

The Great Train Robbery Study Guide

The Great Train Robbery by Michael Crichton

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

The Great Train Robbery Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Part 1, Preparations: Chapters 1-8.....	5
Part 1, Preparations: Chapters 9-16.....	7
Part 2, The Keys: Chapters 17-28.....	9
Part 3, Delays and Difficulties: Chapters 29-41.....	11
Part 4, The Great Train Robbery: Chapters 42-46.....	13
Part 5, Arrest and Trial: Chapters 47-52.....	15
Characters.....	16
Objects/Places.....	19
Themes.....	21
Style.....	23
Quotes.....	25
Topics for Discussion.....	26



Plot Summary

The Great Train Robbery is a novel by bestselling author Michael Crichton. The novel is a fictionalized telling of the true story of a famous train robbery in England in 1855. Edward Pierce is an apparent gentleman with a mysterious past who brings together a group of unlikely criminals in order to pull off the biggest lay of their time. With much planning and strategizing, Pierce pulls together the crime with finesse. This is a crime that should have resulted in a mystery on par with Jack the Ripper. However, the discovery of the unhappy girlfriend of one of the cohorts results in the arrest of everyone involved. On the verge of conviction, Edward Pierce disappears. The Great Train Robbery is written in the style of a documentary, giving a feel of reality to a novel that is both exciting and amusing, while leaving the reader curious enough to research the real crime on which the novel is based.

Edward Pierce watches as a man is thrown from a train. The man had attempted to steal gold headed to France to pay English soldiers fighting in the Crimean War. Pierce plans to do the same thing, but he plans to go about it in a much smarter way. Pierce enlists the help of Robert Agar, a screwsman, to help make copies of keys that will open the safes in which the gold is transported each month. To do this, Pierce must first learn the location of each key. An acquaintance, Henry Fowler, works for the bank that finances the payments and likes to brag about the importance of his job. One night, Fowler tells a group of gentlemen, of which Pierce is a part, that two of the keys are kept at the railway station, one is kept by the bank's president, Mr. Trent, and the last one Mr. Fowler wears around his own neck at all times.

Pierce and Agar stake out the railway station to try to figure out a way to make copies of the two keys kept there. At first it seems impossible because the office is always occupied during the day. Pierce suggests they do it at night, but Agar must break into the office between rounds of the local police, a time span of less than ten minutes. Agar suggests he might need the assistance of a snakesman, someone who could slip into the room and unlock the door and the cabinet where the keys are kept before Agar goes inside to copy the keys. Agar suggests a man named Clean Willy. However, Clean Willy is currently in prison.

At the same time Pierce and Agar are staking out the railway station, Pierce is watching Mr. Trent. Pierce needs to know where Trent keeps his key. After befriending Trent's employees he decides that Trent does not keep the key at work. However, Pierce cannot simply break into Trent's house to search it because there are too many places where a key might be hidden. For this reason, Pierce searches for a way to befriend Trent and finally bonds with him over a sport in which dogs are trained to kill rats quickly. Trent then introduces Pierce to his unmarried daughter, Elizabeth. As Pierce pretends to court Elizabeth, he continues to fish for information on the key and finally learns it is kept in the wine cellar.

Pierce and Agar break into Trent's house one night and search the wine cellar for the key. When they finally find it, Agar makes a careful copy of it and leave. A short time



later, Pierce sets up Mr. Fowler with a prostitute whom Fowler believes will cure him of a venereal disease. While Fowler is with the girl, Agar makes a copy of his key as well. A short time later, Pierce helps break Clean Willy out of prison.

Agar manages to make copies of the two keys in the railway station. A short time later, a guard is paid off to turn a blind eye to Agar's actions on the train. Agar takes his copies of the keys and refines them, ensuring that they will open the safes on the day in question. However, before they can put their plan in action, Clean Willy goes to the police. Pierce is able to mislead the police, but when a case of wine is stolen off the same train that they plan to rob, the security is changed. The van in which the safes are located is locked at the train station and not opened until the gold is to be moved. Hence, Agar is disguised as a corpse and loaded onto the appropriate van to get access to the safes. Pierce must crawl across the top of the train to unlock the van from the outside in order to allow Agar to throw the gold overboard to a waiting accomplice.

After the successful robbery, the cohorts agree to wait two years to divide up the money. In the meantime, Agar is sent to jail for bad checks and his girlfriend is arrested for robbery. In order to get a deal and a lighter sentence, the girlfriend tells the police about Agar's role in the theft. Agar is questioned and eventually tells everything he knows. Pierce is arrested and the three men, Pierce, Agar, and the railway guard, are all put on trial. Pierce announces his intention to escape and a short time later, does exactly that.



Part 1, Preparations: Chapters 1-8

Part 1, Preparations: Chapters 1-8 Summary

This book is a fictionalized telling of a true story. In 1855, gold intended to pay soldiers fighting in the Crimean War was stolen while in route to France. After some confusion, it was decided the gold had been stolen while locked in two safes on a train. Two years later, three men were tried for the crime. The robbery was a sensational news story at the time because the train was a relatively new mode of travel and the crime one of the most daring of the age.

