Argentina, she passed through Brazil and gave speeches on the principles of Peronism.

In the end, her trip was not politically successful. The European Left was unimpressed with the image of Argentina she projected. Journalists often liked Evita even though they disapproved of Peron, because he was widely seen as a fascist and unpopular as a result. They saw fascism as a nightmare given the not-very-distant memory of Hitler and Mussolini.

While in Europe, Evita behaved more as a ceremonial figure but when she returned she gradually changed into a full-time, hands-on politician, working with unions, women and the poor. However, she always followed Peron's lead and ideology.

Chapter 7, The New Argentina

Chapter 7, The New Argentina Summary and Analysis

Peron was regarded as a dictator by the time he was removed from office in 1955, and indeed, he was. His regime did not begin that way in 1946, since he had been popularly elected. However, he soon came to control his party, restrict the media and turned Congress into a rubber-stamp factory for his proposed legislation. During his first term, women were given the right to vote but he also removed term limits on the presidency. Evita in the meanwhile organized a female constituency of Peronists and spoke about the injustices of working women. She inspired total loyalty to Peron. Evita's organization grew to have half a million members by 1952. While Evita was not interested in the more theoretical questions concerning women's rights, she did much to advance the condition of women.

Evita and Peron became romantic figures to the people, replacing the idea of the constitutional rule of law with a populist sovereignty built around their personalities. The history of October 17th was already being perfected and whitewashed. By 1948, Evita had acquired the ability to convey emotion in her speeches. Her words came from the emotions expressed in her soap operas and her love for her husband. She helped to create a cult of Peron in which she was a priestess.

Chapter 8, The Gift of Giving

Chapter 8, The Gift of Giving Summary and Analysis

Evita soon thereafter created the Eva Peron Foundation, a charitable giving organization that aimed to supplement the country's poor social service distribution network. She started distributing clothes and food as early as 1945. When she formed the foundation it provided working tools and scholarships, built houses, created schools and hospitals and local welfare distribution systems. The foundation remained wholly in Evita's hands and was effectively a government department, running its own works. Its creation corresponded with the richest years of Peron's rule. The Foundation was corrupt in some ways; it often threatened corporations that refused to contribute. Evita saw the Foundation as a vocation; she could usually easily find funds not only from the private sector but from the government. When people wanted something from Evita, they frequently went to see her directly. Petitions were constant and the level of human contact was unusually high.

The Foundation completely changed Evita; she was becoming a more austere and efficient figure, without glamor. Her speeches increasingly adopted an outraged attitude that poverty even existed. She did what she could to treat the poor as equals and often kissed and hugged them, even when they had obvious diseases. While Argentina was secular in some respects, it was a thoroughly Catholic country and Evita seems to have deliberately started acquiring behaviors characteristic of a saint. Evita also worked to substantially improve the medical care system, replacing new hospitals. She worked to vastly improve the state of public hospitals, building twelve. With the Foundation, she also built one thousand schools and a university. Many thought Evita's social works were wasteful, poorly conceived and unrelated to the people's needs; however, the authors maintain that whatever she spent, the institutions she created lasted. The Foundation was very successful as a propaganda tool. Even during the tough economic times in 1950 the Foundation expanded.



Chapter 9, The Bridge of Love

Chapter 9, The Bridge of Love Summary and Analysis

The year 1950 did not begin well for Evita after she fainted at an event. The press said that she had had her appendix removed in the surgery thereafter but in fact she may have been informed that she had uterine cancer. Whether she knew or not, she began to live as if she were in a race against time, fighting harder and harder for reforms for the poor. Peron could not control her in the least; she did as she liked and they rarely saw one another. She became a ceaseless giver, helping anyone who asked. At that time she hired ghostwriters to start writing a book called *My Mission in Life*. It contained themes from her speeches and said little about her history, though. It continued to support the myth of Peron. She said she had no children because the Argentine poor were her children.

Many began to say that Evita ruled the country; she was second in ceremonial stature only to Peron himself. Peron's power was not as great as it seemed; he was often hemmed in by Evita's behavior, as she had helped him build his power. Further, high inflation, trade deficits and Peron's faltering economic agenda were all challenges. Many faced lower standards of living. In January 1951 a nation-wide strike was organized and Evita served as mediator. She failed to stop the strike, though Peron crushed it later which was a bizarre mistake for someone who had supported workers against the oligarchs. His handling of the strike was an issue in the 1951 campaign. Due to inflation, many resented Peron and Evita who exercised power within the unions.

