

In the Belly of the Beast: Letters from Prison Study Guide

In the Belly of the Beast: Letters from Prison by Jack Abbott

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Plot Summary

In *The Belly of the Beast* is long-time inmate Jack Henry Abbott's personal account of his time in prison. He explains what goes on in prison and the devastating psychological effects he and others like him have suffered.

Abbott has been jailed from a very young age, having spent time in juvenile and then adult facilities since he was twelve. He was a foster child and initially jailed for "failure to adjust to foster homes." Later he was jailed for passing bad checks; his only serious crime while out of jail was armed robbery when he briefly escaped from prison in the early 1970s. He has spent more than twenty years in prison because of his belligerence and continued acts of defiance while in prison.

To Abbott, the American prison system is unjust, cruel, and oppressive. He cannot adjust to prison, and so he lashes out and ironically perpetuates his time in prison. He does not believe his prison sentence is his fault; on the contrary, he would like an apology from the prison system.

The prison system treats men like children and so creates "arrested adolescences" or emotionally stunted men. Abbott has been subjected to the worst prison has to offer, including blackout cells (sensory deprivation cells where no light shines), and "the hole," solitary confinement where he has been subjected to starvation diets and forced administering of psychiatric drugs, to the point of near-insanity and death.

"Pigs," as Abbott refers to the guards are universally violent and tyrannical. They are allowed to do any violence they like to prisoners, as there are no consequences. Abbott claims he has been accused of many acts of violence he was not guilty of by vindictive guards, which then leads to further punishment and prison time. Guards are evil because the state gives them absolute control over prisoners, and they become corrupted with this power.

Prisoners live by a code of violence and murder. The only thing that is respected is moral strength and the threat of violence. A long-term prisoner must be capable of murdering someone in order to survive. Abbott also describes the frequency of homosexual acts in prison, in which "punks" service their masters. These acts are not about sex or affection, but a display of power, and rare is the prisoner who actually thinks of such acts as homosexual.

Abbott has found comfort in the form of drugs, including heroin and marijuana, and philosophical reading. He is especially enamored of Marx and of Communism. He believes Communists are the only ones capable of honesty in describing the tyranny of America and its prison system. He considers himself somewhat of a revolutionary and is looking forward to the day that Communists spark a worldwide revolution, which would end (in Abbott's mind) the oppressive police state. Like Marx, Abbott believes history is a class struggle.



Abbott equates classism with racism. History has been an effort by whites to assert superiority over non-whites. Racism is rampant in prison, with guards stirring racial animosity and non-whites asserting the dominance that society has otherwise robbed from them.



State-Raised Convict

State-Raised Convict Summary and Analysis

Abbott begins by stating his purpose. He wishes to convey the thoughts and feelings he has experienced as a person who has spent the majority of his life behind bars. He compares his waking life to a "horrible nightmare." He is desperate to escape and finds himself still looking for opportunities to escape.

Unlike many inmates he has seen, he has not hardened himself or killed his emotions. Prison tears him up inside on a daily basis, though he rarely expresses such feelings. When he sees his reflection in a pane of glass, he becomes angry, and when with a crowd of prisoners, he must refrain himself from attacking someone, so powerful is Abbott's daily anger. Abbott shares a poem called "Lies" he wrote, involving violent imagery and a refrain of "Lie to me, then."

Abbott was born January 21, 1944 on a military base in Michigan. He is perpetually in and out of foster homes and does not attend school after the sixth grade. Starting at age nine he serves long terms in juvenile detention. At age 18 he is put into adult prison for passing bad checks. At age 21, he kills an inmate and wounded another, for which he was sentenced to twenty years. At age 26, he escapes from prison for six weeks. At the time of the writing, Abbott is 37 years old and since age 12 has been free a total of only nine and a half months.

Abbott recalls a "big red-brick building" where he spent years in juvenile detention. When he is first brought there in single file with other boys, he attempts to flee and is knocked on the head and dragged back. He is brought to the basement, then flung down the stairs, making his nose bleed and ears ring. The guard orders him to strip, and he inspects Abbott's anus and privates for contraband. He is then taken to his basement cell for solitary confinement. He is served a tiny meal three times a day. Any communication with other prisoners, even tapping on the wall, is met with physical beatings.

Abbott states that long-term prisoners have a sort of "instability" or "arrested adolescence." Normal rites of passage and the process of becoming a man are denied to the prisoner. A prisoner is in fact punished for trying to be a man and treated as an adolescent. "Agreement" between prisoner and guard does not exist because that would imply equality; there is only submission. Abbott's passions, he feels, are that of a boy, and there are a host of emotions he has not experienced, only heard about them.

Abbott has never gone a month in prison without violating rules. He cannot adjust to prison because he feels an adjustment to prison would mean giving up on any adjustment to society. If he had submitted to prison, he would have gotten out of prison far earlier than he has been incarcerated, but to submit would be to give up a part of his soul, which he will not do. Abbott cannot admit to himself that he is in prison because of



himself and his own choices. Abbott will not submit to such indoctrination, as he calls it. He has a long history of violence on his prison record, and he claims that nine-tenths of it is false allegations. The government runs a tyrannical prison regime that can get away with anything, in Abbott's view.

Abbott started reading and teaching himself during a five and a half year stint in Maximum Security. He emerged from this stint having read a great many of the world's classics and having taught himself arithmetic and logic. He has never stopped this educational process since then. He has read major books of philosophy and is drawn to the works of Marx. Books are discouraged in prison and must be fought for. There are "schools" in prison, but Abbott regards them as another form of indoctrination.

Abbott finally states in this chapter that he does not wish to preach or persuade the reader (he is writing to Norman Mailer) but only to present facts in a plain way and raise concern about government control.



Varieties of Punishment

Varieties of Punishment Summary and Analysis

Prison is torture, aimed to take things from a person. They have tried to take Abbott's soul, but he considers himself to have a superior psychological endurance, such that they cannot take his soul.

Abbott has undergone punishments now ruled unjust and cruel, yet the same people preside over him and he has received no apology. He suffered from claustrophobia for four years, in which he felt crushed by the walls. The guards responded by tying him to bed every night, which was its own nightmare because he could not move.