In Chapter 1, a man wrestles with a guard on a train until the man falls to his death on the side of the train tracks. A gentleman watches from a distance before calmly leaving the area.

In Chapter 2, Edward Pierce appears to be a gentleman, but no one knows much about him or from where his wealth comes from. There is some thought that he might come from a wealthy background or that he might have had connections with the criminal underworld.

In Chapter 3, Robert Agar is a screwsman, a man who makes copies of keys for the purpose of committing crimes. Agar is approached in spring of 1854 by Pierce to help him in the committing of a crime. However, Pierce is silent about the nature of the crime.

In Chapter 4, at a dinner one night, Mr. Henry Fowler, the general manager of Huddleston & Bradford, a bank that funds gold to the soldiers fighting in the Crimean War, brags about his role in the gold transfers. Fowler describes how the gold is placed in two Chubb safes aboard the train in its journey to France to which there are two keys each. Fowler then tells the group how two of the keys are kept at the railway station, while the president of the bank, Mr. Trent, has one and Fowler himself has the other.

In Chapter 5, Pierce and Agar stake out the railway station at London Bridge for several days to try to find a way to gain access to the keys kept in the main office. The office is always occupied during the day, so Pierce and Agar agree that the break in will have to take place at night. However, after observing briefly the night time routine, they discover that a cop walks past the office every five minutes. Agar says he can do it, but he needs a snakesman to break in ahead of him and unlike both the door and the cabinet. Agar suggests Clean Willy, but Clean Willy is in prison.

In Chapter 6, Pierce begins to watch Mr. Trent and speak to a few of his employees. Pierce begins to form a picture of the strict employer and decides that he more than likely does not keep the key in the office.

In Chapter 7, Pierce observes Teddy Burke steal a woman's purse on the street without the woman being any the wiser. Pierce hires Burke to make it appear that he is attempting to do the same to Mr. Trent, but he wants Trent to be aware of the attempt.



In Chapter 8, Pierce travels to a section of London known as the Holy Land that is overflowing with poverty and criminals. Pierce contacts Maggie, a girl he believes is Clean Willy's girlfriend. Pierce pays the girl to go to Clean Willy and tell him he wants him to break out of prison.

Part 1, Preparations: Chapters 1-8 Analysis

In these early chapters of the novel, the author introduces the conflict that will propel the novel. Pierce, a gentleman with unknown origins, has decided he wants to steal gold headed for France to pay the English soldiers fighting in the Crimean War. To do this, Pierce knows that he will need the help of several other criminals, including a screwsman who can make copies of the keys required to open the safes. Pierce enlists the help of Agar, a screwsman who has, up to this point, been involved in multiple small crimes, but never anything as big as what Pierce plans. Agar dislikes Pierce's silence on the nature of the crime, but goes along for the promise of a big pay off.

Pierce is an unknown, a strange man who seems to have a great deal of money and is accepted in high society. It is unknown why he would be interested in such a crime, but the author suggests that he might be a part of the criminal underground and might be involved in this crime for the benefit of his criminal associates.

The setting of this novel is of great importance to the plot, therefore the author takes a great deal of time to describe his setting. The time period is important because this is a time when the railroads were still a relatively new thing to the Victorian people. The trains were slow moving, cumbersome things when they first came along and the tracks and stations were built without much concern for the convenience of the passengers or the residents of the cities where they were built. Not long before the period in which the novel takes place, the trains began moving at a faster speed, adding new problems to the people who lived in this period and still did not understand the impact of this mode of travel on the people or nature.

The novel is told with something of an authorial voice as the author tells his story with something of a documentary feel. The author repeatedly references transcripts of a trial that would take place after the events being discussed in the plot at this point in the novel. This gives the novel more of a nonfiction feel despite the dialogue and scenes skillfully created in some of the chapters.



Part 1, Preparations: Chapters 9-16

Part 1, Preparations: Chapters 9-16 Summary

In Chapter 9, Pierce and Agar watch as Teddy Burke makes his play on Mr. Trent. After what appears to be an attempted pickpocket, Mr. Trent pats his side coat pocket, convincing Pierce that he keeps the key at home and only has it on his body on the day of the money transfer. Later, while watching Mr. Trent, Pierce sees him go home and pick up one of his dogs before leaving again. Pierce sees this as a chance to finally make Mr. Trent's acquaintance and hopefully learning which room of his home he keeps the key in.

In Chapter 10, Pierce goes to a kennel and asks to buy a made dog, a dog that has been trained to fight to the death. Pierce purchases the dog, but leaves it in the custody of the kennel.

In Chapter 11, Pierce witnesses Mr. Trent place his dog in a fight against a group of rats. The objective is for the dog to kill a specific number of rats in a specific amount of time. The dog fails and Mr. Trent loses the money he bet. Afterward, Pierce speaks with Mr. Trent, telling him he has a made dog but he cannot care for it because of his business concerns. When Mr. Trent hears this, he offers to buy the dog. Then Mr. Trent invites Pierce to dinner to introduce Pierce to his daughter, Elizabeth.

In Chapter 12, Elizabeth Trent is an unattractive woman who is in her mid-twenties, a young woman whose chances of making a good marriage get smaller each day. Therefore, when her father introduces her to Pierce, and he seems taken with her, it gives both Elizabeth and her parents hope.

