

The Fencing Master Study Guide

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Plot Summary

The novel *The Fencing Master* is a story about an aging master of the art of fencing who finds himself involved in a murder mystery. The story begins in mid nineteenth century Madrid.

Don Jaime Astarloa is the most renowned fencing master in Madrid. He has dedicated his entire adult life to the art of fencing, and he has received a diploma from the most prestigious fencing academy in Europe. As Don Jaime ages, so too does people's regard for the usefulness of his chosen art. Don Jaime is saddened to see fencing relegated to the status of pastime or sport.

Most of Don Jaime's days are the same. He teaches his regular students in addition to one notable private student. His only activity aside from fencing involves visiting the Café Progreso where he observes friends make spectacles out of themselves in their passionate discussions about politics. The most boisterous member of the group is Agapito Carceles, a defrocked priest and sometimes journalist for minor newspapers. Carceles seems to delight in shocking the other members of the group, and Don Jaime enjoys watching the show.

Don Jaime's most notable student is Luis de Ayala-Velate y Vallespin, the Marques de los Alumbres. Don Luis is a known philanderer and a man who enjoys a good time. The two men have an unlikely friendship given their very different lifestyles. Don Luis hires Don Jaime not so much because he needs fencing instruction. Don Luis indeed must rely on his skills in fencing because he has the habit of upsetting jealous husbands, but Don Luis is already one of the finest swordsmen in Madrid. Don Luis hires Don Jaime because he enjoys practicing with a skilled opponent and because he enjoys Don Jaime's company.

All around Don Jaime is the news of one political intrigue after another, but Don Jaime is able to ignore them and focus on his art. Don Jaime has never had an interest in politics. His life's ambition is to invent an unstoppable fencing thrust and include it in a book he is writing about fencing.

Don Jaime's orderly and peaceful world changes with the appearance of the beautiful and enigmatic Dona Adela de Otero. The first time Don Jaime meets Dona Adela is when she summons him to her residence. Don Jaime is immediately struck by the woman's beauty and her traits of subtle aggression. Dona Adela wants Don Jaime to teach her a fencing technique that he invented many years ago but teaches only to select students. Don Jaime refuses on the grounds that he does not teach fencing to women.

Dona Adela is not the type of person to give up easily, and she continues to try to persuade Don Jaime. Eventually she succeeds, and Don Jaime discovers that in addition to being beautiful, Dona Adela is an incredibly skilled fencer. All the while his attraction to Dona Adela grows. Just as fast as she came into his life, Dona Adela



disappears with little or no explanation. Soon after, Don Jaime learns that his friend Don Luis has been murdered.

Despite spending his entire adult life trying to avoid involvement in politics and intrigue, Don Jaime discovers that he alone is the only person that can solve a murder mystery.



Preface and Chapter I

Preface and Chapter I Summary

The novel *The Fencing Master* tells the story of Don Jaime Astarloa, a Spanish fencing instructor, who is unwittingly involved in unsavory political dealings, including blackmail and murder. The story takes place in Madrid during the 1860s.

Preface

In Madrid in December 1866 a minister meets with a well-dressed man. The man gives the minister a sealed envelope containing a report.

Chapter I

Two men, a fencing instructor and a nobleman, practice fencing in the summer. The nobleman is Don Luis, the Marquis de los Alumbres. The instructor is Don Jaime Astarloa. Don Luis's philandering ways often make him the target of duels with jealous husbands.

Don Luis is tired and says he has had enough. He pours sherry for himself and Don Jaime. Don Jaime likes Don Luis, and he knows his student is one of the best swordsmen in Madrid. He practices fencing with Don Jaime not so much because he needs lessons, but because he likes to practice, and he loves fencing. Don Luis has served in government before, and some want him to return, but he prefers his life of leisure.

Don Jaime has the reputation of being the best fencing master in Madrid. Don Jaime is in his mid fifties. He is of medium height with a slim build. His income from teaching fencing allows him to dress only modestly, but he manages to keep up a neat well-groomed appearance.

Don Jaime is trying to write a book on fencing. In order for the book to be highly regarded in the fencing community, it must contain a "masterstroke," a fencing technique invented by Don Jaime. Don Jaime wants his masterstroke to be an unstoppable thrust. He has dreamed of inventing such a technique for years, but now he worries that with the onset of age he will never do so.

Don Jaime leaves Don Luis's residence and walks out into the hot Madrid summer of 1868. People all over Madrid seem preoccupied with discussing the latest political rumors. Don Jaime is not interested in politics. As he walks, Don Jaime encounters Don Manuel. Years earlier Don Jaime had given Don Manuel brief instruction before a duel, and now one of Don Manuel's sons is a regular student of Don Jaime. The two men have a brief and polite exchange.



One of the few luxuries that Don Jaime allows himself when he can afford it is the purchase of books. He stops outside a bookseller's to admire some books, but at present he cannot afford any. He continues on his way to Café Progreso.

Café Progreso is where Don Jaime regularly meets with a group of acquaintances. The café is run down, but it provides a cool place in the summer for Don Jaime and a few friends to escape the heat and have political discussions. Don Jaime does not take part in the discussions, but he enjoys the spectacle of some of his friends' passionate arguments. One of the more colorful characters is Agapito Carceles. Carceles was once a priest and currently holds some political views some consider radical. He often gets excited and launches into vehement speeches. Currently Carceles gets by financially by accepting money from friends and by writing vitriolic journalistic pieces for small newspapers. To an outsider it would appear that the men hate each other and will launch into violence at any moment. But Don Jaime knows the men are friends.

At his residence and fencing gallery Don Jaime instructs young men. He chastises one student for treating fencing like a game. Another student mentions that some call fencing a sport. Don Jaime explains that fencing is a matter of life and death and not a sport. Other students question Don Jaime about whether firearms have made swords obsolete. Don Jaime is weary of hearing the same arguments over and over again, but he tries to explain that with the death of fencing will come the death of chivalry. A knock at the door cuts short Don Jaime's lecture.

Preface and Chapter I Analysis

Preface

The preface is told from the point of view of a third person narrator. The perspective is that of the minister, and the narrator has access to the minister's thoughts.

Chapter I

Chapter I continues with third person narrative, and it is from the perspective Of Don Jaime.

Early on the reader will need to become familiar with a variety of fencing terms. While some of the names for various fencing movements are not necessary for the understanding of the plot, understanding of other names, such as the names of the weapons and safety equipment are essential.

The tone of the conversation between Don Jaime and Don Luis illustrates that the men are comfortable with each other, and they are more than student and teacher. The two men are friends. This friendship is unexpected because the two men could not be more different. Don Luis is a notorious philanderer and hedonist, and Don Jaime lives by a strict moral code. He does not care about earthly pleasures, but instead Don Jaime is dedicated to the art of fencing and the code of honor he believes a part of that art.



Don Jaime's book in progress can be thought of as his life's goal. He certainly thinks of it as his crowning achievement. He hopes it will be the "non plus ultra" of books about fencing. This means he hopes it will be the absolute best, the final word, on fencing.

The environment at Café Progreso seems heated and volatile at first, but as we get to know the characters, we begin to see the scene in the same way Don Jaime sees it. Don Jaime sees it as simply entertainment. He has no interest in politics, and he has no urge to debate opinions he does not hold, but he enjoys watching others and their ardent views. Carceles seems to be the usual center of attention.

One of the recurring themes of the novel is introduced in this first chapter. Don Jaime realizes that fencing is a dying art, and people are beginning to view it as a sport or frivolous pastime. Don Jaime himself is aging. The theme of a dying art, changing times, and antiquated notions will appear throughout the novel.