Evita's condition worsened. She was growing thinner and paler. She had hemorrhages and had intense abdominal pain. Evita wanted to become Vice-President but many Argentinians resisted. She was given many honors and at one public speech during a popular gathering, she seemed to refuse more honors, making rambling and incoherent excuses. Her refusal and displayed humility led the crowds into frenzy and the passion for Evita led Peron to be relegated to a secondary role given Evita's bond with the working classes.

This was the zenith and end of Evita's political career, however. She would not be able to run for vice-president due to her health but also because Peron simply would not allow it. August 22nd, 1951 became Evita's Day of Renunciation which represented her discipline, loyalty and humility. Her behavior at this gathering, the *Cabildo Abierto*, ensured that she would survive in terms of a myth of a deliberately chosen sacrifice, a woman who gave up the world just because she was good. Even though she would have accepted were Peron to let her, she appeared to have declined it on her own. Further, even if she had further ambitions, she fell ill immediately after the gathering.



Chapter 10, Death and Its Public

Chapter 10, Death and Its Public Summary and Analysis

Evita was extremely ill. In one of her final speeches, she appeared very sick and wasting away. Peron gave a speech about all of Evita's accomplishments, something he had never done. She was overwhelmed with emotion and gratefulness. She then gave one of her most powerful speeches and the people were overcome with emotion. Evita afterward found herself in and out of hospitals and confined to rest, even despite a hastily conceived coup against Peron staged by General Menendez.

Evita did not die immediately and thus gave many final speeches. These speeches seemed like a managed melodrama meant to drag the people into a frenzy of mourning. Eventually she had a hysterectomy to fight her cancer and recovered somewhat. Her speeches began to take on messianic themes about the afterlife and political violence. By 1952 she weighed a mere eighty pounds. Throughout May and June she was only sometimes lucid.

But all through her dying period, she decided to die publicly and let the people see her sickness, something uncommon in the modern West. During that period her autobiography was published and sold nearly two hundred thousand copies. Evita was worshipful of Peron until the end and made sure of care for her family. She died on July 26th, 1952 at the young age of thirty-three. A minute after she died, her death was broadcast to the nation and it sank into a national period of mourning; many industries and places of business shut down. Evita's body was placed in public view for a national wake; seventeen thousand people came.



Chapter 11, The Body and the Myth

Chapter 11, The Body and the Myth Summary and Analysis

Dr. Ara was placed in charge of a substantial embalming of Evita's body, so it could survive in open view for decades. It took him a full year of filling her body with solidifying substances to do so. Her tomb was built slowly and was impressive. Evita's name was put out for canonization though the Vatican did not take this seriously. Peron quickly became impatient managing her affairs and so her Foundation shrunk. Peron mourned her seriously and became further isolated.

In September 1955, Peron went into exile. His decline was not caused by Evita's death. Instead, it was caused by the perilous condition of the economy. Inflation had started to affect the working classes. In 1953, Evita's brother Juan had killed himself and Peron handled it poorly. Further, Peron's security forces had muzzled the opposition for too long. People grew tired of the police state. Finally, Peron confronted the Catholic Church in the hopes of subordinating it to him. This led the Catholic Church to move against him and unite the opposition. Peron was excommunicated and many in the armed forces started to defect. The Navy openly revolted; many believed social peace could not be secured until Peron was gone.

Over the years, Dr. Ara kept up with the body. The new president, General Eduardo Lonardi, was cautious about it. But his regime was full of men who had been harassed and imprisoned by Peron and they spread rumors that her body was decaying and distorted. They also tried to desanctify her. They hoped to show that Dr. Ara was a madman, obsessed with the body and they wanted to demonstrate that Evita's body was a fake. Lonardi's staff tried to cremate her but the Catholic Church would not allow it. Evita was secretly buried in an unknown area where she was stored for some time. The Foundation was vandalized in the meanwhile and her name was removed from places across the country. Now that the Argentine press was free, they often wrote bitter, resentful and vengeful exposes of Peron and Evita. The attacks were almost religious. Many tried to purge Argentina of Peronism which produced the Resistance of Peronists, who were suppressed. Evita's body was then moved to Peron's family memorial.