In Chapter 13, Pierce, Agar, and Barlow, Pierce's chauffeur, and two women, all arrive at a boarding house near Newgate Prison to watch a hanging. However, their true purpose is to rescue Clean Willy after he escapes Newgate by climbing over the rock walls. The women clean Clean Willy's multiple wounds from the sharp rock and dress him as a woman to sneak him out of the boardinghouse.

In Chapter 14, a body found floating in the Thames a month later makes police believe that Clean Willy died in his escape attempt from Newgate.

In Chapter 15, Clean Willy is taken into Pierce's home where he hides out, first to wait for his wounds to heal, then to wait for his hair to grow out so that no one will realize he is an escaped prisoner.

In Chapter 16, Pierce has been courting Elizabeth Trent and as part of that, accompanies her horseback riding on Rotten Row. One day Elizabeth mentions that her father always goes into the wine cellar the morning of the gold transfers.



Part 1, Preparations: Chapters 9-16 Analysis

Pierce finally finds a way to get to Mr. Trent, first through Mr. Trent's interest in dog fighting and later through his daughter. Pierce needs to know exactly where in the Trent home Mr. Trent keeps the key for the Chubb safes because the Victorians are known to have had many trinkets made expressly to hide things, therefore there would have been too many places to look to search a house for something as small as a key. For this reason, Pierce pretends interest in Mr. Trent's daughter so that he might get close enough to learn the secret of Mr. Trent's hiding place. In the end, Pierce is successful.

At this point in the novel, several things have come into place for Pierce. Pierce knows where all four of the keys are and has begun a plan to begin getting copies of them. Agar is still in the dark, but goes along with each step of the plan as though he is a part of the whole thing. Pierce breaks Clean Willy out of prison even though the prison where Willy was being held is known for its strange architecture that makes escape all but impossible. Now everything is in place and it is time for Pierce and his crew to begin the next phase of the crime.



Part 2, The Keys: Chapters 17-28

Part 2, The Keys: Chapters 17-28 Summary

In Chapter 17, Mr. Henry Fowler approaches Pierce and asks him in help of procuring a virgin. Mr. Fowler has a venereal disease and it was believed at the time that sex with a virgin would cure the illness.

In Chapter 18, Pierce's mistress, Miss Miriam, creates a distraction so that Agar and Pierce can sneak into the Trent home. In the wine cellar, Pierce and Agar search for nearly an hour before finding the key. Agar quickly makes two copies of the key before they sneak out of the house again during a disturbance created by Barlow.

In Chapter 19, Pierce arranges a virgin for Fowler. While Fowler is occupied, Agar makes a copy of his key.

In Chapter 20, Pierce and Agar learn that the railway has hired a security guard to sit outside the railway station office all night. Pierce arranges for a skipper, someone who can sleep in odd places, to be placed in a crate and the crate delivered to the railway station. The man is to observe the guard and report back. However, the news is not good. They learn that the man only leaves his station once a night, for just over a minute, each night. Agar is worried, but agrees to try to copy the keys in that amount of time.

In Chapter 21, a cop is attacked in the middle of the night and his uniform stolen.

In Chapter 22, Pierce hires Andrew Taggart to procure a leopard for him.

In Chapter 23, Pierce hires a kid to attempt to rob Miss Miriam in the train station. The kid is then to run into the railway office and break a window there. The kid is then apprehended by Barlow, wearing the stolen cop's uniform.

In Chapter 24, Clean Willy is called to Pierce's house where he witnesses Agar and Pierce practicing the lay. Clean Willy is then instructed to break into the railway office that night through a broken window, unlock a cabinet and the door with two picklocks, wait for Agar to do his job, then lock them again and leave.

In Chapter 25, Clean Willy gets into the railway office and does what he was told as quietly as possible, then settles down to wait. At the same time, Agar is hiding in the station, watching the cop and the guard. Pierce comes into the station, pretending to be a drunk Irishman, and is led away by the cop. Then, when the guard goes to take his bathroom break, Agar rushes to the office and goes inside. There are multiple keys in the cabinet, so Agar has to guess which to copy. Then one of the molds break and Agar has to make another. Finally Agar rushes out, barely making it back to his hiding place before the guard returns.



In Chapter 26, Pierce approaches a guard who works on the train in question in the van in question. Pierce offers him a bribe to simply turn a blind eye to a man who will tip him off to his purpose with a code phrase.

In Chapter 27, Pierce orders five thousand LC shot from a local eel-skinner. The man is shocked by the size of the order, unaware that Pierce has made similar orders at multiple other shops.

In Chapter 28, a leopard is loaded onto the train in the same car where the Chubb safes are located. As soon as the train is on its way, the trainer for the leopard pulls out grease and four keys and begins adjusting them to the locks on the Chubb safes. The man is Agar and when he uses the code phrase, the guard, Burgess, sits back and simply watches.