Chapter II

Chapter II Summary

Don Jaime has received a note from someone called Dona Adela de Otero, inviting him to visit. He goes to the meeting thinking that the invitation comes from the mother of a prospective student. When he arrives at the home, a maid shows him to a room, and Dona Adela enters soon after. Don Jaime is surprised to see a young and beautiful woman. He notices that despite her beauty there seems to be something aggressive, perhaps masculine, about her. Don Jaime also notices a small facial scar in the corner of her mouth.

After offering Don Jaime some coffee, Dona Adela states that she wants to learn the two-hundred-escudo thrust. Don Jaime is shocked and wonders if he has misunderstood. Dona Adela continues to state that she has made inquiries and discovered that Don Jaime is the best fencing instructor in Madrid, and he is also the inventor of a particular technique. She also states that she has heard that Don Jaime's fee for teaching the particular technique is one thousand two hundred reales.

Don Jaime says that he will never teach fencing to a woman. He tries to apologize and say that at fifty-six he is too old to change his ways.

Dona Adela says that she has heard that the thrust is impossible to parry, or block. Don Jaime says that is an exaggeration. He says that the thrust is easy to parry for one who knows the technique. Dona Adela offers to raise the price to two thousand reales. Though this amount is equal to three months income, Don Jaime says that he teaches the thrust to only worthy opponents and not simply for monetary gain. Don Jaime leaves Dona Adela's residence.

Over the summer Don Jaime continues to practice with Don Luis and teach his regular students, and Don Jaime continues to meet his friends at Café Progreso. One morning Don Jaime hears a knock at his door, and when he answers he sees Dona Adela. Though surprised, he invites her in. Dona Adela comments on a painting, and Don Jaime says the man in the painting was his father who died fighting Napoleon's forces that occupied Spain.

Dona Adela asks Don Jaime how he would respond to a particular fencing technique, and he is impressed with her knowledge. The two continue to talk about fencing, and Don Jaime remains impressed. He agrees to test Dona Adela's fencing abilities the following day, and if she does well, they will discuss the possibility of Don Jaime teaching the two-hundred-escudo thrust.

Late at night Don Jaime tries to develop the perfect thrust. He begins by drawing on paper and then goes into his gallery to practice before a mirror. As he looks at his reflection he remembers his old fencing master telling him that the perfect thrust does



not exist. Don Jaime has dreamed of inventing the perfect thrust ever since he was young and in training for the army.

As the son of a hero of a previous war, Don Jaime had a promising career in the army, but while he was a lieutenant he fell in love. A rival challenged him to a duel. Don Jaime killed his adversary and had to flee Spain. He settled in Paris and eventually became a student of the most renowned fencing master in France, Lucien de Montespan. For years Don Jaime trained with Montespan and even traveled with him to various European cities teaching the junior students. In Rome, Don Jaime had his second duel. A Roman had criticized Montespan, and rather than let his teacher duel, Don Jaime took the challenge. Don Jaime did not kill his opponent, but he made such an impression that the man was impressed.

Montespan became ill, and he and Don Jaime returned to Paris. Don Jaime received a diploma from the Paris Academy of Arms and became a fencing master. He continued a close friendship with his former teacher, Montespan.

In Paris, Don Jaime had his third duel. A man had been teaching fencing without the proper credentials. The academy and established masters were offended, and they chose Don Jaime to face the upstart instructor. In a duel, Don Jaime easily defeated and killed his opponent. Soon after Montespan died and left his collection of swords to Don Jaime. Don Jaime bought flowers and visited Montespan's grave where he left the flowers and the sword he used to kill the other fencing instructor.

Don Jaime thinks how those events happened almost thirty years previously. He also thinks that now in the present he has no one to bequeath his swords.

Chapter II Analysis

Don Jaime is instantly intrigued with Dona Adela. Though he refuses her initial request, he cannot stop thinking about her. His attraction is mixed some feelings of misgiving that he cannot articulate. Don Jaime continues to think about Dona Adela long after their meeting. In sum, his attraction to Dona Adela makes Don Jaime uncomfortable.

Dona Adela's offer to raise the price for Don Jaime's instruction offends him. He does not see fencing instruction as a commodity. He sees it as an art that can be passed only to those capable and worthy. The prices he charges are merely what are necessary for him to maintain his modest lifestyle. Dona Adela's equating fencing instruction to a commodity to be bought and sold offends Don Jaime every bit as much as the arguments that Don Jaime hears stating that fencing is an obsolete and useless art and useful in the modern day only as an enjoyable form of exercise.

In Don Jaime's remembrance of his past, it is apparent that much of his life has been solitary. With the exception of a few minor romantic endeavors, Don Jaime has spent the majority of his life in the single-minded pursuit of perfecting his art. The late night scene where he works to perfect a fencing technique first on paper and then in front of mirrors is the same way he has spent thousands of nights.



Don Jaime's recollection of his duel with the fencing instructor is curious in that it does not say much about Don Jaime's feelings about having killed the man. Surely Don Jaime did not feel good about having to kill a man that wanted only the income to provide for his family. Likely Don Jaime saw it as a duty to his own instructor and the governing body that gave him his credentials. Perhaps that is why Don Jaime included the sword with the flowers at Montespan's grave.



Chapter III

Chapter III Summary

In preparation for Dona Adela's arrival, Don Jaime grooms himself well. When Dona Adela arrives, Don Jaime shows her to a room where she can change into clothes suitable for fencing. Don Jaime notices that Dona Adela leaves the door partially open. As soon as Dona Adela adopts her fencing stance, Don Jaime is immediately impressed. He can already tell that she has had some quality instruction, and he sees that it has been in the Italian style. Dona Adela refuses to wear a protective mask for the first bout, and this troubles Don Jaime. He says it will be safer if she wears the protective equipment, but she declines.

During the first bout Don Jaime is impressed with Dona Adela's skill. He stops short of actually striking her when he has the opportunity, and this angers Dona Adela. She tells him that if she is to learn anything he must stop treating her like a new student or a helpless woman. The bout resumes, and Dona Adela fights more fiercely. Don Jaime lets the bout go on for a while before disarming Dona Adela.

After the bout Dona Adela seems delighted. Don Jaime asks her what she had been trying to accomplish, and she says that she wanted to demonstrate that she did not require special treatment simply because she was a woman. The two resume practicing, but this time they wear protective masks. Again Dona Adela impresses Don Jaime.

After the second bout, Don Jaime asks Dona Adela how long she has been practicing fencing and she says that she has been training in fencing since she was eighteen, and she is now twenty-seven. Dona Adela changes out of her fencing clothes, and again she leaves the door slightly open.

Don Jaime agrees to teach Dona Adela the two-hundred-escudo thrust. Dona Adela is grateful and says that Don Jaime has a special quality as a fencer, but Don Jaime says it is not so much special as it is a result of a lifetime of practice. Don Jaime asks Dona Adela who her fencing master was, but she declines to answer.

Dona Adela asks Don Jaime how he became a fencing master. Don Jaime says that he studied with Montespan then worked as a fencing instructor in Paris for eleven years before returning to Spain in 1850. Dona Adela comments on how Don Jaime seems devoted to classical or traditional methods, and he agrees. He also speaks of how it bothers him to hear of fencing being thought of as sport.

Dona Adela asks if Don Jaime is lonely, and he answers that he is, but he also says that it is his own fault.

That evening Don Jaime goes for a walk alone, and he thinks about the current condition of his life and how he balances feelings of loneliness with serenity.



Chapter III Analysis

Don Jaime's attention to grooming and his nervousness before Dona Adela's arrival illustrates his attraction to Dona Adela, and it is behavior that is a marked departure from his usual life.