Due to the Resistance, a cult of Evita began and her mythology was maintained. Her body's location and fate was always a mystery. The failures of the new regime led to a Peronist resurgence and many started to look at Peron's rule as a golden age. Peronists became a new voting force and would vote as Peron directed them. Peronism was rediscovered by Argentina's intellectuals and Evita became an important symbol in the second Peronism. Many speculated on her probable political development. In the early 1970s, Peronists formed guerilla forces. To defuse the terrorism they caused, the government decided to allow Peronists to run for office. Then the Evita cult came above ground and discussions about her were held everywhere. The Foundation was

reopened and the cadaver was moved again in 1974 when Isabel Peron was president. Evita came to lie in a small tomb in Recoleta Cemetery, where rich Argentinians are buried. The tomb is unremarkable but is proofed against grave robbers.



Epilogue

Epilogue Summary and Analysis

In the 1970s, Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice made a rock opera about Evita. It was incredibly successful worldwide and was somewhat sympathetic to her. It was the first British musical to break into Broadway. It was a form of glamor rock and was representative of popular culture taking politics less seriously. Evita became an almost silly symbol of meaningless, romantic politics. However, a spirit of feminism also accompanied her for some. A film version of her life was put together by Oliver Stone, but it was sidelined for years. Eventually Madonna was selected to play Evita and the Argentine government collaborated in the movie. Evita had become a relic of a bygone era. To some Argentinians, she was a symbol, a national hero to be fought over, someone many saw as a key figure in Argentina's history. The struggle over Evita's body was ultimately a struggle for ideological power. In the late nineties, for whatever reason, Evita came back to life. In this way, she was immortal, just as she wanted.



Characters

Evita Duarte Peron

Evita, the focus of the book, lived from 1919 to 1952, dying of uterine cancer when she was merely thirty-three years old. She served as Head of the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare of Argentina from 1946 to 1952 and Head of the Ministry of Health of Argentina over the same time. From 1947 to 1952, she was president of the Female Peronist Party and from 1948 to 1952, she was President of the Maria Eva Duarte de Peron Foundation. During all of this time she was the first lady of Argentina.

However, Evita's beginnings were fairly ordinary, having been born an illegitimate child of Juan Duarte to his mistress, Doña Juana in the city of Los Toldos. Evita lived a simple childhood in Junín, Argentina. But as a young woman, she was an aspiring actress who worked her way to Buenos Aires when she was fifteen. She had a variety of small roles until she met Juan Peron and when he rose to power and they were married, she was instantly famous. From there she developed from a simple but glamorous first lady to an impassioned partisan of the working classes, the poor, disabled and of women.

Despite her common advocacy, Evita still was a Peronist to her core, always encouraging deep devotion to her husband by all citizens. While Evita contributed much to the formation of the Argentine welfare state, she became messianic and apocalyptic as she grew older and sick. After displaying her dying process publicly, her body and legacy became a symbol of many things to many political movements and popular cultures.

Juan Peron

Juan Domingo Peron was the 29th and 41st President of Argentina, in office from both 1946 to 1952 and 1973-1974. He also served as Vice-President from 1944 to 1945 and was the second president of the Eva Peron Foundation. Peron lived from 1895 to 1974. He was also an Argentine military general who was elected President of Argentina in open elections and was overthrown by a military coup in 1955. Peron was deeply popular along with Evita when he was president and they are still icons of the Peronist party. Peronists tend to cite Peron's struggle to get rid of poverty and increase the place of laborers in Argentine society. However, his detractors though he was a demagogue, fascist and bungler.

In the book, Peron's political movement and government are analyzed in some detail. The ideals of the Peronist party involved the great expansion of the state and the governance to running large companies and utilities, dramatically expanding the social safety net, building labor organizations as well as reforming and restricting the power of the Oligarchs. However, Peron became less popular as his policies led to massive inflation and the recovery of the post World War II economy led to a decline of Argentine



exports. Peron always seemed to be very close to Evita and gave her surprisingly free discretion in his government, in large part because she was responsible for substantially increasing his support.

Doña Juana Duarte

Evita's mother and the mistress of her father, Doña Juana Duarte also survived Evita after Evita's death.

Juan Duarte

Evita's brother Juan Duarte helped her acting career and later served in the Peron administration, surviving her death but committing suicide before Peron's exile.

Peronists

The Peronists are supporters of Peron and his political agenda, often for decades following Peron's exile.

Anti-Peronists

All sectors of society who opposed Peron and his political agenda were known as anti-Peronists; again, often for decades following Peron's rule.