Part 2, The Keys: Chapters 17-28 Analysis

In these chapters, Pierce and his cohorts use multiple techniques to acquire copies of the keys that they need to steal the gold. Pierce and Agar break into Trent's house and copy the key in his wine cellar while two of their cohorts create diversions outside. Later, Pierce easily manipulates Mr. Fowler into taking off his key so that a copy can be made of it. The hard part is getting the keys from the railway station office, but Agar manages to do it with a carefully planned and executed plan.

These chapters illustrate Pierce's intelligence as it shows how he expertly copied each of the keys without anyone but his cohorts being aware of it. At the same time, Pierce goes to a great deal of expense to pull off his preparations. This again suggests that Pierce is a wealthy man and he has access to a great deal of money, making it curious why he would commit such a crime. At the same time, the reader can see what an accomplishment such a crime would be and how an intelligent man like Pierce could pull it off. Perhaps he is doing it just for the thrill. Either way, the crime is set to proceed, foreshadowing the moment of truth.



Part 3, Delays and Difficulties: Chapters 29-41

Part 3, Delays and Difficulties: Chapters 29-41 Summary

In Chapter 29, as Pierce is planning the date for the robbery, he learns that the safes have been removed from the train and returned to Chubb for repairs. Pierce worries that Agar damaged the locks and made the impending robbery known.

In Chapter 30, Miss Miriam goes to Chubb pretending to be a wealthy woman looking to buy a safe. Miss Miriam convinces Mr. Chubb to take her to workroom where the safes are built so she can see examples of safes. When she sees the two safes from the train, Miss Miriam pretends these are the safes she wants and learns they are having their undercarriage mounting pins replaced.

In Chapter 31, Pierce gets a note from Clean Willy requesting a meeting. Pierce immediately thinks that Clean Willy has gone to the police. Pierce meets with him anyway and Clean Willy tries to convince Pierce he simply needs more money. However, as Pierce leaves, he becomes aware of two undercover cops following him.

In Chapter 32, Pierce is walking in the street when he runs into Miss Elizabeth Trent. Elizabeth confronts Pierce on the fact that he has not been in touch with her for weeks. Pierce tells Elizabeth he has been out of the country. Pierce then tells Elizabeth that when she did not respond to a letter he sent her, he thought she was no longer interested in him so he became engaged to another woman.

In Chapter 33, the second in command at Scotland Yard, Edward Harranby, speaks with his assistant, Jonathan Sharp, about the suspicions that Pierce is planning a huge heist.

In Chapter 34, Clean Willy is murdered in an abandoned building.

In Chapter 35, Pierce speaks to Agar about Clean Willy's betrayal and decides to send the cops in the wrong direction by convincing them he is planning a heist in Greenwich. Pierce goes to see Chokee Bill, a pawnshop owner, and asks for five guns. Pierce is careful to give Chokee Bill the impression he is planning a crime in Greenwich the following Thursday.

In Chapter 36, as expected, Chokee Bill goes straight to Scotland Yard and tells what he knows about Pierce.

In Chapter 37, Pierce informs Agar and Miss Miriam that everything is back on schedule.



In Chapter 38, a few days before Pierce and his gang are supposed to rob the gold, a professional soldier was supposed to pay a gambling debt with an expensive case of wine. However, because he did not want to lose the wine, the man shipped an empty crate. When the crate was opened, the man claimed it was stolen while on the train.

In Chapter 39, Pierce is dining with Miss Miriam when Burgess comes with Agar. Burgess tells Pierce that because of a recent robbery on another train, the security procedures have changed. No one is now allowed to ride in the van where the safes are. The loading and unloading of the van is overseen by the dispatcher's nephew. Finally, the van is locked from the outside with a padlock and is not reopened until it reaches Folkestone. Pierce, however, refuses to change his plans.

In Chapter 40, on the morning of May 23rd, the dispatcher's nephew is confronted with a mourning woman. The woman is upset that her brother's coffin must be inspected before it is boarded onto the train. Before the dispatcher's nephew can inspect the coffin, the bell mechanism on top rings. The dispatcher, his nephew, and the grieving woman quickly open the coffin, but it clear by the smell and the appearance of the body that he is long dead. When the woman mentions that her brother died of cholera, the dispatcher quickly orders the coffin closed and boarded on the train.

In Chapter 41, as Pierce is boarding the train, he pretends to befriend the grieving woman who is actually his lover, Miss Miriam. As they make their way to his compartment, they run into Mr. Fowler who is on board the train to unlock the safes when they arrive in Folkestone. Pierce needs to get rid of Mr. Fowler, so he lights a cigar and Miss Miriam pretends to be offended by the smell. Mr. Fowler quickly takes Miss Miriam to his compartment, leaving Pierce alone.

Part 3, Delays and Difficulties: Chapters 29-41 Analysis

In the weeks before the planned robbery of the Crimean gold, several things happen that make the whole situation more difficult. First Clean Willy goes to the police. Thankfully Willy did not know very much about the overall plan. This reminds the reader of Agar's frustration at not knowing the whole plan and why Pierce made this decision. It turns out it was probably a good choice on Pierce's part.

Pierce, who has shown a great deal of intelligence in planning this entire crime, comes up with a good solution to his current problem. Pierce manages to mislead the police and he has his man kill Clean Willy so that he can no longer be a problem. Pierce solves this problem simply enough, but then learns of more trouble. The new security measures implemented by the railway company seem overwhelming, but again Pierce manages to overcome them by disguising Agar as a corpse. It is an interesting turn of events, foreshadowing a successful robbery in the next section of the novel.