During the fencing bouts Don Jaime is forced to reconsider women's potential and role in the art of fencing. Don Jaime admits to himself that he would be impressed with Don Adela's skill regardless of her gender. However, he probably would not have had to be counseled to stop holding back had he faced a male student.

Dona Adela admires a skill that Don Jaime possesses. Sword enthusiasts call it "sentiment du fer." Literally it means feeling or sense of iron. In fencing it refers to one's ability to sense and even predict the movements of an opponent simply through the tactile sensations transmitted from the sword to the fencer. Don Jaime says that there is no other way to acquire it besides many years of practice.

Dona Adela seems to know no one in Madrid and have no connections to any sort of social network. She is intentionally cryptic in response to any questions Don Jaime asks, yet she is relentless in asking questions of her own. In fact, at times the questions come so frequently that the conversation seems more like an interrogation. Likely Don Jaime would be aware of this if it were not for his attraction to Dona Adela.



Chapter IV, pages 81-98

Chapter IV, pages 81-98 Summary

During the summer Don Jaime has no interest in the volatile political situation, but it is impossible for him to escape hearing the constant repeating of rumor. At the Café Progreso, Carceles is more boisterous than ever. He shows a recent newspaper article that he believes corroborates things he has been saying all along. Other group members try to get Don Jaime to take sides in the endless debate, but he says that his business in life is fencing, not politics.

Dona Adela comes to Don Jaime's residence and fencing gallery as agreed for her lessons. Don Jaime teaches her the two-hundred-escudo thrust, and she learns quickly. Don Jaime is still impressed with her abilities, and Dona Adela seems delighted to learn a new technique. Dona Adela asks if Don Jaime ever used the thrust to kill anyone. He remembers an incident that he does not speak about. Instead he says that if he had, he would not take pride in such a thing.

At one of their regular fencing sessions, Don Luis asks Don Jaime about teaching a woman. Don Luis makes some insinuations about Don Jaime accepting Dona Adela as a student because she is beautiful, and this mildly offends Don Jaime. He says he accepted Dona Adela as a student because she saw talent. Don Luis says he wants to meet Dona Adela, but Don Jaime is hesitant.

Changing the subject from Dona Adela, Don Luis says that Don Jaime is an extraordinary and admirable man. He says that Don Jaime is more worthy to be a nobleman than anyone Don Luis knows, including himself. Don Luis mentions how his father used financial leverage to get the title that Don Luis now holds, and Don Luis mentions the heroic way that Don Jaime's father died.

Don Luis mentions something about the latest political intrigue. He speaks about how a coalition of forces intends to depose the queen. Don Luis sees how uninterested Don Jaime is in political events, and Don Luis is impressed that Don Jaime can stay so focused on his art of fencing and so aloof from current events. Don Luis also speculates about how much of Don Jaime's personal philosophy comes from religion. Don Jaime says he owes none of his ideas to religion. In reference to god he says, "He doesn't interest me. God tolerates the intolerable; he is irresponsible and inconsistent. He is not a gentleman."

Chapter IV, pages 81-98 Analysis

As revealed in his interaction with friends at the Café Progreso, Don Jaime is truly not interested in external events. He knows that what others regard as significant is occurring, but to Don Jaime all political events are more of the same, and few if any have anything to do with his passion in life, fencing.



Though he has not learned any specific facts about Dona Adela's personal life, Don Jaime is beginning to notice some disturbing aspects to her personality. In her eagerness to hear about whether the two-hundred-escudo thrust has been used to kill, Don Jaime detects a cruel nature.

Part of the reason Don Jaime becomes so annoyed at Don Luis's insinuations about Dona Adela's beauty and Don Jaime's reasons for accepting her as a student is because Don Jaime knows that Don Luis is correct. He has been affected by her beauty.

Don Luis says that Don Jaime feels like a foreigner everywhere he goes. Don Jaime is not wrapped up in the petty everyday concerns of the normal person but instead lives his life in pursuit of a greater aesthetic principle.



Chapter IV, pages 98-115

Chapter IV, pages 98-115 Summary

Don Jaime continues with his regular routine, and he continues to give instruction to Dona Adela. Not since her second visit have they had a discussion about anything other than fencing. Don Jaime tries to learn about Dona Adela, but she does not offer any direct answers, and she offers few clues. All Don Jaime can learn is that she lives alone, she has not been in Madrid long, and she has no interest in social interaction. Dona Adela still has the strange habit of leaving the changing room door open.

One day after her lesson Dona Adela seems faint and has to lean against the wall to keep from falling to the floor. Don Jaime assists her in getting to a chair. She says the cause must be the heat. Don Jaime gives her some brandy and tells her to rest. Slowly Dona Adela begins to recover, and she compliments Don Jaime on the décor in his residence. Don Jaime acknowledges that the artifacts in his residence and fencing gallery are symbols of memories and regrets. Dona Adela says that she knows what he means, but Don Jaime says that is not possible because Dona Adela is so young.

Don Jaime says that he usually learns a great deal about people from fencing with them, but that is not the case with Dona Adela. Dona Adela asks if Don Jaime was ever in love, and he answers, yes, many years ago in Paris. She asks how the relationship ended, and Don Jaime says he forced the woman to make a choice. From this comment, Dona Adela deduces that the woman was married, and Don Jaime is impressed with her insight. Don Jaime says that the woman made her choice, and then he sold much of what he owned and returned to Spain.

As they speak, Dona Adela begins moving closer to where Don Jaime is sitting. When she gets so close that Don Jaime is uncomfortable, he lights a lamp to change the mood. It is too late in the evening for Dona Adela to go home alone, so Don Jaime escorts her. They hire a carriage. At first while riding in the carriage neither speaks, and Don Jaime is uncomfortable. He thinks that something has changed between the two of them. Eventually Dona Adela begins to speak, and Don Jaime is grateful for the end of the awkward silence.

Dona Adela asks if Don Jaime knows any people among the nobility, and Don Jaime names several of his clients. When Don Jaime mentions Don Luis, Dona Adela seems to recognize the name and becomes interested. She asks if she can meet Don Luis, and Don Jaime says that he does not believe that will be possible. Dona Adela continues to try to persuade Don Jaime, and she even accuses him of being jealous. Don Jaime relents and agrees to make introductions.

Don Jaime indeed mentions Dona Adela's desire to meet Don Luis, and two days later Don Luis comes to Don Jaime's residence while he is instructing Dona Adela. Don Luis and Dona Adela get along well, and Don Luis invites her to a concert that evening. Days



pass and there is much news of political turmoil, but more noticeable to Don Jaime is Dona Adela's absence. Don Luis and Dona Adela are often seen in public, and Don Jaime hears some of the rumors. One day Don Jaime receives a note from Dona Adela. In the note Dona Adela says she will not require more lessons, and along with the note she includes money for the lessons she has received. Don Jaime responds with a note of his own saying that she has overpaid, and he is returning the excess funds.

Chapter IV, pages 98-115 Analysis

For the second time someone has used the analogy of a foreigner to describe Don Jaime's distance from everyday concerns.

During their discussion about Don Jaime's past, Dona Adela demonstrates astute insight. It seems that she too has experienced heartache, but she will not confirm Don Jaime's suspicions. To the reader, some of Dona Adela's behavior might seem manipulative, but Don Jaime's attraction to her prevents him from seeing it. Her habit of leaving the changing room door open when Don Jaime is present but closing it when Don Luis is present could mean that she enjoys tempting one who endeavors to be immune to temptation, but she has no interest in playing with a man like Don Luis who readily admits that he enjoys leading a debauched life. It is unclear what Dona Adela's goal is in moving close to Don Jaime in a dark room. It is possible that she is attracted to the much older man, but it is also possible that she has ulterior motives.