Once for a period of about 25 days Abbott is subjected to staying in a blackout cell, a cell in which no light penetrated. Abbott likens the experience to "swimming in ink." He is fed a starvation diet of one bowl of broth and a hard biscuit per day. Dust chokes his lungs and insects crawl over him. At about day 23, Abbott has a nervous breakdown in which he blacks out, and when he recovers he finds himself in a regular cell. These kind of cells survive under the term "strip cells" and are used for punishment. There is no running water in a strip cell, not even a toilet, but a hole in the center of the cell. A single bulb hangs from the ceiling and is never turned out, such that the days run into each other for added torture. Abbott has spent weeks and weeks in a cell such as this.

Another form of prison torture is the starvation diet. Abbott recalls one period, after continually defying prison guards and punishment committees, Abbott was given consecutive periods of six months' worth of starvation dieting. Guards and prisoners knew a man could not survive such a period, so to him the sentence was like a death penalty. On the starvation diet, Abbott lay very still in order to conserve energy. He ate cockroaches and insects because of starvation. He experienced severe hunger pangs and then a strange pain as his muscle tissue began to deteriorate. One inmate tried to take the blame for one of Abbott's offenses to cut Abbott's time but was ignored. Abbott at a certain point refuses even his once-a-day meal, no longer feeling the hunger, buoyed by a kind of false euphoria.

Realizing Abbott is about to die, inmates take a guard hostage, demanding the release of Abbott. Abbott is too dazed to realize what is happening, but eventually he is taken to the infirmary and awakens a week later in a hospital bed being fed intravenously.

Another punishment cell Abbott endures is known as the C-300, in the former death row part of the prison. There he was only given a glass of water once a day but no food. He was sometimes chained to the floor. It is in C-300 where Abbott learns that President Kennedy was assassinated and that his mother died.

Another time, Abbott swears a guard is yelling obscenities at him and threatening him. He is examined and told he is hallucinating, and so he is given three shots of Thorazine



a day. He must be tackled and wrestled to the ground for these shots because he does not want them. He imagines he was one of the first prisoners to be subjected to drug therapy in the United States, where now it is common. Thorazine and other "tranquilizer" drugs are another form of torture to Abbott. They cause incredible pain, making the nerves extra-sensitive. They can force the back to bend like a rigid bow or other spasms. They also cause "Parkinson's Reactions," symptoms like what a Parkinson's sufferer would undergo, such as involuntary movements of the jaw and trembling.

Once, after being falsely accused of a near-fatal stabbing of a prison guard, Abbott was taken to Butner North Carolina Federal Correctional Institution for psychological experimentation. There, he was chained with irons to a steel bed naked in the spread-eagle condition. He had to twist his torso to urinate, and even then it was not very effective. He was there for a week and beaten and strangled to within an inch of his life on three different occasions. When a medical technician observed his arm nerves were "dying," he was taken back to Atlanta Federal Penitentiary.



The Hole: Solitary Confinement

The Hole: Solitary Confinement Summary and Analysis

Abbott has served time in solitary confinement in a cell called "the hole" for years, if all the time was added up. He compares it to a coffin and being buried alive; one literally feels oneself decaying. There is only a seven-foot by three-foot path in the cell to walk; other space is taken up by the bunk or toilet. Abbott feels that animals in the zoo are treated better.

One must fight the routine and monotony. Abbott reads voraciously when he is in solitary confinement, and he mutters to himself just to hear something. He also describes something he deems "psyche-pain," which is the gradual wearing away of healthy aspects to one's psychology, and all that is left is pain, disappointment, and bad memories. Perception is amplified, and every little sensation elicits a memory. Abbott has spent days lost in his own head, living his memories as if they were real. Dream becomes reality. Intelligence, robbed of actual experience, becomes pure, something Abbott deems "supersanity." Theory must be studied in absence of practice or real-world experience. What Abbott describes he was eventually told was sensory deprivation.

When Abbott is let out of solitary and back into the general population, even dull blue prison shirts strike him as dazzling in their beauty, and Abbott becomes amazed by the feel of a piece of wood or the chatter of prisoners. Abbott believes that prison controls one's body, including mood and physical condition. A William James' analogy is used to elucidate this point: "We do not shed tears because we are sad, we are sad because we shed tears."

The Prison Staff

The Prison Staff Summary and Analysis

"Pigs," as Abbott calls every government employee of the prison system, from guard to parole committee member to judges, are universally condemned as violent and tyrannical. At their leisure, pigs can beat an inmate without consequence any hour of any day. And yet, as tools of the government, they are not held accountable for their actions, while the prisoner is held more than responsible for his. Guards may shoot a prisoner for any slight reason, from touching another prisoner to moving toward the toilet when they fear the prisoner will flush contraband.

The law against "cruel and unusual" punishment is a joke because only convicts can bear witness to the punishment being inflicted upon them, and no one will believe the word of a convict. Abbott dares the reader to locate any case in American judicial history in which a prisoner has aired accusations of cruel and unusual punishment and then been vindicated by the courts.

Pigs like policemen and guards do not have to answer to the people, to elections, and they get where they are by hiring each other in a fraternity-like atmosphere. Guards are evil, and the source of that evil is the state that gives them such absolute control over prisoners. Guards look upon prisoners as animals. The "policeman" mentality, as Abbott sees it throughout history, is a constant evil, the rule rather than the exception. The policeman mentality allows some human beings to treat other human beings like they were not human beings. Policemen obey violence.

Abbott feels this policeman state will come to a violent end in a worldwide revolution. The reader is urged to help fight the powers that be when the revolution does come. Abbott believes this revolution will be stoked by the fires of vengeance, by fury caused by injustice.



The Inmates

The Inmates Summary and Analysis

The inside of a prison has noise akin to a zoo, and the inmates are its animals. Only between midnight and breakfast does the din cease enough to rest one's mind. Prisoners live by a code of survival. Abbott has seen many men become animals for trying to live, including committing terrible acts of violence and having abundant oral sex with other inmates. The one thing a convict respects is moral strength, and when a man has that robbed from him, he is a broken, skulking man.