The Oligarchs

The Oligarchs were the historical landed aristocracy in Argentina who had great wealth and political power; they were also the scapegoats of many of Peron's increases in state power.

The Descamisados

The working classes who Evita connected with so strongly were known as the Descamisados .

Dr. Ara

Dr. Ara was placed in charge of embalming Evita's body and maintaining it.



General Eduardo Lonardi

General Eduardo Lonardi was the military dictator who replaced Peron and tried to desanctify Evita.

The Women's Party

The Women's Party was formed by women Peronists whom Evita led to support Peron.



Objects/Places

Argentina

Argentina is the country of concern in the book.

Junín

Junin, Argentina is Evita's hometown.

Buenos Aires

The largest city in Argentina, Buenos Aires is the location of the central government and Evita's home from the time she was fifteen until her death at thirty-three.

Evita's Tomb

When Evita died, an elaborate tomb was built for her so that the public could visit but her body was eventually removed from it.

Evita's Body

Evita's body was embalmed after her death so that it could be publicly displayed; however, the regime following Peron had it removed and it seemed to have been lost for years afterward until it was finally buried in a cemetery for persons of importance in Argentina. Her body also came to symbolize her memory.

Fascism

Fascism is a totalitarian philosophy that attempts to merge the state and the economy and eschews limits on government power. Peron was arguably a fascist and at least was thought to be one by much of the world.

The Argentine Welfare State

Evita was instrumental in the creation and dramatic expansion of the Argentine welfare state.



The Foundation

Evita began a charitable foundation that provided a wide range of goods and services to the poor, including food, clothing, shelter and health care.

Military Dictatorship

Peron was a military dictator even if he was not an actual proponent of fascism.

Inflation

Inflation is the increase of prices over time. Inflation became very high under Peron and destroyed his popularity.

Peronism

Peronism was the political ideology of Peron and his followers which, by and large, was a philosophy of military dictatorship, the massive redistribution of wealth and a mild form of socialist control over the economy.

Evita the Musical and Evita the Movie

Evita became a pop culture phenomenon through the musical and movie made about her life.



Themes

Evita, Myth and Reality

Eva Peron was a member of one of the most controversial governments in the history of Argentina and stood united with one of the last fascist rulers of any nation in the Western hemisphere, her husband, Juan Peron. As a result, Peron had fierce proponents, required for maintaining the power of a dictatorship, and fierce opponents whom Peron repressed. Evita, due to her association with Peron, became a figure associated with love on the one hand and hatred on the other. Consequently, cutting through the ideology, rumor and cultic symbolism requires carefully going through available records and dozens of sources, something the author pursues fairly and consistently.

By and large, the author tears down the popular myths about Evita. They expose her relatively ordinary childhood and the fact that she was an illegitimate child, something she tried to hide. The author also exposes her childish behavior and extreme naïveté with respect to politics. Everything compassionate she did she tied to defending absolute obedience to Peron. However, Evita seems to have had a clear and powerful concern for the poor and marginalized in Argentine society, especially women. Thus, the author defends this claim against her detractors, arguing that she had a huge hand in the development of the Argentine welfare state. They are also critical of individuals who obscure the importance of her achievements to use her as a symbol of their particular political ideology or of current fads in popular culture.

Fascism, Democracy and Popular Sovereignty

A biography of Evita cannot be complete without a detailed examination of the Peron Administration and the political events that made his regime possible, along with the events that followed which led to Evita's major presence in the popular imagination. Argentina throughout the nineteenth century had a constitution much like that of the United States. It protected private property rights, implemented the rule of law and permitted the widespread use of market mechanisms. However, Argentina's legacy of imperialism had led a small number of aristocratic families called the Oligarchs to own large swaths of land, whereas the United States had no such history. The consequence of this is that Argentina was much more open to class warfare rhetoric which brought Peron to power.

Argentina benefited enormously from World War II as it became a major exporter due to the fact that it remained untouched by the war. Peron rose to power in a wave of anti-corruption sentiment and class conflict between the working class and middle classes against the Oligarchs. Thus, Peron and Evita situated themselves as defenders of the people against oppression by capitalist bosses and oligarchs. While they were by no means socialists, they did appeal to a notion of popular sovereignty more characteristic



of the socialist tradition, which de-emphasizes the rule of law, preferring leaders who embody the evolving and dynamic will of the people. Thus Peron's fascistic state relied on a kind of conception of popular sovereignty. Due to his rule, excessive spending and poor handling of the economy, he was ultimately removed from power. His military rule led to political clashes and coups throughout the next two decades.