As Don Jaime escorts Dona Adela home, he is angry with himself for not seizing the moment and allowing the relationship with Dona Adela to evolve on its own. He has the sense that he will not get a similar opportunity again.



Chapter IV, pages 115-127

Chapter IV, pages 115-127 Summary

The usual meeting at Café Progreso ends early because several of the friends have other places to be. Don Jaime takes a walk with Marcelino Romero, the music teacher. Romero's students are away for the summer, so he does not get paid for lessons. He gets by during the summers by borrowing money from friends. He asks Don Jaime for a loan, and Don Jaime grants the request and even makes an effort to sooth Romero's feelings of embarrassment for having to ask for money.

Romero makes a reference to his unrequited love for a married woman, and rather than offer sympathy, Don Jaime becomes intensely annoyed. He berates Romero. He says Romero is young at forty, and rather than complain in a pathetic manner he ought to take action. He should either do something or simply endure the situation.

Romero says that he is not a violent man, and he says that the Catholic Church is against violence. This comment upsets Don Jaime. He vehemently states that some of the most violent and cruel acts, such as the Crusades and the Inquisition, have been committed in the name of Christianity.

Romero is surprised at Don Jaime's rancor. He compares some of Don Jaime's remarks to views held by Carceles. Don Jaime says he is nothing like Carceles, and he is disgusted with many of the ideas of others. Romero leaves hurt and confused.

After visiting a pharmacy, Don Jaime sees Dona Adela inside a carriage. She is speaking to a man standing outside the carriage. When Dona Adela sees Don Jaime, she commands the driver to depart immediately. Don Jaime thinks that Dona Adela appeared afraid. That night Don Jaime is awakened by a nightmare. In his dream he saw a doll floating in water. When he picked up the doll, he saw that it had no eyes.

At one of their fencing sessions, Don Jaime can see that Don Luis's mind is not on practice. They take a walk, and Don Luis asks how Don Jaime met Dona Adela. Don Jaime explains, and he tells about the conversation he had with Dona Adela in a carriage one evening. Don Luis says that he suspects something is happening, but he cannot tell Don Jaime everything at this time. He says he has a favor to ask of Don Jaime. Don Luis wants Don Jaime to take possession of a file, hide it, but not read any of it. Don Jaime agrees. When Don Jaime asks why Don Luis chose him for the task, Don Luis says that Don Jaime is the only honest man he knows.

Chapter IV, pages 115-127 Analysis

Don Jaime's anger toward Romero is misdirected. Don Jaime is angry with himself for what he sees as a missed opportunity with Dona Adela, and he takes out this frustration on Romero who he sees as committing a similar act. On any other day Don Jaime might



have been able to offer support, and certainly on any other day Don Jaime would have felt bad for upsetting a friend in need.

Dona Adela's behavior in the carriage seems to confirm some of the suspicions the reader may be developing. Don Jaime is blind to this because of his attraction to her. His first thoughts are concern for her welfare. Don Luis's suspicions regarding Dona Adela seem to further confirm that all is not as it seems to Don Jaime.

Don Luis's statement that Don Jaime is the only honest man he knows illustrates how unusual and how admirable the fencing master is to the people that know him.



Chapter V, pages 128-140

Chapter V, pages 128-140 Summary

In September, it has been many weeks since any political demonstration occurred, but rumors abound among the group at Café Progreso, and as usual Don Jaime is bored with the spectacle.

During one of his regular fencing classes, Don Jaime lectures his students on how modern views of fencing as a sport diminishes its value as an art. While Don Jaime practices with a student, they hear a noise from the street. The students rush to the windows and see the Civil Guard fighting demonstrators. Neighbors shout from balconies. Don Jaime closes the shutters and orders his students to focus on fencing.

Later Don Jaime passes a woman on the stairs, and she informs him that a rival to the Spanish throne has landed, and the navy is on his side. On the way to Café Progreso Don Jaime sees many soldiers and realizes that martial law has been declared.

At Café Progreso the members of the discussion group are worried about the prospect of civil war. Carceles, outrageous as usual, says that he hopes a violent civil war happens. Don Jaime, bored and annoyed, leaves early and goes for a walk.

During the rainy weekend, Don Jaime stays home and tries to occupy himself with reading. He is troubled by thoughts that Dona Adela used him for something.

Chapter V, pages 128-140 Analysis

Don Jaime's action of closing the shutters and ordering his students to focus on fencing is symbolic of the way that he tries to lead his life. He continues to try to shut out external events, but whether he realizes it or not, external events may not allow him to continue living a quiet life devoted to his chosen art.

At last, Don Jaime seems to realize that Dona Adela's attention was for a reason other than a genuine interest in fencing.



Chapter V, pages 140-155

Chapter V, pages 140-155 Summary

Don Jaime wakes, dresses, and goes to a café for breakfast. The café owner says that no newspapers are available, so Don Jaime asks what the owner knows of the news. The café owner says that the situation is confusing. Military leaders seem to be switching sides, and it is difficult to know which side different figures are allied with.

After breakfast Don Jaime goes to Don Luis's residence. He sees a large crowd gathered. He hears members of the crowd referring to Don Luis and saying something about a tragedy. A policeman stops Don Jaime from entering, and Don Jaime says that he is a friend of Don Luis, and he has an appointment. The policeman tells Don Jaime to follow, and the policeman introduces Don Jaime to Jenaro Campillo, Chief of Police.

Don Jaime asks about Don Luis, and Campillo says to follow. Don Jaime sees a body and blood. When Don Jaime asks if the death was a suicide, the chief invites Don Jaime to take a look. Don Jaime sees that Don Luis died from a stab to the neck, and the wound was made by a foil. To his horror he also sees that the wound came from the two-hundred-escudo thrust.

Campillo questions Don Jaime about his knowledge of Don Luis. Campillo says that the police have found evidence of locks being pried apart, and even the safe has been opened, but no jewels or money has been taken. Though he does not say it, Don Jaime thinks the murderer must have been looking for the file. Campillo asks if Don Luis ever discussed politics, and Don Jaime says that Don Luis tried to avoid stay out of politics. Campillo asks if Don Jaime knows of any affairs Don Luis was involved in and if any of those involved jealous husbands.

Don Jaime realizes that the file might contain answers for the police, but Don Jaime wants to protect Don Luis's reputation until he knows more. Don Jaime also realizes that he might be a suspect since Don Luis was killed by a foil.

Campillo surprises Don Jaime by asking if he knows Dona Adela. The previous evening Don Luis dismissed his servants as he usually did when he expected to have a romantic encounter in his home. The following morning the servants discovered Don Luis's body and the blood stained foil. No one knows the identity of Don Luis's visitor. Campillo asks about the character of Dona Adela, and Don Jaime suggests that the police interview her directly. He gives Campillo Dona Adela's address, but the police chief already knows the address. He says that Dona Adela is missing.

Chapter V, pages 140-155 Analysis

Don Jaime asks the café owner about news only out of politeness. Few people could care less about political events than Don Jaime.



Chief of Police Jenaro Campillo is immediately a remarkable character. He is not at all disturbed by the sight of death. To him it is a frequent sight, and he makes comments he finds humorous, but to a person not exposed to death and murder on a frequent basis, his remarks come across as callous and insensitive.

The horror Don Jaime feels upon examining Don Luis cannot be underestimated. He knows immediately that Don Luis was killed by a fencing technique of Don Jaime's invention. Though Don Jaime has tried to stay out of politics and personal entanglements, he is now very much involved.

The novel seems to have taken on all the aspects of a murder mystery.