Prisoners have another thing in common: hatred for pigs and a desire to best them and the system. Should Abbott see a prisoner fighting a squad of pigs, Abbott will join in that fight against the pigs because in that way prisoners are brothers. In prison, the murder of a guard is the worst thing one can do. A prisoner will never see the light of day again once they have murdered a guard.

Abbott recalls a prisoner named Striker. One day Striker is playing poker and is drunk off pruno (prison wine). A new guard arrives and breaks up the game. The guard does not realize that most seasoned guards allow the poker game to go on despite it technically be against the rules. Striker becomes belligerent and argumentative. Someone, in jest, tells Striker he should kill the guard, and the man gives Striker a shiv (a weapon). Striker proceeds to stab the guard in the gut, and then stab him repeatedly in the chest. He receives a life sentence in a Maximum Security prison for this offense. However, shortly thereafter Striker is found hanged in his cell.

Abbott also recalls a prisoner named X, who served a life sentence and was paralyzed to where he could only bat an eyelid. A prisoner friend of his, visiting X in the infirmary, asks X if he wants to die, and X bats his eyelid once to indicate "Yes." The friend turned X over so that X would smother to death in bed. Abbott considers this and Striker's suicide as mercy killings, since the alternative (a life in prison) is so very awful.

Prison is compared to a bullfighting ring, with the prisoner as the bull. The bull is tormented, pricked with spears, run around, to the point that he becomes enraged. At the point that he is most enraged, he is killed with honor by the matador to the cheer of the crowd. That's where the comparison stops; the prisoner is killed in shame amid hateful men.

Violence in prison is geared toward murder. Murder is the natural result of prison violence. Should a man instigate a fistfight with a second man, the second man must plan to murder the first man because there is no telling what the first man will escalate to after a fistfight. Same with theft or anything else. The knife is the murder weapon of choice. One (as a prisoner) must become friendly with a man one intends to kill, so that one can get close enough to use the knife. Abbott has seen men stick out their chest and beg to be killed, so horrible is their existence in prison.



Abbott is convinced he was sent to prison to become a "punk," someone who is a slave to another "master" prisoner. The punk is a broken and humiliated prisoner, who will be on the receiving end of sodomy and who performs fellatio on their master, in addition to other chores and any other orders. Abbott beat the system by forcing the first man who tried to enslave him into slavery himself, making a "punk" of a would-be master. Abbott has never been a punk but has in fact punked others himself. An example of a punk is given, a man named Gerard, who suffered a breakdown in prison and then constantly begged to give people fellatio.

Homosexuality is an odd thing in prison. Sex acts that could be described as homosexual are common, but in fact very few in prison think of themselves as homosexual. This is because sex acts are merely demonstrations of power, and have been completely voided of anything approaching actual love or sex in prison.



Gods and Drugs, and, Choosing Sides: Communists and Marxism

Gods and Drugs, and, Choosing Sides: Communists and Marxism Summary and Analysis

"Gods and Drugs": Abbott does not believe in God, not because he will not but because he cannot. He admires the "human element" in religion and religious practices and wishes he could participate, but something in the essence of his being is not compatible with God and religion. He wishes he could find consolation in religion and is very moved when he sees people who do, yet he cannot.

Instead, the only "respite" or "consolation" available to him after 17 years in prison is drugs. He is an addict and feels that drugs substitute for God pretty well. Drugs are "our antidote to the devil."

Abbott talks in derogatory terms of an inmate who eschews drinking, drugs, and sex as a way to denounce the vices of others. This man, by denying human nature, is denying happiness. In addition, he is becoming exactly what the prison system wants him to become.

Abbott admits to using heroin and claims it is therapeutic, and he like other inmates uses it for "emotional security." By contrast, his use of marijuana compels him to think about philosophical matters, and in his pot-fueled mental state he attains a rare clarity of mind.

"Choosing Sides: Communists and Marxism": Abbott defines propaganda as a form of the truth told from a certain viewpoint. The notion that prisoners are at fault for landing in prison is propaganda, told from a viewpoint with which Abbott does not agree.

Abbott, like many prisoners, is attracted to communist and similarly subversive literature. Why? That communist literature always tells the truth about prisoners and conditions in prisons, is the simple answer. Abbott claims that Communists fight for prisoners, airing grievances to the public, assigning attorneys in court, conducting letter-writing campaigns, and doing everything possible to save prisoners from the prison system. Other political parties ignore the plight of the prisoner.

Abbott likens himself to Castro, insofar that he sees himself willing to die for a cause or principle. He has chosen a side in life and will fight the other side ruthlessly. Class distinctions are blamed for inequality and human weakness, of the kind that exist between a prisoner and guard. Communism has done more to solve the "riddle" of humanity and society more than any other science or system.



However, Abbott was initially terrified of Communism, as many Americans were in the 1950s and 1960s. In his vast readings of philosophy, he "advanced to a higher level" with Marx and Engels and to an even higher level with Lenin, Stalin, and Mao; this advance came naturally after a broad range of readings.

In American society, men view each other as objects of exploitation, tools to be used up and discarded. This leads to innate unhappiness, and violence begets violence. Only with revolution can one attain happiness and be liberated. And this revolution, per Marx, must paradoxically come about through violent conflict, for the ruling classes will not give up their position without bloodshed.

Abbott relates the story of a woman who wrote him, and they eventually became pen pals. She complains of petty problems about trying to become a television actress and having "only one" mink coat; meanwhile, Abbott is in solitary confinement and deprived of everything. He asks her for a few dollars to purchase toothpaste or some coffee, and she scolds him for his materialism. This sort of wrong-headed, hypocritical insult is the worst insult Abbott can imagine suffering.

In summary, Abbott believes he is unhappy because he has been denied the society of others.