Part 4, The Great Train Robbery: Chapters 42-46

Part 4, The Great Train Robbery: Chapters 42-46 Summary

In Chapter 42, once the train is underway, Agar makes his way out of the coffin. As Burgess watches, Agar begins to switch the gold with lead shot provided by Pierce.

In Chapter 43, Pierce slips out the window of his compartment and begins to scale the top of the train to the van where the gold shipment and Agar await. Once at the proper van, Pierce slips a rope down a slapper designed for ventilation and Agar pushes it back up through another. Pierce uses this as an anchor point as he hangs off the side of the van to unlock the padlock.

In Chapter 44, once Pierce is inside the van, Agar points out that walking in the high wind on top of the train has ruined his clothing. Pierce has not planned for this, so he forces Agar to take off his clothes so he can wear them. They then throw the gold overboard so that Pierce's chauffeur can pick it up. Then Pierce makes his way back to his compartment after relocking the door.

In Chapter 45, when he arrives in his compartment, Pierce tries to remove the soot from his face and hands, but it is difficult without water. When Pierce runs into Mr. Fowler, Pierce is worried Mr. Fowler will notice his change of clothes. However, all Mr. Fowler notices is that Pierce looks grey, advising him to see a doctor.

In Chapter 46, when the safes arrive in France and are opened, they are shocked to find the gold missing. There is some miscommunication before either side realizes the impact of what has happened. Then there is some playing of the blame game before it is finally decided that the robbery took place on board the train. It is then that the robbery hits the papers worldwide and several people are accused, including a gang in New York City, only to later be proven innocent. By fall however, interest wanes.

Part 4, The Great Train Robbery: Chapters 42-46 Analysis

This is the section of the book that the author has been leading up to from the first pages. In this section, Agar, pretending to be a corpse, escapes his coffin and switches the gold with lead shot. Pierce then unwittingly risks his life and climbs over the top of the train to unlock the van door so that they might throw the gold off the train before arriving at the next station. Pierce ruins his clothes and is covered in soot from the coal burning engines. However, this proves to be a good excuse when he again runs into his old friend and unwitting accomplice, Mr. Fowler.

The robbery appears to be a success. Politics postpone the search for the robbers, therefore Pierce and his cohorts seem to have gotten away with the impossible. This leaves the reader wondering how they get caught as was foreshadowed in the opening pages of the novel.



Part 5, Arrest and Trial: Chapters 47-52

Part 5, Arrest and Trial: Chapters 47-52 Summary

In Chapter 47, on Guy Fawkes day in 1856, a cop comes across a woman who is clearly stealing from a drunk and passed out man. The woman objects to her arrest, so the man takes her to his sergeant to watch over her while he gets a matron to search her. The woman tells the sergeant that she has information on the train robbery the year before.

In Chapter 48, Agar is brought in for questioning after his girlfriend tells authorities that he took part in the train robbery the year before. At first Agar refuses to tell authorities anything, but when they threaten to send him to Australia, he tells all he knows.

In Chapter 49, Pierce is arrested while watching a boxing match.

In Chapter 50, Pierce is interrogated multiple times, but he refuses to tell Harranby anything.

In Chapter 51, as Pierce, Agar, and Burgess come to trial, a massacre takes place in Cawnpore, India against British soldiers and later against their wives and children. For this reason, most of the press are more interested in the aftermath of the massacre than the trial against Pierce. Pierce even testifies in court that he has been planning an escape, but no one believes him.

In Chapter 52, Pierce concludes his testimony in August. A short time later, Pierce disappears from police custody with the help of his chauffeur. Agar is sent to Australia for his part in the robbery and dies a wealthy man in Sydney. The money from the robbery is never recovered.

Part 5, Arrest and Trial: Chapters 47-52 Analysis

A jealous and frustrated girlfriend of Agar is eventually the downfall of Pierce and his cohorts. However, Pierce continues to be one step ahead of the authorities. Pierce never tells the authorities anything and never tells anyone where the money is. Pierce then escapes. As the reader has suspected from the beginning of the novel, Pierce manages to come out on top despite everything.

The time period of the novel plays a very important role in the plot of this novel once again when the massacre in Cawnpore overshadows the arrest and trial of Pierce and his cohorts, allowing Pierce to slip away without anyone noticing him. It is a fascinating turn of luck for Pierce that could not have been better if he had planned it that way.



Characters

Edward Pierce

Edward Pierce is a gentleman with a mysterious past. No one knows for sure where Pierce came from or the origin of his apparent wealth. The author suggests that perhaps Pierce is a member of the criminal underground, groomed as a gentleman to carry out crimes in the open while hiding behind his apparent wealth.

Pierce is the mastermind behind the Great Train Robbery. Pierce puts together a team and he arranges for all the details. It is Pierce who finds where all the keys are kept and helps Agar gain access to each so that he can make copies. It is also Pierce who risks his own life to crawl over the outside of the moving train to unlock the van where the gold is kept so that Agar can throw the gold overboard to Pierce's waiting chauffeur.