Chapter VI, pages 156-171

Chapter VI, pages 156-171 Summary

As Don Jaime leaves Don Luis's residence, Campillo tells him to come to his office the following day for more questioning. Don Jaime does not want to believe that Dona Adela is involved in the murder, but the evidence, particularly the timing and the use of a fencing technique Don Jaime taught to Dona Adela, is hard to ignore. Don Jaime decides to go home and read the file. He thinks the prudent thing would be to turn the file over to the police, but he wants answers for himself first. During the carriage ride home, Don Jaime analyzes past events, and he wonders if the murderer knows that he is in possession of the file.

As Don Jaime opens the file, the papers spill out and fall across the floor. He gathers them and tries to put them back in order. Don Jaime reads the file, which consists of letters to and from various government officials ordering the surveillance, arrest, even execution of people. Don Jaime is not knowledgeable in politics, and he cannot understand what in the file warranted murder. He reads the file again, but he still cannot understand.

Don Jaime considers giving the file to the police, but he realizes that he will appear to be a liar after having told Campillo that he knew nothing. Don Jaime considers destroying the file, but he thinks that may prevent him from ever knowing the truth. Don Jaime decides that a person more knowledgeable in politics may be able to find answers. He leaves for Café Progreso to find Carceles.

Chapter VI, pages 156-171 Analysis

When faced with a confusing situation, Don Jaime uses the best skills in his possession. As he tries to understand events leading up to the present, he equates each individual event to a fencing movement.

Though Don Jaime himself may not be aware, there is irony in the current situation. A man who has never shown any interest in politics and even actively tried to avoid knowing about political intrigue is now in possession of a file detailing government action that somehow might have resulted in the murder of one of Don Jaime's friends.



Chapter VI, pages 171-180

Chapter VI, pages 171-180 Summary

Don Jaime finds Carceles at Café Progreso, and he takes Carceles away from the others to speak to him. He vaguely explains the matter and says that he trusts in Carceles complete discretion. The two men go to Don Jaime's residence, and before giving Carceles the file, Don Jaime again asks for Carceles's promise of discretion.

Carceles appears surprised when he sees the letterhead, and then he reads all of the letters. Carceles remains quiet for a moment after reading the letters and then appears excited. He begins to tell Don Jaime something, but the two men are interrupted by a knock at the door. Carceles says to get rid of whoever is at the door because they must speak.

A policeman is at the door, and he says Chief Campillo has sent him, and Don Jaime must come. As Don Jaime prepares to leave, Carceles says he will remain at Don Jaime's until his return. When Don Jaime leaves with the policeman he asks where they are going, and the policeman says to the morgue.

At the morgue Campillo offers Don Jaime a cigar and says that the smoke will make what he is about to see easier to bear. He says he wants Don Jaime's help in identifying a female drowning victim. Campillo removes a sheet from a body, and Don Jaime is immediately nauseous. The woman's face has been horribly mutilated. It is missing the eyes, nose, and lips. Sickened, Don Jaime remembers his nightmare. Campillo says he believes it is Dona Adela.

Chapter VI, pages 171-180 Analysis

Much depends on Carceles ability to keep a secret. Don Jaime is taking a risk in trusting Carceles. Having to leave Carceles alone with the file puts Don Jaime at even greater risk.

When Don Jaime learns that Dona Adela is dead, this absolves her of any guilt in Don Jaime's mind. Now he feels only sorrow and loss in regard to Dona Adela.



Chapter VII, pages 181-200

Chapter VII, pages 181-200 Summary

Campillo and Don Jaime discuss matters in Campillo's office. Campillo says that he believes the body was not thrown into the river until this morning, but he does not know why the body was removed from the residence. At Dona Adela's residence there was blood and signs of a fight. Campillo shows Don Jaime a ring, and Don Jaime identifies it as one worn by Dona Adela.

Campillo asks Don Jaime if he knows of any enemies of Dona Adela, and he asks Don Jaime to return the following morning for more questions. Don Jaime asks if he is a suspect, and Campillo says not really, but Don Jaime is the only person that knew both of the victims. He tells Don Jaime not to leave Madrid and to be available for more questioning.

Outside the police office, Don Jaime feels intense anger. He vows to solve the mystery. When he arrives home neither Carceles or the papers are there. Don Jaime finds a note from Carceles saying he needs to check some facts and to trust him. Don Jaime tries to decide whether to go to the police first or whether to find Carceles first. He decides he must go to the police with proof, so he must first find Carceles.

Don Jaime wonders if he is in danger. He changes his walking stick with another. Inside his new walking stick is concealed a high quality foil. When Don Jaime arrives at Carceles residence he knocks, but there is no answer. Don Jaime climbs onto the roof, walks over it, and descends to where he can enter through one of Carceles glass doors.

Inside the residence it is dark, and Don Jaime lights his way with a match. He finds Carceles tied in bed and severely mutilated but alive. Carceles is delirious. He does not realize he speaks to Don Jaime. He pleads for his life and says that Don Jaime has the documents. Don Jaime senses someone else in the room, but it is dark, and Don Jaime cannot see. He holds out the walking stick, and someone grabs the end and pulls, removing the blade. Don Jaime thrusts, and someone cries out that he has been stabbed.

Don Jaime realizes that he faces two opponents. As he tries to move through the darkened room, a man grabs him, trapping his arms. Don Jaime head butts the man and gets away. Again he senses someone near him, and he thrusts twice. Again someone cries out that he has been stabbed. The attackers flee and disturb the neighbors. When the night watchman arrives, Don Jaime asks him to send for the police and for a doctor. He says that one attacker probably has a broken nose and the other has stab wounds.



Chapter VII, pages 181-200 Analysis

Since the police are unable to find Lucia, Dona Adela's maid, Don Jaime, and perhaps Carceles, are the only people that have any clues to the mystery.

Inside Campillo's office, Don Jaime feels stunned. Outside, Don Jaime feels rage. It is this rage that keeps him from feeling afraid for his personal safety.

When Don Jaime enters Carceles residence, he learns that his friend has betrayed him, but under the circumstances Don Jaime can hardly blame him. Probably the only thing that saves Don Jaime's life is his daily dedication to physical fitness.



Chapter VII, pages 200-207

Chapter VII, pages 200-207 Summary

Campillo says that Don Jaime has behaved like a child. Don Jaime agrees and says that he wanted to protect Dona Adela. Campillo asks why Don Jaime did not disclose the whole truth, and Don Jaime says that he loved Dona Adela.

Campillo says that Don Jaime is lucky to have survived. He is surprised that Don Jaime at his age prevailed against two professional killers. Campillo says that there is something innocent or naïve about Don Jaime, and he doubts that even now Don Jaime realizes the danger he is in. Campillo suggests that Don Jaime stay away from his residence and even leave Madrid for a while. He says that the killers may return. Don Jaime says that he will consider Campillo's warning.

Another policeman comes to Campillo's office and says that Carceles has died. Campillo says that Don Jaime is now the only link in the mystery, and he advises Don Jaime to stay armed.

Chapter VII, pages 200-207 Analysis

Despite his anger, it is clear that Campillo likes Don Jaime. He has enough cause to jail Don Jaime for withholding evidence, but he seems to sympathize with Don Jaime's motivations, especially after hearing Don Jaime's admission of being in love with Dona Adela.

Campillo's comment that there is something innocent or naïve about Don Jaime is similar to what both Don Luis and Dona Adela said about Don Jaime being the eternal foreigner.



Chapter VIII, pages 207-215

Chapter VIII, pages 207-215 Summary

It is late afternoon when Don Jaime leaves the police offices. While on his way home he thinks he sees a young man watching him, but then Don Jaime realizes that he has no idea what his attackers might look like. He thinks about Campillo's advice to hide, but Don Jaime decides against it. Don Jaime thinks about Don Luis, Dona Adela, and Carceles, and he feels sorrow. Don Jaime is determined not to flee.