Evita as Cultural Symbol

Evita: The Real Life of Eva Peron both begins and ends with references to Evita's cultural prominence in the 1990s. A musical about Evita's life had been created by Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber called Evita and this led Oliver Stone to become interested in making a movie about her, since the musical was enormously successful. While he was noncommittal for years, a movie was eventually made with pop culture icon Madonna playing Evita.

But this was far from the first time that Evita was a cultural symbol. When Peron came to power, Evita eventually became a symbol of the poor and marginalized, with Evita-based propaganda resembling iconography of the Virgin Mary. Her status as a giving, sacrificial figure allowed analogies with the Virgin Mary in a heavily Catholic country. As she was dying of cancer, she became apocalyptic and deeply spiritual in her speeches, often seeming to recommend political violence. Her body became a symbol of the Peronist regime after she died, as she had decided to make her death public and her followers decided to make her body public afterward. It was often moved and became the subject of myth and rumor. When Peronism stopped being repressed in Argentina, Evita was revived as a symbol of the second Peronism which was composed largely of guerillas fighting for power with a somewhat similar agenda to the Peron administration.

Evita died when she was thirty-three years old but her beauty, passion and emotional connection to the Argentina people lent itself directly to her conversion into a symbol that could represent the ideas of many different groups.



Style

Perspective

Authors Nicholas Fraser and Marysa Navarro seek to project a nuanced perspective in their treatment of Evita, her life and those around her. They note that, while Evita's short life was one of the most interesting in the twentieth century, the way her life was used by different individuals for their own purposes is just as interesting. The authors published several editions of the book and have updated it as new sources come to life. Their aim is to preserve a genuine image of Evita, the real person, not the myth, not the wife of the tyrant, not the saint of the poor in Argentina.

The authors do not relentlessly expose Evita's flaws. Instead, they report the details in a matter of fact way, warts and all. They defend Evita against rumors spread by her detractors, such as that she "slept her way to the top" and so on. But they also acknowledge that she was no saint, often acting selfishly and childishly. They point to her naivete in things political and how she did nothing to stop the tyranny of her husband's regime. To the contrary, she encouraged absolute obedience to him.

The authors have to struggle to give an even-handed picture of Argentina's political history, since it is integral to explaining Evita's life and its significance. They try not to take a position on which governments were good and which were bad, the extent to which Peron was a fascist, whether his economic program was good or bad, though they allude that it had net negative effects, or whether Peronism is a good political philosophy. They discuss politics for the sake of context, not to editorialize.

Tone

The tone of *Evita: The Real Life of Eva Peron* is complex, and seems somewhat tragic on the whole. While Evita had many triumphs in her life, it was very short, a mere thirty-three years. Further, many of Evita's major life decisions were made with little information and sometimes under duress or pressure from others, like Peron. In many ways, her life was not always a happy one. The tone reflects these facts. For instance, Evita's total loyalty to Peron, while somewhat romantic, manifests a sad tone when it is mentioned because Evita's love for her husband was identified with the political agenda of obedience to a fascist dictator.

The tone is also somewhat negative because Evita has been largely a positive cultural symbol, associated with good things, not bad ones. As a result, when the authors expose myths, Evita is desanctified and in some ways this has a sad element as well. But perhaps the greatest tragedy, the darkest language, is used when Evita's death is covered. She contracted uterine cancer at a young age and died a painful death. Her illness seems to have caused her to make a number of insane speeches that were later used to justify political violence. And after her death, the tone of the book remains tragic,



as her body was embalmed in a disgusting way and fought over as an object of political struggle. In the end, she becomes an almost silly cultural symbol in the nineties.

However, the book has real moments of triumph and inspiration, such as when Evita is engaged in her great works of compassion; and the tone reflects this in those passages.

Structure

Evita: The Real Life of Eva Peron is a biography of a fairly standard variety. It simply tells the story of Evita's life, often discussing context, dispelling myths, explaining ideas and taking interpretative positions along the way. The book has a brief introduction and then proceeds chronologically through Evita's life in the first ten chapters, reviewing her influence after she died in chapter eleven and the epilogue. The book also contains an extensive set of notes for further research.