In the end, Pierce is arrested because of a disgruntled girlfriend of Agar. Pierce is interrogated multiple times, but he never tells anything to investigators. Pierce goes on trial and tells the judge he is planning his escape, but no one actually believes him until Pierce disappears. No one ever learns what happened to the gold.

Robert Agar

Robert Agar grew up working in a match stick factory and this has caused him to be left with permanent lung damage. As an adult, Agar began working as a screwsman, a man who makes copies of keys for the purpose of criminal acts. Pierce hires Agar to work with him on the Great Train Robbery.

Agar does not know all the details of the crime Pierce is planning, therefore much of his work is done blindly. However, Agar manages to pull off an amazing feat when he makes several copies of the two keys kept in the railway office in less than a minute. Agar is then the one who is placed in the van with safes on the day of the actual robbery because he has the keys and can work quickly if there is a problem with the keys. In the end, however, it is Agar's girlfriend who rats out the group and causes them to go to jail. Agar is sent to Australia, but he becomes wealthy and leaves behind a family that includes a future mayor of Sydney.

Clean Willy

Clean Willy is a snakesman, someone who can slip into hard to reach places and unlock doors for their accomplices. Clean Willy is the best snakesman Agar is aware of and he tells Pierce that he needs Clean Willy for getting into the railway office. Clean Willy, however, is in Newgate Prison, a prison that is notoriously impossible to escape from. Pierce gets word to Clean Willy that he needs him to escape and Clean Willy does, scaling a rock wall that leaves his skin shredded. Pierce keeps Clean Willy in his



own home for weeks until he is sure that it is safe for Clean Willy to be on the streets again. In the end, Clean Willy does help Agar get to the keys in the railway office, but then he turns on Pierce by informing the police. Pierce orders the murder of Clean Willy.

Miss Miriam

Miss Miriam is Pierce's mistress. Miss Miriam helps Pierce in his plan at several different points in the robbery. Miss Miriam creates a distraction outside the Trent home so that Agar and Pierce can get inside to search for the key. Miss Miriam also provides a location for Mr. Fowler to go when he spends the night with a virgin to attempt to heal his sexually transmitted disease. Later, Miss Miriam pretends to be Agar's grieving sister when Pierce places him in a coffin in order to get him on board the van that transports the safes carrying gold.

Burgess

Burgess is the guard who travels on the train to watch over the safes that contain the gold. Burgess is a hardworking man with a hardworking wife and several children. However, Burgess and his wife do not make enough money to survive. Therefore, Burgess is willing to take a bribe when Pierce offers to pay him off for simply looking the other way. Burgess is a firsthand witness of the robbery. When Pierce and Agar are arrested, Burgess is charged as well even though he cannot be located initially. Burgess is sentence to two years in prison, but he dies of cholera before he is released.

Mr. Trent

Mr. Trent is the president of the bank that provides the gold for payment to the soldiers in the Crimean War. Trent is a strict man who lives his wife by a strict routine. However, Trent has one habit that seems to stand out from his usual routine, he likes to have his dog fight in rat fights. This is how Pierce manages to get close to Trent and how he learns where Trent hides one of the keys to the Chubb safes that contain the gold on the train.

Mr. Fowler

Mr. Fowler is the general manager of the bank that provides the gold for the payments to the soldiers in the Crimean War. For this reason, Mr. Fowler is trusted with one of the keys to the Chubb safes in which the gold travels. Mr. Fowler always keeps this key on his person, wearing it around his neck. However, Mr. Fowler brags about his place in this important shipment every month and it is from Mr. Fowler that Pierce learns about the four keys and their locations.



Elizabeth Trent

Elizabeth Trent is Mr. Trent's eldest daughter. Elizabeth is not an attractive woman, therefore she has had trouble finding a husband. At the same time, Elizabeth has been raised to be a wife and mother, therefore she is not prepared to get a job or do anything else. For this reason, Elizabeth and her parents jump at the apparent chance that Pierce represents when he comes to court Elizabeth. Elizabeth believes Pierce's interest to be genuine. Elizabeth gives Pierce information he needs about the key that her father keeps for the Crimean gold shipments and causes him to lose interest in her. Elizabeth eventually marries someone else.

Mr. Harranby

Mr. Harranby is the police detective who becomes interested in Pierce when Clean Willy tells the police about Pierce's plan for a big crime. Mr. Harranby has some of his detectives follow Pierce for a while, but Pierce manages to throw him off the scent by convincing another snitch that the crime is to take place in Greenwich, not on the train. In the end, Harranby arrests Pierce, but Pierce never tells Harranby anything he wants to know.

Barlow

Barlow is officially Pierce's chauffeur, but he is a large, tough man that the author implies is some kind of enforcer such as the modern day mob might employ. Barlow is responsible for killing Clean Willy after Willy goes to the police. Later, Barlow picks up the gold from the train when Agar and Pierce throw it overboard. Finally, Barlow is the one who helps Pierce escape from police custody during his trial.



Objects/Places

Clothing

Crawling over the top of a moving train damages Pierce's clothing, forcing him to change clothes with Agar before he returns to his compartment.