After a modest dinner, Don Jaime drinks coffee and looks at the artifacts in his residence. He sees the collection of swords and the diploma from the French academy. Don Jaime opens a drawer and removes a revolver that had been a gift from a former student. He places the revolver next to a sword on a table near a chair. Don Jaime unlocks the door to his residence, refills his coffee, and waits.

Around three in the morning, Don Jaime hears a faint knock at his door. Then he hears a louder knock. Don Jaime aims the revolver at the doorway. The door opens, and a voice calls out his name. Don Jaime drops the revolver when he recognizes the voice as that of Dona Adela.

Chapter VIII, pages 207-215 Analysis

The opening to the final chapter, like all the chapters before, contains a few lines about fencing strategy. In this chapter the lines state that in actual combat the rules of fencing do not apply.

Don Jaime looks at the artifacts of his residence as if he expects to die soon. He looks at them as the only symbols of his life, and it is as if Don Jaime is taking a last look.

Don Jaime's use of a pistol is surprising. Throughout the novel he has repeatedly said that fencing is an art and the use of firearms is crude and brutish. But as the opening to the chapter states, in real life or death combat, the rules of fencing do not apply.



Chapter VIII, pages 215-233

Chapter VIII, pages 215-233 Summary

Dona Adela steps into the room. Don Jaime lights a lamp, and his hands tremble. Dona Adela says she owes an explanation, and Don Jaime asks about the identity of the dead woman. Dona Adela asks for patience.

Dona Adela takes her time and begins telling a story. The story seems vague, and she does not use names. She tells of a young woman who was once happy but experienced heartbreak so intense that she contemplated suicide. A new man came into her life and offered assistance without asking for anything in return. One day the man departed, and to show her gratitude the young woman said to call upon her if the man ever needed her. Eventually the man does contact her, and he needs help recovering an incriminating file.

Dona Adela reveals that Don Luis was a blackmailer, but Don Jaime does not want to believe it. Dona Adela admits that she came from Italy and used Don Jaime as a means to get close to Don Luis. She says that it had already been decided that Don Luis must die even if she recovered the file. She admits to killing Don Luis. After refusing her offer of money for the file and then insulting her, Don Luis does not fully appreciate the danger he is in when Dona Adela picks up a foil. She killed him quickly with the thrust Don Jaime taught her.

After killing Don Luis, Dona Adela knew she had to vanish from Madrid. Don Jaime asks about Lucia the maid, and Dona Adela admits that she hired the same two thugs that Don Jaime fought to kill Lucia. Don Jaime asks how she discovered Carceles, and Dona Adela says that Carceles was trying to sell the file. Don Jaime is shocked and disappointed. Dona Adela says that Don Jaime has trusted too many people.

Dona Adela asks why Don Jaime involved Carceles, and Don Jaime says he did not understand the file. He needed someone who understood politics. Dona Adela is confused. She asks if he did not read the letter that explained the entire file. Don Jaime is also confused and says he knows of no such letter. Both Don Jaime and Dona Adela remain silent for a time until Don Jaime remembers that when he first opened the file the papers fell onto the floor. He looks under the sideboard and finds the missing letter.

Dona Adela pleads with Don Jaime not to read the letter, but he holds it near the lamp and begins reading.

Chapter VIII, pages 215-233 Analysis

Dona Adela claims to want only to offer an explanation, but it soon becomes apparent that she has come in search of information. Eventually she admits that her only purpose is to recover the missing letter.



The more Dona Adela speaks the more Don Jaime feels hatred and disgust, especially when they discuss Lucia. Dona Adela and her associates behave in a manner that is completely opposite the code by which Don Jaime has dedicated his entire life. This woman that for a time he was in love with has turned out to be the vilest person he has ever met.



Chapter VIII, pages 233-244

Chapter VIII, pages 233-244 Summary

After reading the letter Don Jaime asks if Dona Adela intends to kill him if he does not surrender the document. She asks for the letter, but Don Jaime refuses. Dona Adela asks his intentions, and Don Jaime says he has not decided if he will first go to the police or first go and kill her benefactor.

Dona Adela begins to undress. At first Don Jaime is mesmerized by her beauty, but then he notices her eyes. He sees the same expression he saw before Dona Adela would lunge during fencing practice. Don Jaime leaps back and sees that Dona Adela was about to kill him with a hatpin.

Dona Adela takes Don Jaime's sword, and Don Jaime runs to the gallery and takes the first available sword, but it is a practicing foil with a blunted tip. Dona Adela attacks, but Don Jaime is limited to defensive movements because he does not have a fighting foil. Dona Adela manages to wound Don Jaime in the side, but he recovers and resumes his defense.

Because Don Jaime's sword has a blunted tip, he knows that the only area he can attack on Dona Adela is her face. Don Jaime continues to make defensive movements and waits for an opportunity. Dona Adela attacks again, and Don Jaime manages to stab her in the eye and kill her.

As dawn comes, Dona Adela lays dead, and Don Jaime practices fencing in front of a mirror.

Chapter VIII, pages 233-244 Analysis

Despite the scorn Don Jaime feels for Dona Adela, he cannot help but find her beautiful. Fortunately the skills he has spent a lifetime perfecting return, and he manages to step away just in time.

In a way Dona Adela's arrogance killed her. Had she chosen the pistol instead of the sword, she would have prevailed. The idea of defeating a fencing master is too great a temptation for Dona Adela, and she attacks Don Jaime in a venue where he has spent his entire life. Fortunately for Don Jaime, he knows when to dispense with polite rules and do what is necessary to survive.

In a final example of Don Jaime's amazing abilities to shut out the external world and focus on his goal of developing the unstoppable thrust, dawn finds him in front of his gallery's mirrors practicing his beloved art.



Characters

Don Jaime Astarloa

The first quality of Don Jaime that anyone notices is his physical appearance. He is in his mid fifties and very thin. He appears frail, but this is deceiving because he is in excellent physical condition. He has a full head of white hair. His taste in clothing is considered tasteful but old fashioned. His physical traits and his choice of fashion combine to give the impression of a man frozen in time.

This impression based on physical appearance is fitting for Don Jaime, because he also tries to live by a code of conduct that many in his day think of as outdated. He devotes his life to the art of fencing and the code of honor that he believes goes along with the physical aspects of the art.

Don Jaime lives a solitary life. Besides his students and his regular attendance at his discussion group's gatherings at Café Progreso, Don Jaime has little or no social interaction. His participation in a discussion group cannot really be called participation because Don Jaime does not take part in the discussion. rather he attends because he enjoys the spectacle of seeing others passionately argue their points of view. Don Jaime does not care about politics. His entire life is devoted to the study of his chosen art, fencing.

Don Jaime's residence and fencing gallery is a reflection of his persona. His residence is as much like a museum as a home. He inherited his fencing master's collection of weapons, and he displays them along with his diplomas from many years ago.

Dona Adela de Otero

Throughout much of the novel the reader and the principle characters know very little about Dona Adela beyond her physical description. She is strikingly beautiful. She is in her mid twenties with black hair, and she is tall for a woman. She has a thin build, and her violet eyes are captivating. She has a scar at the right corner of her mouth.

Beyond her appearance, one of the few things Don Jaime is able to learn is that she is remarkably skilled at fencing, which is an unusual skill for a woman of that time. Though she does not tell Don Jaime where she comes from, he detects a slight foreign accent, and he notices that she has been trained in the Italian style of fencing.

Dona Adela resists answering any questions that Don Jaime asks, but he can tell from some of her reactions to his statements that she has experienced pain and heartbreak in life. However, these moments when she seems warm and understanding are mixed with moments when she gives subtle clues to a cold, even cruel, nature.