American Violence/American Justice: The Legal System

American Violence/American Justice: The Legal System Summary and Analysis

It is unsurprising to Abbott that Americans have a hunger for "true crime" stories such as Norman Mailer's Executioner's Song, for Americans are violent and so love violence. For some Americans to feign shock and outrage at murders and other violent crimes is like a prostitute expressing outrage at premarital sex. Only when Americans become outraged at true violence, such as Abbott's plight in prison, can the cycle of violence stop.

Abbott mocks Vietnam War veterans for being "proud" of serving their country. He likens the war to cruel butchery, the "mutilation" of a "doll-like people," in which case shame should be felt instead. America is the most oppressive regime on the planet, much more so than the Soviet Union.

Abbott next provides an extended analogy, comparing a dog trainer training an animal through punishment, and the prison system leading a prisoner through incarceration. Through all of the justice system, there is never an attempt made to correct the prisoner and tell him what he did wrong. There is also never an attempt to discover why he did what he did. There is only behavior and the correction of that behavior.

A man can bear a sentence of a definite period because he can count off the days and look forward to a time when he will no longer be in prison. In Abbott's case of an indefinite sentence, this is robbed from him, and by extension the very conception of time is robbed from him.

Prisoners enter prison, and it is a "civil death." Their rights are confiscated, and they are cut off from society. Abbott recalls a prisoner by the name of Blackie. During a riot, Blackie seized four guards as hostages and demanded that media people enter the prison and interview him, along with Abbott and another man, in order to "lift the veil" on the prison system and show the American public what prison life is really like. A couple of local reporters were sent; the prisoners aired their grievances, and the hostage guards were let go. After that, however, Blackie was never seen again. Later, guards claimed he hanged himself in his cell, but Abbott thought Blackie loved life and would never do such a thing. Abbott tried to petition for an autopsy, but since Blackie had no relatives an autopsy was never done. This is yet another example of American (in)justice, as Abbott believes guards killed Blackie and it was swept under the rug.

Prison is about punishment, not rehabilitation. Rehabilitation is renewing a promise to follow the values of society. Since prisoners are never given any sort of access to society, how can they rediscover societal values? Instead, American justice assumes a



prisoner should "know better" than to have committed his crimes, and so he is punished, even if he is ignorant of laws and societal values. Some people "belong" in prison, some do not. Abbott has seen some repeat offenders enter prison gaunt and unhealthy, and after a few days they are healthy and upbeat. Others waste away.

Prison, instead of rehabilitating a man, gives the man the will, the capacity, to commit crimes. Men's hearts are blackened in prison. You learn that your life depends on issuing threats and your willingness to commit violence. Prison guards and government employees of the justice system are complicit in this because they commit murder and torture and otherwise perpetuate violence. Prisoners learn never to trust anyone. And when they finally get out, they are capable of any crime, especially robbery, for their wealth (defined as the money they could have earned if they had not been in prison for years) can never be earned honestly. It is lost forever.



Capital Punishment and Gary Gilmore

Capital Punishment and Gary Gilmore Summary and Analysis

Marx once wrote to The Times newspaper in an unfinished letter stating that capital punishment is ineffective, and that it sows the seeds for others to commit murder and other violent acts. A newspaper once documented that following several executions, there were rashes of violent acts committed in the community. So, in essence, capital punishment is no deterrent for murder but could be said to encourage it. The very act of putting someone to death shows society a murderer that was not deterred by the threat of capital punishment. In fact, history has shown that punishment of any kind has never been a deterrent to crime. Abbott asks rhetorically whether it would not be more humane to brainwash a criminal into never committing another criminal act, than putting him to death.

Speaking about Gary Gilmore, whom Norman Mailer is writing about in his book *The Executioner's Song*, Abbott cannot understand why Gilmore killed two people when they did not resist. Only a desperate man, robbing for a great sum of money, would kill when there was no reason to. Abbott questions Gilmore's intelligence, insofar that he could have driven farther away to commit his robbery in order to avoid identification. Gilmore, in summary, is cold-blooded, and Abbott would like to understand Gilmore so he could understand evil.

At the end of the day, guilt is a matter of the heart. We can never know if Gilmore is guilty because it is a personal matter, based upon what was in Gilmore's heart and if he chose in his heart to take lives. The fact that Gilmore is asking for the death penalty might point to the fact that he bears an inner guilt.

Abbott has been reading the Stendhal novel *The Red and the Black* and has enjoyed it. He feels it is a remarkable expression of romantic love. The protagonist, Julien Sorel, has been unwittingly portrayed by the author as a homosexual caught up in a vast romantic misunderstanding. Returning to Gilmore and his insistence on the death penalty, Abbott hopes Gilmore is caught up in the same kind of misunderstanding in regards to death. Gilmore does not want death itself, or so Abbott hopes, but instead he is attracted to the death sentence, to the notion of it, in the same way that people committed murder after a death penalty, as Abbott referenced at the beginning of the chapter.



Racism in America and Behind Bars

Racism in America and Behind Bars Summary and Analysis

The history of human rights has been a history of racism. From the American Constitution (which paradoxically declared the freedom of Man while allowing for slavery of blacks) to the Magna Carta to the notion of Manifest Destiny, whites have asserted their superiority over non-white races. The "big secret" is the constant push in society to show that non-whites are inferior to whites, and this "race theory of humanity" still continues. This can be done in a variety of ways - through crime statistics, psychological tests, intelligence tests. The only force which opposes this "race theory of humanity" is Communism and specifically the Marxist idea of dialectical materialism.

Prejudice is a barrier to intelligence in the Communist philosophy, and genealogical discrimination or isolation has been shown in history to be the death of civilizations. "Intelligence" and other measures of men are biased, the product of bourgeois science rather than true science. So, naturally, black men being tested by a "white man's intelligence test" will score lower on average than white men taking the same test.

On a related note, Abbott points out that, when the world was considered to be flat, only the "fools" or "morons" in that society could question this flatness and suggest the world was round. Only geniuses are able to cut through prejudice and cultural tradition to arrive at truth. Most any test, measure or fact of knowledge, is in fact based upon prejudice. Even a mathematics test is based upon a prejudice towards rigorous logic perhaps culturally inherited by Europeans and not inherited by Africans. Therefore, a test average showing Africans scoring lower than Europeans in math is not in any way indicative of how whites are superior to blacks, but how prejudiced the test was.