Keys

There are four keys that Pierce must obtain in order to open the safes that contain the gold. Pierce arranges for Agar to make copies of each key for the robbery.

Wax

Agar uses wax to make molds of the keys so that he might make a copy of them.

Coffin

When the security changes on the train and passengers are not allowed in the van in which the gold is transported, Pierce arranges for Agar to be placed in a coffin so that the railway officials believe they are transporting a corpse, not a living person.

Padlock

The train van is locked from the outside with a padlock. Pierce must crawl over the outside of the moving train in order to unlock the padlock so that he and Agar might throw the gold overboard for Barlow to recover. Pierce must then relock the padlock and return to his compartment.

Dogs

Mr. Trent raises dogs that are trained to fight rats for sport. It is through this sport that Pierce finally manages to befriend Mr. Trent for the purpose of learning where he hides his key to the Chubb safe.

Van

The gold travels inside a train car that Pierce refers to as a van throughout the novel.



Chubb Safes

Chubb safes are the safes that contain the gold shipment while they are on the train. Chubb was a well-known brand in the 1850s and the safes were thought to be impenetrable. It takes two keys per safe to open them.

Newgate Prison

Clean Willy is imprisoned in Newgate Prison at the beginning of the novel. Newgate is notoriously impossible to escape from, but Clean Willy manages to do it at the request of Pierce.

London Bridge Station

London Bridge Station is the railway station where the gold shipment originates. It is also in the railway office in London Bridge Station where two of the keys for the Chubb safes are kept.

London, England

The novel takes place mostly in and around London, England in 1854-1855.



Themes

Crime

The entire novel is based on the story of one of the most notorious train robberies in England. Although little is known about the actual participants in the original robbery, the author has taken what little is known and created a fictional tale about the robbery. Pierce, a mysterious gentleman who is clearly wealthy, plans and executes the perfect train robbery. To do this, Pierce must commit multiple crimes along with his team.

Pierce is a highly intelligent man with a clever plan to commit what should have been the perfect crime. Pierce does not tell his entire team the full story of what he plans to do until it is absolutely necessary because he knows that given the chance, these men will turn on him as quickly as they agreed to work with him. It is clear to the reader that Pierce knows exactly what he is doing and how he wants to go about it. For this reason, crime is a major theme of the novel.

Class Divisions

The author paints Pierce as a perfect gentleman, a man who is accepted in multiple social circles. It is through this access to high standing gentleman that Pierce learns how to find the keys to the Chubb safes that he must have to steal the gold. However, Pierce appears to feel just as comfortable in the world of criminals and poverty as he does the world of wealth and class.

The author takes the reader from Pierce's comfortable, wealthy world to the world of Clean Willy, the Holy Land, where boarding houses are filled past capacity and young criminals find themselves sharing their rooms with multiple strangers. Agar also lives in this world, working hard for a small amount of money, ruining his own health to help care for his family as a small boy.

The class divisions in this novel are important because these class distinctions not only show how Pierce was able to learn about the gold shipments and how to go about stealing it, but it also gives motive to several of the characters who find themselves in a position in which they need what Pierce is willing to pay or a portion of the stolen gold to survive. For this reason, class divisions is a theme of the novel.

Victorian England

Victorian England is the setting of this novel. This is a time period in which new technology appeared almost on a daily basis and the pace of life was changing constantly. London was an overcrowded place, filled with more people and animals than there was room for. There was a great deal of crime and poverty, but there was also great wealth and wonderful new advances.

The train system was relatively new in 1855. Trains sprang up all over England, with stations built where it was convenient for the railway owners, not necessarily the passengers. Trains continued to evolve, moving faster and faster until they were moving at an amazing speed in 1855.

The setting of the novel is also a theme of the novel because the lives of the characters and the world in which they live is extremely important to their motivations and their actions. If not for the trains, Pierce would not have had such a difficult time stealing the gold. If not for poverty and overcrowding, Pierce's accomplices might not have been inspired to help him.

Style

Point of View

The novel is written in the third-person point of view. The story is told through the voice of the author, written as though a documentary style non-fiction book about an actual crime. While the novel is based on a robbery that in fact did happen, it has been fictionalized and the novel contains things about the crime that no one could possibly have ever learned.

The point of view of the novel is interesting because of the authorial voice that the writer uses to tell his story. The author gives a great deal of information throughout the novel, writing a fictional story with the same tone and style of a non-fiction book. This gives the novel an interesting feel, a sense of reality that might not be present with the use of a different point of view. Due to the nature of the novel, this point of view works well with the plot of the novel.

Setting

The novel is set in Victorian England in the time period between 1854 and 1856. The setting of the novel takes on something like a characterization of its own due to its huge impact on the overall plot of the novel. In this setting, the railway was a relatively new thing, as was the type of huge crime such as the robbery that takes place in this novel.

The setting of the novel works with the overall plot of the novel for several reasons. First, the setting works with the plot because the novel is based on a true story and therefore the setting is similar to what would have been part of the historical crime. Second, the setting of the novel is important to the plot of the novel because the overcrowding of the cities, the poverty, and the crime statistics impact the characters in various ways, motivating some of their actions in the plot.

Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is proper English. The author uses a sophisticated language that reflects the education level of the writer. The author also uses crime slang that was commonly used in the time period in which the novel is set. The author uses very little in the way of foreign languages, but there are some phrases and words in the novel that a reader might not be familiar with. However, the author explains many of these words and phrases within the context of the novel.

The language of this novel works well with the plot because it reflects the social and economic position of most of the characters. The language of the novel includes a great deal of slang that was common to criminals of the time period, reflecting the main

characters of the novel. At the same time, the language reflects the modern language of the author to support the authorial voice of the writing.

Structure

The novel is divided into five parts and fifty-two chapters. The chapters vary in length, from very short to fairly long. The story is told in the style of a non-fiction type story, but includes multiple scenes that show the story rather than simply telling it.

The novel contains one main plot and several subplots. The main plot follows Pierce as he plans and executes a robbery. One subplot follows Pierce and Agar as they help Clean Willy escape from prison. Another subplot involves the gathering of the keys that will be used in the robbery. Another subplot follows the relationship between Pierce and his mistress, Miss Miriam. All the plots come to a satisfying conclusion at the end of the novel.



Quotes

"This singular gentleman was Edward Pierce, and for a man destined to become so notorious that Queen Victoria herself expressed a desire to meet him - or, barring that, to attend his hanging - he remain an oddly mysterious figure" (Chapter 2, p. 4-5).

"England's railroads grew at such a phenomenal rate that the city of London was overwhelmed, and never managed to build a central station" (Chapter 5, p. 16).

"Between 1801 and 1851, London tripled in size" (Chapter 8, p. 33).

"The problem was made more acute by the fact that well-born women had few alternatives to wifedom" (Chapter 12, p. 59).

"Thus, by dawn of November 13, 1854, Edward Pierce had the first of the four keys he needed. He immediately directed his attention to obtaining the second key" (Chapter 18, p. 94).

"He knew that Burgess fell into the lowest-paid category of railway employee" (Chapter 26, p. 129).

"The plan seemed utterly foolproof, and the robbers prepared to carry it out on the next gold shipment, scheduled for March 14, 1855" (Chapter 29, p. 141).

"It was in this fashion that Pierce and Agar learned that the overhaul did not include changing the locks on the safes. That was, of course, all they cared about, and so they made their final preparations for the robbery, which they would carry out on May 22, 1855" (Chapter 30, p. 148).

"The watching crowd, when it heard that the man had died of cholera, dissipated with the same swiftness. In a moment, the station platform was nearly deserted" (Chapter 40, p. 199).

"Burgess had no inkling of Pierce's plan, and he was astonished when the coffin bell began to ring" (Chapter 42, p. 211).

"Events of subsequent days followed a certain predictable pattern. The English suspected the French; the French suspected the English; everyone suspected the English railway officials, who in turn suspected the English steamship officials, who in turn suspected the French customs officials" (Chapter 46, p. 230).

"The money from The Great Train Robbery was never recovered" (Chapter 52, p. 266).



Topics for Discussion

Who is Edward Pierce? What is mysterious about his background? Why is it so mysterious? Where does the author suggest Pierce came from? Why is this the author's guess? What crime is Pierce planning? Why? What is the intended outcome of this plan? Does Pierce get what he wanted in the end?

Who is Agar? Why does Agar work with Pierce? What does Agar hope to achieve by helping Pierce? Why does Pierce not tell Agar from the beginning what his plan is? How does Agar feel about this? Why does Agar go blindly along with Pierce? What does this suggest about Agar's personality? How did Agar damage his lungs as a child? What impact might this have on Agar's role in Pierce's plan?

Who is Clean Willy? Why does Pierce decide it is important to help Clean Willy escape from prison? Why does everyone suggest it is impossible for Clean Willy to escape? How does Willy eventually escape? What is the result of this escape? Why does Pierce keep Clean Willy locked up in his house? For what purpose? Why does Clean Willy eventually turn on Pierce? What is the result? Why?

Who is Miss Miriam? What is her role in the robbery? Why does Miss Miriam help Pierce? How do the others feel about Miriam's role in the robbery? Why does Mr. Fowler become enamored with Miss Miriam? How does Miss Miriam save Pierce from having to delay the robbery because of Mr. Fowler's presence on the train? What is Miss Miriam's reward for her help in the robbery?

Who is Burgess? Why does Burgess agree to turn the other way when Agar and Pierce commit the robbery? What could possibly happen to Burgess if caught aiding them in the robbery? Why does Burgess take this risk? What happens to Burgess after the robbery? What does Burgess give as an excuse for leaving town after the robbery? What is Burgess' ultimate fate?

Who is Barlow? How important a character is Barlow? What suggests that Barlow is something more than a chauffeur? What is Barlow's role in the robbery? How does Barlow help Pierce escape from police custody at the end of the novel? How does Barlow's presence in the novel give credence to the author's thought that Pierce might be part of some kind of criminal underground?

Discuss the setting in detail, focusing on the following: What role does the setting of the novel play in the plot? Why does the author spend so much time discussing the history of the area in which the novel is set? Why does the author discuss such things as the Holy Land and the construction of the train stations throughout London?