Don Jaime is not the only character to be kept in the dark about Dona Adela's history. Until the climax of the novel when Dona Adela gives some vague description of her past, no one knows who she is or where she came from. She seems to have moved to Madrid three months prior to the beginning of the novel, yet during that time she has made no effort to make social contacts.

Luis de Ayala-Velate y Vallespin, the Marques de los Alumbre

This man is a notorious philanderer and hedonist. He is also one of the best swordsmen in Madrid, and that skill serves him well because he has a tendency to get into trouble with jealous husbands. He is both student and friend of Don Jaime.

Chief of Police Jenaro Campillo

This man initially comes across as crass and uncaring about matters of death. He has seen murder victims so much that he is able to make jokes as if it is all in a day's work. Despite his abrasive manner, he takes a liking to Don Jaime.

Agapito Carceles

This boisterous character is a defrocked priest who occasionally finds work writing vitriolic pieces for minor newspapers. He never misses an opportunity to angrily discuss politics, though he seems more intent on being shocking than offering sound arguments. He also attempts to write poetry and plays, but these are generally plagiarized.

Marcelino Romero

This man is a mild mannered music teacher. He once had dreams of becoming famous in the field of music but is now a sad and defeated man.

Lucia

This is Dona Adela's maid. She is roughly the same height and build as Dona Adela.

Lucien de Montespan

In his day, Lucien de Montespan was the finest fencing master in Europe. He was also the teacher and mentor of Don Jaime.



Jean de Rolandi

This man offered fencing instruction without the approval of the Paris Academy of Arms. He faced Don Jaime in a duel and died.

General Juan Prim

Though he does not appear directly in the novel, Juan Prim is mentioned continually. During the time of the novel, Prim led the Glorious Revolution and deposed the Spanish monarch.



Objects/Places

Madrid, Spain

This is the main setting of the novel. During the time of the novel, the 1860s, the Glorious Revolution occurred.

Foil

This is the most common weapon used in fencing. Those used for competition have blunted ends, but foils meant to be used as weapons lack the blunted end and are lethal instruments.

Plastron

This is the protective jacket worn by fencers. It takes its name from a part of the shell of turtles.

Two-hundred-escudo thrust

This is a fencing technique that Don Jaime invented. He teaches it to worthy students for a fee.

Paris Academy of Arms

At the time that Don Jaime attends, this is the most prestigious fencing academy in Europe.

Civil Guard

This police force is in charge of combating the anti-monarchy demonstrations.

Café Progreso

This is where Don Jaime meets with his discussion group. The men have coffee and toast and argue about politics.



Lefauchaux revolver

This is a French pistol designed by Casimir Lefauchaux. A former student gave one as a gift to Don Jaime, and he arms himself with it near the close of the novel.

Palacio de Villaflores

This is where the home of Don Luis is located.

Paris, France

This is the location of Don Jaime's primary residence during his years of self-imposed exile from Spain.



Themes

Eternal Foreigner or Resident Anachronism

Multiple characters refer to Don Jaime as being a charming and unusual person. Both Don Luis and Dona Adela compare Don Jaime to a foreigner who is eternally unfamiliar with the land he inhabits. Chief of Police Campillo says there is something innocent or naïve about Don Jaime. Certainly Don Jaime has intentionally tried to ignore unfolding political events, and he wishes he could ignore the replacement of his beloved art of fighting with blades with technological advancements in firearms. However it may be an oversimplification to say that Don Jaime is innocent or naïve. It may be that Don Jaime is more aware of history than any of the other characters, and he has made a conscious choice to live according to a code. In fact, it may be the other characters who have blindly found themselves in the present.

Other characters marvel at Don Jaime's lack of interest in political events, but what they misinterpret as ignorance may be more likely a lack of interest. Don Jaime has lived longer than the other principle characters, and his knowledge of history is both first hand and through education. When Romero's attitude and passive attitude move Don Jaime to anger, he reveals part of his knowledge of history, and that knowledge reveals an unexpected level of cynicism.

Perhaps Don Jaime explains it best during a conversation with Don Luis. Don Jaime says that one reaches a point in life where one has to make a choice. After that choice is made, for right or wrong, the only thing one can do is adhere to the decision. Don Jaime has made such a choice, and the fact that others consider his way of life charmingly anachronistic says as much about them as it does about Don Jaime.

Staying Focused Amid the Chaos

Don Jaime has an incredible ability to stay focused on his art despite what is going on around him. While his country is undergoing what some call a revolution, and some fear will erupt into a full-blown civil war, Don Jaime cares only about his dedication to fencing. Throughout the novel many characters comment on this admirable ability of Don Jaime's, and each time he dismisses it. He says it is not so much a talent as a choice. Always he attributes it to something such as age or lack of any other options, always taking a humble stance on the issue. Despite Don Jaime's lack of boasting or even acknowledgement of the talent, it is a truly admirable and amazing gift.

Once while teaching his regular students, a noisy and possibly violent protest occurs in the street outside Don Jaime's residence. His students are drawn to the windows to see the clash between the Civil Guard and the demonstrators. Neighbors shout from their balconies. The students' and the neighbors' response to the civil unrest and the prospect of even worse public disorder is understandable. What is extraordinary is Don



Jaime's response. He closes the window shutters and orders his students to return to fencing practice.

Certainly the most extreme example of Don Jaime's incredible abilities to stay on his quest occurs immediately after the climax of the novel.

A Dying Art and Changing Times

One of the ever-present ideas in *The Fencing Master* is that times are changing, and Don Jaime's art is a dying one. From the actual person of Don Jaime to his occupation to the attitude of all people around him to the volatile political atmosphere, everything indicates that times are changing. Often Don Jaime has to answer comments that swords are no longer relevant in any way except as a pastime or sport because firearms have made them obsolete. Don Jaime's answer that few seem to understand is that there is more to fencing than the objects, the swords. To Don Jaime, fencing also includes a philosophy and code of conduct, and the modern world will suffer if those concepts are lost. It is to this philosophy that Don Jaime dedicates his life, though few people near him understand.

This concept is not limited to Don Jaime's eighteenth century European world. A few years later across the Atlantic Ocean, some people would begin to lament the taming of the American frontier. In a time closer to the era of the modern reader many have looked upon the onset of the digital age with apprehension and longed for what they perceived to be a simpler time.

The conclusion that the novel seems to come to, and one that Don Jaime embodies, is that just because something or someone is old does not mean it or he is no longer useful.



Style

Point of View

The point of view in *The Fencing Master* is from a third person limited narrator. The narrator has access to Don Jaime's thoughts, and it is from Don Jaime's perspective that the story is told. Don Jaime's perspective dramatically affects our perception of the story.

Early in the novel we begin to feel and sympathize with Don Jaime's concerns about aging. We also feel his lament over his beloved art becoming thought of as a quaint old pastime in the modern age. These two feelings combine to give us the sense that time is running out in terms of Don Jaime's life's goal, the discovery of an unstoppable thrust. On the one hand Don Jaime is racing time in relation to his own physical abilities. Every day he gets a little older, and every day he is less and less able to perform the athleticism necessary in a fighting art. On the other hand, every day that passes is another day that fencing becomes less important to people other than Don Jaime. In this respect, Don Jaime is in a race to discover his masterstroke while there are some people left who still care about fencing.

The perspective of Don Jaime also governs how we feel about the unfolding political situation. Don Jaime has never cared about politics. Often times he gets frustrated and impatient at having to hear about something he does not care about. This sense of frustration translates to the reader who faced with having to read through detailed descriptions of the political turmoil of Spain in 1866 becomes impatient for the continuation of the story of Don Jaime.