Abbott recalls three incidents of racism he experienced when he was briefly out of prison in 1962. In Texas, a black farmer was charged with a fine of \$200 because his truck was slightly double-parked. He couldn't pay such a ridiculous fine, and so the police moved to arrest him. The farmer shoved the policemen off, then grabbed a fence post to use as a club weapon. He was surrounded by policemen and, as Abbott watched, he was shot multiple times dead, even though he made no motion with the club. In a second incident, Abbott ate dinner with a young black man. Abbott's dinner was served, but the black man's was put in a brown paper bag to go. Only later Abbott realized the diner did not serve blacks. In the third incident, Abbott was passing through a town with a dance hall called Liberty Wells, a Mormon-run hall that would not allow non-whites. Abbott was stopped by a group of young black men and beat up. He made the connection between these black men's hatred for him, a white man, and the injustice of the whites-only dance hall nearby.

American democracy is slanted against blacks. There are old Congressional documents with Congressmen arguing for lowered immigration quotas for non-whites, for one



example. In fact, non-whites only get "equality" in prison, and so they become drunk with it and exert aggression and dominance over whites in prison. If anything, whites are now the targets in American prisons.

In prison, guards instigate violence by pooling prisoners into racial groups. Abbott has been put into cells with all blacks just because it might start a fight. Whites are taught to hate non-whites in prison.



Foreign Affairs, and, Freedom?

Foreign Affairs, and, Freedom? Summary and Analysis

Foreign Affairs: Communist revolution depends upon the alliance of the peasant with the worker. Every Communist revolution in any part of the world brings the world closer to its ideal state, a world revolution where capitalism is overthrown. The Communist superpowers, China and the Soviet Union, may play a role in this revolution, should they assist lesser nations with their revolutions.

Abbott admires Russia for two reasons. Its citizens express a great suffering in humanity which moves Abbott. Also, he feels very close to Lenin and his associates through reading all about them, and he dreams of a day when he might join with fellow Communists to change history, as Lenin did.

Abbott has read books by Alexander Solzhenitsyn and considers him a traitor to his people. The Soviet "gulag" system Solzhenitsyn is credited with exposing is in fact a more humane system than the American prison system to Abbott.

Cuba is an "infant" and a dog to its master, the Soviet Union. Cuba needs a South American Communist bloc of two or three countries to ally itself with in order to assert power in the Western hemisphere and break free of Russian influence. As for Mao in China, Abbott supports Mao's writings and influence but is not sure of support for the official Communist party in China, as he does not know enough about it. China has the potential for formidable military might, not because of technology but because their army is backed by and composed of "the people."

When Israel is compared to the United States favorably, it makes Abbott sick. America is violent and can steal one's soul; even a Soviet gulag or the Shah of Iran can execute someone, but they cannot steal one's soul as America can. Abbott wishes for instability in the Middle East, for with instability comes the possibility of Communist revolution.

Freedom?: Abbott appreciates simple things, like the rain pattering on his cell window. As a prisoner, he has been reduced to appreciation for tiny things, things that he needs rather than wants.

Abbott sometimes entertains thoughts of what it would be like to be free, but it is a "fading dream." Deep down, he believes he does not care if he dies in prison or not. He has found a higher calling - the urging of worldwide Communist revolution - and believes that the earliest revolutionaries die unknown. If it is his fate to be this early "unknown" revolutionary, so be it.

Abbott does not know how he would react in the outside world, mingling with the very guards, lawyers, judges, etc., who have conspired to crush him under their collective

heel for his whole life. In all, Abbott is very conflicted about the prospect of freedom, vacillating between yearning for it and accepting his fate.



Characters

Jack Henry Abbott

Abbott is the author of the letters that have been collected in excerpt form in *In the Belly of the Beast*. His purpose with the letters, as he states, is to expose the American public to the horrors of the American prison system, in a factual and objective way. He originally wrote to Norman Mailer, wishing to help Mailer with his research for Mailer's book *The Executioner's Song*.

Abbott has lived in prison for most of his life since he was twelve. Before that, he had been in and out of foster homes and was originally incarcerated in a juvenile facility for failure to adjust to foster homes. As a man without access to normal experiences and the outside world, he feels he is stunted emotionally, an "arrested adolescent," with the body of a man and the emotions of a child. He is self-taught, having read voraciously as a way to fight tedium in prison. He has read widely, especially philosophy, and has settled on Communism as the best and ideal political system for the world. He considers himself a revolutionary and looks forward to a world dominated by Communism.

He has never adjusted to prison. He hates the "pigs" (guards) and always fights them as a matter of principle. To submit to the pigs would be to give up his soul, his values, and his hope for the future, which he will not do. As a result, what would have been a short prison sentence turned into an indefinite prison sentence, and he has spent years in solitary confinement and other punishment cells because of his defiance.

Pigs

Abbott frequently refers to pigs. He usually means the prison guards who patrol the prison grounds but sometimes expands the definition of "pigs" to refer to all of the lawyers, judges, administrators, and other state employees who make up the American prison system. He believes employees at all levels conspire to oppress the prison population and rob inmates of their rights, dignity, and soul.

Pigs are given by the state absolute control over inmates, who are stripped of all rights when they enter prison, a process Abbott calls a "civil death." Pigs are members of a fraternity which protects its own. Because a pig's word is always believed over an inmate's, and because pigs engage in routine cover-ups and manipulation, nothing stops them from doing anything they want to inmates. Because of this absolute power, pigs become evil. Abbott characterizes pigs very broadly; they are universally evil, violent, manipulative, cowardly, and cruel. In his fury toward the establishment, Abbott does not differentiate one pig from another or attribute any unique personalities to pigs.

Pigs can throw an inmate into solitary confinement, force them to go on a starvation diet, beat them mercilessly, and subject them to intense pain and humiliation for the



slightest infractions, or even imagined infractions. Abbott himself has been accused dozens of times for things he did not do.