Chapter 1 introduces the reader to Evita's parents, their circumstances and her hometown. It discusses how she grew up and lived a fairly ordinary childhood in many ways. Chapter 2 takes her to Buenos Aires, from the beginning to the mid-point of her acting career. Chapter 3 explains how Evita met Peron and developed a relationship with him, along with the culmination of her acting career. Chapter 4 is the story of how Peron came to power and its significance for Evita, whereas Chapter 5 explains how Evita functioned as wife of the president in the early days of the Peron Administration. Chapter 6 discusses Evita's trip to Europe and Chapter 7 explains how Argentina developed under Peron and how Evita matured as his wife and a political leader of her own.

In Chapter 8, the authors explain how Evita came to do charity work and how popular it made her with the poor and with women. Chapter 9 continues to expand upon her campaigns to expand the Argentine welfare state. Chapter 10 discusses Evita's battle with uterine cancer and how she decided to make her experience of dying public. Chapter 11 explains the significance of Evita's body after her death and the myths that sprung up around her. Finally, the Epilogue covers the events involving Evita's memory from the first edition in 1980 to the third edition printed in 2003.



Quotes

"As far as I can remember the existence of injustice has hurt my soul as if a nail was being driven into it. From every period of my life I retain the memory of some injustice tormenting me and tearing me apart." (Chapter 1, pg. 5)

"She seemed a personification of innocence and that is really what she was, very pure inside" (Chapter 2, pg.22)

"She had been in Buenos Aires for six years, she was twenty-three and she felt, or wanted to feel, like a star." (Chapter 2, pg. 27)

"He said absolutely nothing to her, he never questioned her at all and from that day Evita stayed with him." (Chapter 3, pg. 34)

"But it was the last film she ever appeared in, for before it could be premiered, her acting career - since 1935 she had appeared in twenty plays, five movies and at least twenty-six soap operas - was swallowed up in her other life, her political life with Peron." (Chapter 3, pg. 48)

"It is thus she has been represented, depending on political preferences, as a power behind the throne or a political militant, but either way she has admirably fulfilled, in Peron's absence, the role of agent in history, orchestrator of events." (Chapter 4, pg. 58)

"The Evita of those days was extraordinary." (Chapter 5, pg. 75)

"Evita behaved like a queen, as if she had received such expressions of affection and respect all her life." (Chapter 6, pg. 94)

"To be a Peronist is, for a woman, to be loyal and to have blind confidence in Peron." (Chapter 7, pg. 107)

"Evita's cult of Peron probably first occurred in her speeches to shore up her own political identity and to reflect her own real admiration for Peron, but by 1949, the cult was institutionalized and Evita was its priestess." (Chapter 7, pg. 112)

"People who wanted things from Evita came to see her; the procedure was almost as simple as that." (Chapter 8, pg. 122)

"The reason Evita had no children, according to her autobiography, was because her real children were those she protected - the poor and the old and the helpless of Argentina - together with whom she joined in adoration of Peron, their father. Thus, pure, virginal, without sexual desire, she had become the ideal mother." (Chapter 9, pg. 140)



"For the first time in his career, Peron found himself relegated to a secondary role, mute and astonished by the passion inspiring his wife's bond with the descamisados." (Chapter 9, pg. 146)

"Nothing I have, nothing I am, nothing I think is mine; it all belongs to Peron." (Chapter 10, pg. ,151)

"They were genuine and deep and demonstrated that Evita, who had contributed so strongly to the totalitarianism and bankruptcy of her country, had also won its love." (Chapter 10, pg. 166)

"There is an altar to Evita in every Peronist home, and no saint of the Catholic Church has received so much devotion in Argentina." (Chapter 11, pg. 181)

"I will come again, and I will be millions." (Epilogue, pg. 193)

"In Argentina, we are never more alive than when we are contemplating death." (Epilogue, pg. 197)

"Within the limits prescribed by the late twentieth century, she had become immortal, as she had wanted." (Epilogue, pg. 198)



Topics for Discussion

How did Evita become an actress? How did her role as an actress lead her to meet Peron?

How did Evita learn to be a public speaker? How did she learn to be a politician?

Why do you think that Evita always and everywhere preached absolute devotion to her husband?

What were the political circumstances in Argentina that led to Peron's ascension? What circumstances led to his overthrow and exile?

What is the significance of Evita's body?

How was Evita used as a cultural symbol by Peronists throughout the sixties and seventies?

How did Evita become a cultural symbol in the nineties? What do the authors think she symbolized? What do you think she symbolized?

All in all, do you think Evita's contributions to Argentine society were good or bad? Defend your answer.