Setting

The physical setting of the novel is Madrid, Spain. Of greater importance than the physical setting is the setting of time. As far as physical setting, the story could have likely taken place in any major metropolitan area, certainly any major European city, but the story could have taken place only at one period in time.

During the 1860s most modern militaries of the world still issued blade weapons, whether they be cavalry sabers or somewhat shorter swords that officers could wear and use. However at this time the focus was increasingly on the use of firearms. Rapid advancements in firearm technology were occurring at this time, and each of these innovations made swords and the need to know how to use them less important. Only in this setting of time could the story of a fencing master tied up in a murder mystery take place.

Though not crucial to the plot, the setting of 1868 Madrid provides a colorful backdrop to the story. In the fall of 1868 the Glorious Revolution took place. Some Spanish military leaders joined together to depose Queen Isabella II. Every character other than Don



Jaime is preoccupied with news of the changing political situation, but the protagonist just wants to focus on his art. Had the novel been set in a less volatile time, the nature of Don Jaime as a man of single-minded dedication to his art would have been more difficult to portray.

Language and Meaning

The Language of *The Fencing Master* is at times clear and precise, just like successful and efficient fencing techniques. At other times it is vague and obscure, just like the uncertain political situation in the fall of 1868. And at other times the language captures the longing and loneliness of a man, his solitude, and his devotion to a dying art. The language of the novel is part of what makes it such a joy to read, and this is especially unusual for what is essentially a murder mystery.

One of the aspects of the language of *The Fencing Master* is that it is a translated work. The novel was originally published in Spanish in 1988 and then translated to English and published ten years later. Often times with a translated work the translator has to depart from literal translation in order to preserve the spirit of the original work.

Another aspect of the novel that affects the language is the art of fencing. At times the text includes highly technical descriptions of fencing movements. Most of the language used to describe these movements is not part of our everyday modern vocabulary. At the end of the novel the translator acknowledges those that offered assistance in understanding and employing fencing terminology. The fencing terminology is not so dense as to force a reader to constantly have a dictionary on hand, but rather it is used in such a way as to give the reader an appreciation of what a highly complex art fencing is.

Structure

The structure of the novel *The Fencing Master* is overall linear and chronological. The book includes a short preface and eight chapters. Each of the eight chapters has a title and some introductory text. Both the titles and the introductory text pertain to the marital art of fencing. Each of the chapter titles is a description of a type of fencing match or a particular technique used in fencing. Each bit of introductory text, usually just a few lines, consists of a description or explanation of fencing doctrine or a particular fencing movement. The titles and the passages of introductory text always have dual meanings. On the surface they describe an element of fencing, but beyond that they are also a description of what is to come in the chapter, using fencing as a metaphor for the unfolding plot.

The linear plot adds to the element of suspense. By seeing things in order and as they are seen by the protagonist, Don Jaime Astarloa, we the readers are as deeply involved, and sometimes confused, by the mystery. One crucial chance act that determines the outcome of the story occurs much earlier in the novel. Likely the audience has forgotten the occurrence until Don Jaime freezes in wide-eyed surprise.

Plot events like this have a greater impact in a linear structure where sufficient time has elapsed between the event and our learning of its significance.



Quotes

Chapter I, p. 10

Don Jaime shook his head, ironic and indulgent. "Fencing is like holy communion," he said with a smile. "You must come to it in a fit state of body and soul. If you break that supreme law, then punishment is bound to follow."

Chapter I, p. 23

Despite their frequent disputes, their political differences, their disparate moods, the five felt a complex solidarity that, had it ever been expressed openly, would have been hotly denied by all of them but that might be likened to the huddling together for warmth of solitary creatures.

Chapter III, p. 76

Don Jaime stiffened proudly. Perhaps, as the young woman had just said, it had not been her intention to offend him, but nevertheless she had. "Ours is a dying art, madam," he replied. "Duels with foils are now rare events, given that the pistol is so much easier to handle and does not require such rigorous discipline. Fencing has become a frivolous pastime."

Chapter IV, p. 95

"That's why it is so exciting to follow the details from the sidelines, as I do. What can I say? When it comes to politics and women, you have to taste all the sauces, but you must never let either one or the other give you indigestion."

Chapter IV, pp. 96-97

Don Jaime turned the palms of his hands up in a gesture of resignation. "You can get used to anything, especially when you have no option. If you have to pay, you pay; it's just a question of attitude. At a particular moment in your life you adopt a certain position, whether mistaken or not. You decide to be like this or that. You burn your boats, and then all you can do is defend that position, come what may."

Chapter IV, p. 107

As for what Adela de Otero might be thinking at that moment, he had absolutely no desire to know. However, one certainty floated in the air; that night, at the end of a conversation that should have brought them closer, something had been broken between them, definitely and forever.

Chapter IV, pp. 119-120

"Don't make me laugh, Don Marcelino. Christianity was sustained by Constantine's legions and by the swords of the Crusaders, and the Catholic Church by the Inquisition's bonfires, by the galleys at Lepanto and by the Hapsburgs' infantrymen."

Chapter V, p. 132

"You must remember that the salutes in quarte and tierce are for the seconds and the witnesses. One assumes that such events will normally take place among the wellborn."



We can hardly object if two men insist on killing each other over a point of honor, can we? But we can at least demand that they do so in the politest way possible."

Chapter VII, p. 187

The puppet refused to play anymore; he had broken free of the strings. Now he would act on his own initiative; that was why he still had said nothing to the police. With the confusion gone, he was filled instead by a cold anger, by an immense, lucid, calm hatred.

Chapter VII, p. 199

He wondered how much longer he could hold out. Not long, of course, but this wasn't, after all, such a bad way to die. Much better than, in a few years' time, fading away in some home for the infirm, with the nuns diddling him out of his last meager savings stashed away under the bed and with him cursing a God in whom he had never quite been able to believe.

Chapter VIII, p. 209

Death was the worst thing that could happen to him, and he was prepared for that. Indeed, he thought with a sense of profound satisfaction, not only was he prepared, he had already faced it unflinchingly the previous night, engaged in a seemingly hopeless battle. The memory of how he had acquitted himself made him half-close his eyes, as if his pride had received a gentle caress. The solitary old wolf had shown that he still had a few teeth to bite with.

Chapter VIII, p. 238

"Of all the people in this drama, Senor Astarloa, you have been the most credulous, the most likable, and the most worthy of pity."



Topics for Discussion

Each chapter has a title, and each title refers to fencing. After having read the chapters, can you find meanings for the titles beyond the practice of fencing?

Don Jaime continually refers to himself as old and speaks as if death is only a few years away. Considering that Don Jaime is fifty-six, this must seem strange to us today. Research the life expectancy of a male in Europe during the 1860s, and discuss how this information changes your opinion of Don Jaime's remarks regarding his age.

The Fencing Master is a work of historical fiction. For many readers the references to the politics of Spain in 1860 might be confusing. How much knowledge of nineteenth century Spanish history is necessary to understand and enjoy the murder mystery aspect of the novel?

On multiple occasions Don Jaime is referred to as an "eternal foreigner," or a foreigner everywhere he goes. What do these statements mean?

In addition to the chapter titles, each chapter contains text at the opening that includes explanation or instruction about fencing. Usually it is not clear how these openings relate to the chapter until after the chapter is read. After having read the chapters, how do each of these openings relate to the events in their respective chapters?

Don Jaime repeatedly speaks of the art of fencing as noble and the use of firearms as crude. Discuss some of the reasons why Don Jaime is able to rationalize use of a pistol late in the novel.

Don Jaime is immediately smitten with the antagonist, yet the reader probably sees cause for concern that Don Jaime does not. Discuss some of the clues that Don Jaime misses because of his attraction to Dona Adela.