Pigs are also very manipulative. They use racial animosity to encourage fighting among the inmates. For example, they might put a white man in a cell with four black men, in the hopes the black men might kill or sodomize that white man. They also stir racial hatred by badmouthing blacks to white inmates, or other such actions. They intentionally place inmates in situations (be they geographical, physical, or mental) such that they might be killed or beaten badly by other prisoners. In that way, they pit prisoners against themselves as a way to preserve their power.

Abbott dreams of a day when this police state will crumble due to Communist worldwide revolution. Until then, he will join with his inmate brothers in common hatred for their perceived pig enemy.

Norman Mailer

Norman Mailer is who Jack Abbott is writing to in his series of letters. Abbott had heard about the Gilmore case and Mailer's decision to research and write about Gilmore. Abbott then volunteered to tell Mailer about the true state of the American prison system, and so *In the Belly of the Beast* was eventually born.

Uncle Ho

An inmate known only as "Uncle Ho" composed a poem while in prison that Abbott has never forgotten. It involves welcoming the winter (despair, sadness, punishment) for only with winter can there be a spring. It celebrates damage done to the body and mind, for this damage has strengthened body and mind.

William James

Abbott invokes an analogy written by William James to help explain his belief that being in prison alters a man's very being, and also his belief that his actions are not his own fault. James wrote that "we do not shed tears because we are sad; we are sad because we shed tears." Abbott's own version might be along the lines of, "Prison does not lock up violent and bad people; people become violent and bad because they are in prison."

Striker

Abbott recalls an inmate named Striker who, drunk off pruno or prison wine, stabbed and killed a prison guard after the guard tried to break up his poker game. Striker received a life sentence in a maximum security prison for this act but shortly thereafter he hung himself in his cell rather than do the time.



Gerard the Punk

Abbott uses the word "punk" to describe a prisoner who has been degraded and broken, sexually and otherwise. The punk will perform fellatio on other inmates, or be on the receiving end of sodomy. The punk will clean their "master's" cell and do errands for them. Abbott is convinced he was sent to prison to become a "punk" and be taught a lesson, but he beat the system and made others his punks instead. Abbott knew a man named Gerard who became a punk, shamelessly begging prisoners to allow him to give them fellatio.

Blackie

Blackie was an inmate who, during a riot, took four guards hostages and refused to release them until the convicts' grievances were aired on public airwaves. Local media people were sent in to interview Blackie, Abbott, and another man, who shared their experiences of the prison system. Thereafter, Blackie released the guards. Shortly after the event, Blackie was never seen again, with guards claiming he had hanged himself. Abbott never believed the guards' story about Blackie's suicide, but he had no power to order an autopsy despite his efforts to do so.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn

Solzhenitsyn exposed the horrors of Soviet gulags for a Western audience when he escaped from the Soviet Union to the United States and released a series of books. Abbott considers the man to be a traitor, who actually demonstrated how tame the Soviet gulags are in contrast to the American prison system.

Gary Gilmore

Gary Gilmore was convicted of two cold-blooded murder-robberies. He famously refused any appeals or court opportunities to delay the death penalty, in fact asking for his execution to happen as soon as possible. He is documented in Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song*. In commenting on Gilmore, Abbott doesn't understand why he would kill two people without any apparent reason, and he considers Gilmore evil, though he opposes the death penalty on principle.



Objects/Places

Indoctrination

In Abbott's view, indoctrination is the process whereby prisoners are forced to admit they are in prison because of their own bad behavior and that prisoners deserve any punishment doled out in prison by guards or the system. Abbott flatly rejects indoctrination. He will not admit that he did anything to be locked up, and any violence he commits behind bars is not his fault but the result of a brutal prison system.

Claustrophobia

Abbott suffered from claustrophobia for three or four years while in prison. He felt the walls were crushing and smothering him; he couldn't breathe, and he flailed wildly and screamed. Prison guards tied him down to bed every night to "cure" him of this condition.

Blackout cell

Abbott was confined to a blackout cell once for about 25 days. Absolutely no light reached him inside the cell. He was fed once a day with a bowl of broth and a hard biscuit and heard nothing except his own movements and mutterings. He had a nervous breakdown and when he recovered, the guards had moved him to a regular cell.

The Starvation Diet

For perceived offenses, prisoners could be subjected to starvation diets, consisting of just a bowl of broth and a hard biscuit once a day. For continuing to defy authority, Abbot was once subjected to a near-consecutive six-month sentence of a starvation diet, something no inmate or guard thought he could survive. He became insane with hunger. Inmates threatened guards and threatened to riot on Abbott's behalf, and eventually his sentence was cut short. Abbot spent the next week in a daze in the hospital being fed intravenously.

Pruno

Pruno is "prison wine," an alcoholic drink made from fruit, juice, sugar, or sometimes whatever may be at hand. It is contraband in prison but made easily and discreetly by inmates. Abbott describes a man named Striker getting drunk off pruno and thereafter killing a prison guard.



Pay-him-no-mind List

Abbott claims there is an unwritten list guards have, to where certain prisoners are "paid no mind" and become free to go anywhere and do anything, short of violence. It is the hope (again, according to Abbott) in these guards that this prisoner will so enrage the community with his freedom and his meddling that he will be killed by the prison community. So in essence, being put on the "pay-him-no-mind" list is a death sentence.

Communism

Out of all the philosophical systems Abbott has read about, he has found Communism to be the most enlightening. He feels Communists fight for prisoners' rights and help expose the conditions of the prison system. He admires Marx and other Communists for concentrating on actual experience and history rather than abstract theory. He sees himself as a revolutionary, and looks forward to a day when the existing world order will be toppled by a worldwide Communist revolution.

The Death Penalty

Abbott believes the death penalty (and in fact, all state-sponsored punishment) is not a deterrent to crime and in some cases may even make citizens more inclined to murder because the death penalty forces death and violence to be an everyday part of the American experience. Anyone being put to death in fact proves the futility of the death penalty as a deterrent because the threat of it did not stop the particular individual now being put to death.

The Red and The Black

This realist novel by Stendhal is referenced by Abbott as a particularly good romance. The protagonist is believed by Abbott to be a homosexual vainly pursuing a heterosexual relationship. He compares this "misunderstanding" to Gary Gilmore's stated desire to be executed by the state.

Race Theory of Humanity

Influenced by Marxism, Abbott states that the history of human rights is the history of whites asserting superiority over non-whites. Prejudice is the basis of this system, which obscures true knowledge. For example, a study may claim that whites do better on average than blacks on IQ tests, when in fact the IQ test was created by a white man and is slanted towards whites.



Themes

Communism is the Answer

In his time in prison, and especially his years in solitary confinement, Abbott has used book reading as a way to challenge his mind and understand the world in absence of being out in the world to directly experience it. In his wide reading of many philosophers and philosophical systems, he has become most closely attached to Communism, especially the works of Karl Marx. He claims Communists are the ones who fight for prisoners' rights, hiring them attorneys and organizing letter—writing campaigns. Communists are the only ones who will report the true state of the American prison system.

Abbott is also attracted to Communism because he believes it most accurately describes human nature and history. Like Marx, he sees the progress of history as a series of class struggles. Classism creates inequality, which begets anger and eventually violence. Without class distinctions there would be no such cycles of violence and thus no police state. The police and prison state is a direct result of classism and inequality. Abbott feels Communism can also be accurately applied to the racism he sees infecting American and its prison system. History in this view is a series of attempts by whites to assert superiority over non-whites. Guards in prison encourage racial animosity and use race issues to manipulate prisoners.

Abbott sees himself as a Communist revolutionary and dreams of a day when he can walk side by side with his fellow "comrades" to effect major change in the world, as someone like Lenin did. He is encouraged (writing in the mid 1970s) by the spread of Communist influence as in Cuba and elsewhere. Worldwide revolution will only be possible, in Abbott's view, when the workers ally with the peasants to topple the bourgeois.

Prison as Punishment

Prison is incapable of rehabilitating prisoners, as many believe its purpose is or should be. Rehabilitation is, in Abbott's definition, the rediscovery and reconnection of social values. Prison, by its very definition, cuts people off from society. Therefore, prisoners can learn nothing about the values of the outside society, only the twisted values of prison culture, so nothing in prison prepares the inmate for the real world. Also missing in the justice system for Abbott is any concern for the "why" of a prisoner's crime and any real effort to teach a criminal right from wrong. Abbott believes many "crimes" are in fact the result of ignorance rather than malice, but the American justice system makes no such distinction, looking solely at behavior.

By concentrating only on behavior and correcting behavior, the prison system is no more complicated than a master training a dog with treats and physical blows. Guards



behave with either cruel, irrational violence (granted to them by the state, and granted in a fraternity-like environment such that there are no consequences) or by withholding basic needs such as food, water, clothing, a temperature threshold in the cell, etc. The guards' absolute power corrupts absolutely, and Abbott considers them universally evil. This makes the prisoner-guard relationship a perpetual power struggle with the prisoner's very dignity, sanity, and soul at stake.

Punishment is not a deterrent to crime, so says Abbott. Since prisoners are treated with excessive violence for any minor infraction - having a contraband magazine or just looking at a guard funny - any notion of the punishment fitting or even relating to the crime is obliterated. Violence only begets violence.

An Altered State of Mind

Above any physical torture or punishment, prison works on a profound psychological level. Abbott compares much of his time in prison to a waking nightmare from which he cannot escape. While many men have killed their emotions, blackened their hearts, gone insane, or given up their souls, Abbott refuses to do so, and as a result prison is that much more psychologically draining because he must commit to a daily fight for his sanity.

Part of this fight involves what Abbott calls indoctrination, which is a process by which the prison system attempts to force prisoners to admit their transgressions are their own fault and also to force prisoners to obey an arbitrary set of submissive behaviors and thought patterns. Abbott refuses to admit any wrongdoing; in fact, he wants an apology for how he's been treated and refuses to submit by adopting the behaviors and mental attitude the system wants him to adopt. As a result, he has been a constant "problem child" in his prison and has been subjected to years of solitary confinement and extended prison sentences for his acts of defiance.

Because prison life has nowhere near the depth of feeling and experience of "free" life, emotions are stunted and compacted, resulting in "man-child" prisoners. The prison breeds psychological problems in its inmates as a matter of course and then attempts to fix them through the forcible administration of psychiatric drugs. Abbott describes his state of mind on some of these drugs, including Thorazine, including incredible pain from sensitive nerves and drooling and shaking from "Parkinson's Reaction" side effects.

Abbott compares prisoners, psychologically, to a bull in a bullfighting arena. Bulls are pricked with spears, manipulated, ran around, subjected to mental torture of all types. From this they gain an incredible amount of anger and indignation that make them lash out at the matador. At the moment of the bull's greatest anger, he is cut down. Similarly, evil guards goad prisoners, torture them psychologically, stir them until they lash out in anger, at which point they are beat down and the cycle continues.



Style

Perspective

Abbott is speaking from the perspective of a state-raised convict, a long-term inmate who has seen all aspects of prison, including maximum security facilities, psychiatric facilities, and solitary confinement cells. Abbott makes the distinction between the short-term prisoner and someone like himself, who has been in and out (mostly in) of prison since he was twelve. Abbott feels that the state-raised convict is more qualified to speak about the essence of prison than someone who has only done a few years, for the true effect of prison on a man's body, soul, and mind only manifests itself after perhaps five years or more.

He feels he is particularly qualified to speak about the American prison system. Unlike many others he has observed, he has not lost his mind nor been indoctrinated or "brainwashed" by the oppressive prison system. He remains lucid and has maintained a critical distance from both the system and the prison population, such that his evaluations have some measure of authority and objectivity.

Because he has been violent and defiant in prison, he has seen the darkest sides of the prison system. He has been subjected to years of solitary confinement (which brings with it its own unique horrors and traumas) and psychiatric medication. He has seen murders, riots, the power politics of sex acts, drug use - and he hints that he has directly participated in all of the above directly. His account is certainly a first-hand account, which Abbott believed Norman Mailer may be missing from his research-based, third person account of convict Gary Gilmore.

Tone

The overriding tone of *In the Belly of the Beast* could be said to be anger. Abbott is irate at his own present circumstances of an indefinite prison sentence. He believes his placement in prison is the result of a gross injustice and that he did nothing to earn his lifetime of incarceration and punishment. Extremely indignant, Abbott demands an apology from the prison system for the wrongs they have committed.

However, this is not the ravings of a lunatic or merely a forum to vent. Abbott's ostensible purpose is to inform Norman Mailer (to whom he is writing) in a fairly objective manner about the reality of the prison system; therefore, competing with his inherent fury at his station in life is Abbott's attempt at objectivity. He wishes to document, without embellishment or emotion getting in the way, some of the things he has personally witnessed or experienced, such as solitary confinement and other things. Abbott realizes that mere ranting will not make the average reader receptive to hearing about the system he wishes to expose. The result of these contradictory purposes (expressing anger versus documenting the prison system) is fairly steady, logical



musings that occasionally erupt with righteous anger. There is a conflict, if one is reading between the lines, within Abbott as he tries to emotionally detach himself from personal experiences (in order to explain them accurately) that were in fact traumatic and emotionally devastating.

Structure

Abbott originally wrote what would become *In the Belly of the Beast* as a series of letters to author Norman Mailer, who was at that time preparing and researching his book about convicted killer Gary Gilmore and the death penalty, *The Executioner's Song*. Abbott wrote Mailer initially in this spirit of research and enlightenment; he would write to inform Mailer about what's really happening inside prison.

In the Belly of the Beast collects excerpts from these letters. Sometimes these excerpts may be pages long or sometimes only a paragraph or couple of sentences. Ellipses before or after a passage indicate that the passage was lifted from a longer letter. In a few instances, Abbott is responding to something Mailer wrote him (none of Mailer's responses are published), leading to some initial confusion because the reader doesn't have the benefit of knowing what Mailer wrote, but for the most part the excerpts can stand on their own and be interpreted individually.

Because Abbott is writing about a wide range of topics, chapters usually are organized around a conceptual theme. The last chapter includes musings on one topic, Freedom, for one example.

Though Chapter 1 does include initial biographical information to ground the reader, chapters pay no attention to chronology, as Abbott pays little attention to chronology in his free-form letter writing. Rather, similar ideas from various letters are collected and put together. There is no "narrative progression" or similar locomotion to the book because of its conceptual organization; it can in fact be read in any order.



Quotes

"To be in prison so long, it's difficult to remember exactly what you did to get there. So long, your fantasies of the free world are no longer easily distinguishable from what you 'know' the free world is really like. So long, that being free is exactly identical to a free man's dreams of heaven." (State-Raised Convict, page 3)

"I learned a little secret in this period. A convict over sixty years old passed it on to me: cockroaches are a source of protein. Mash the day's catch all together in a piece of bread and swallow it like a big pill." (Varieties of Punishment, page 32)

"Time descends in your cell like the lid of a coffin in which you lie and watch it as it slowly closes over you. When you neither move nor think in your cell, you are awash in pure nothingness." (The Hole: Solitary Confinement, pages 44-45)

"The pigs in the state and federal prisons - especially in the judicial system - treat me so violently, I cannot possibly imagine a time I could ever have anything but the deepest, aching, searing hatred for them. I can't begin to tell you what they do to me. If I were weaker by a hair, they would destroy me." (The Prison Staff, page 54)

"The only thing a convict respects in another is moral strength. That is all it takes to kill a man. I don't fear or respect any man only for his ability to harm another, and no convict does." (The Inmates, page 68)

"We all need emotional security. [Using heroin is] the only way I can get it, so I do it. It's practical and most convicts serving long sentences use heroin for that purpose. It is therapeutic." (Gods and Drugs, page 91)

"Communists are closer to solving all the 'riddles of mankind than any scientists or philosophers in the past and present have ever been. I do not mean to boast when I say this. It is not a 'theory' but a demonstrable fact." (Choosing Sides: Communists and Marxism, page 99)

"It used to be a pastime of mine to watch the change in men, to observe the blackening of their hearts. It takes place before your eyes. They enter prison more bewildered than afraid. Every step after that, the fear creeps into them." (American Violence/American Justice: The Legal System, page 121)



"In history, capital punishment appears before there appear the crimes of atrocious murders and suicides. Not only do laws perpetrate the forms of crimes they 'abolish,' when they finally contradict the very purpose they were written for they give birth to other forms of crimes. This is what has become of the death penalty in history." (Capital Punishment, page 126)

"Society, which has never in reality accepted blacks as equals, gives them 'equality' only in prison, where they immediately exploit that equality to get back in prison what society outside prison deprives them of: power." (Racism in America and Behind Bars, page 151)

"Every peasant nation that frees itself by an alliance with the Communist Party, the dictatorship of the proletariat, from the imperialist monopoly capitalism of other nations, brings us closer to the hour of the successful proletarian revolution that is spearheading, historically, the world revolution." (Foreign Affairs, page 156)

"I cannot imagine how I can be happy in American society. After all this that society has done, I am naturally resentful. I don't want revenge; to punish. I just would like an apology of some sort. A little consideration. Just a small recognition by society of the injustice that has been done to me, not to mention others like me." (Freedom?, page 165)

Topics for Discussion

How does Abbott compare a prisoner to a bull and the prison system to a bullfighting ring? How does Abbott compare a prisoner to a dog and the prison system to a dog trainer?

What appeal does Abbott find in Communism? Why does he prefer it over other political systems? What is his hope for the world in regards to Communism?

How does Abbott feel about capital punishment? How does he feel about convicted killer Gary Gilmore's decision to skip the appeals process and proceed directly to execution?

Why does Abbott use drugs such as heroin and marijuana? What does he achieve by using them?

Describe "the hole" as Abbott relates it. What makes solitary confinement much worse than normal prison?

How does Abbott relate American racism to the prison system? What form does racism take inside prison culture?

According to Abbott, why must a man be capable of murder in order to survive in prison? What makes murder (either real or the threat of it) central to prison culture?