

# **Invitation to a Beheading Study Guide**

## **Invitation to a Beheading by Vladimir Nabokov**

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# Plot Summary

Cincinnatus C. is a prisoner, condemned to death and awaiting his beheading for a crime that he doesn't fully understand. Cincinnatus isn't condemned for doing anything; instead, he's condemned for being different from everyone else. That difference seems embodied in the strange, dream-like quality of the world he lives in, a world that seems conjured up by his own mind. At the moment of his beheading, Cincinnatus realizes the strange control he has over the world and dissolves his own cage and oppressors.

As the novel begins, Cincinnatus is sentenced to death and locked in a towering prisoner on top of a mountain. Cincinnatus has never fit in with the rest of the world. Even as a child, others could see that Cincinnatus's soul was "opaque," not "transparent" like everyone else's. Cincinnatus learns to hide his deficiency, and he becomes a kindergarten teacher and marries a woman, Marthe.

However, Marthe is unfaithful to Cincinnatus, and Cincinnatus begins to be less guarded around other people. He is detected as different and sentenced to death. His time in the prison is filled with impossible, dreamlike events. Cincinnatus insists on knowing the scheduled time of execution, but no one will tell him. He writes down his thoughts in a disjointed journal.

One of Cincinnatus's dearest desires is to see Marthe again, and he anxiously awaits her scheduled visit. However, instead of Marthe, he meets a fellow prisoner, M'sieur Pierre. Pierre says that he's in prison for planning to help Cincinnatus escape, but he is a pompous and obnoxious man, pretending sympathy and friendship. Meanwhile, Cincinnatus also meets Emmie, the twelve-year-old child of one of the prison officials.

When Cincinnatus finally meets with Marthe, she brings her whole family and all their furniture. He can't even have a single private word with her. After the visit, Cincinnatus begins hearing scratching noises, as if someone is tunneling toward him at night. At the same time, Emmie tells him that she is planning to help him escape.

The prison wall is finally broken through, but instead of rescuers, Cincinnatus finds Pierre and the prison director, laughing at their joke. Pierre leads Cincinnatus through the tunnel to Pierre's cell, where Cincinnatus realizes that Pierre is really the executioner. When Cincinnatus tries to crawl back through the tunnel, though, he ends up outside. Emmie meets him and leads him away, but she leads him back to the prison director's house. Cincinnatus is again in prison.

Finally, Cincinnatus's execution is scheduled, but the night before there is a party for Pierre and Cincinnatus, with all the important local officials. The officials are all sick the next day, and the execution is put off again. Cincinnatus is taken by surprise when he's led away to be executed that afternoon. At the execution, Cincinnatus lays down on the cutting block. Then, he suddenly wonders why he is cooperating with this punishment. He gets up and walks away, as the world of his oppressors crumbles into nothingness in his wake. In the distance, he hears the voices of others like him.



# Chapter One

## Chapter One Summary

As the novel begins, Cincinnatus is sentenced to death for an unknown crime. The judge whispers the sentence in his ear, and then Cincinnatus is hauled away to a towering prison atop a mountain where he is incarcerated by the jailer, Rodion. His lawyer is waiting in the prison cell, but Cincinnatus asks him to leave. The prisoner begins writing down his thoughts, disjointedly. A spider hangs from the ceiling, but Cincinnatus is the only prisoner.

Rodion comes in the cell and dances with the prisoner. They glide out into the corridor and then back into the cell, a room with one window containing a cot, a table, and a chair. Cincinnatus's dinner is getting cold; he's allowed the same food as the wardens. The prison director comes in dressed in a formal frock coat, walks ceremoniously to the cot, and disappears. Then, he walks in again, greets the prisoner, and chides him for not eating. The director begins eating the dinner himself.

Cincinnatus asks when his execution will be, but the director says that he does not know. Cincinnatus insists on knowing. He feels that he cannot start any task, for fear of not having time to finish. The director insists that he does not know and would not be allowed to tell Cincinnatus in any case. However, they are awaiting the arrival of the executioner, who will need some time to prepare.

The director rises and reads a formal speech, with ends in a request for the prisoner to write a formal note of thanks to the director for treating him so well. The director sits down at the table and dismisses Cincinnatus, who wanders out of his cell, down through the tower, out onto the road, down the mountain, and to his house. He opens the door, walks through, and again finds himself locked in his cell.

Cincinnatus asks the guard to turn off the lights, lies down in his bed, and thinks over his situation. He thinks of his wife Marthe and his trial, where his lawyer skillfully won him execution by beheading instead of some worse punishment. The sentence was pronounced in a coded phrase.

## Chapter One Analysis

Cincinnatus is sentenced for an unnamed crime, which even he seems to understand barely, if at all. His entire imprisonment seems absurd, and it takes on the character of a dream. The director walks into the cell and disappears. Cincinnatus walks all the way home, passing by the guards because that night's code word happens to be silence, only to find himself again incarcerated in his cell. To the reader, the events seem like a dream.



The surrealism of the trial and incarceration makes a statement about Cincinnatus's society. It is incomprehensible to him, without any reason. He is caught up in unimaginable events. The idea that he would be sentenced to death is inconceivable and absurd.

However, the surrealism of Cincinnatus's imprisonment also makes the reader question the narrative point of view of the story. Is the imprisonment real? Is all of this part of Cincinnatus's imagination? Is it a dream, or could it be that Cincinnatus is insane and the narration portrays his twisted interpretation of events?



# Chapter Two

## Chapter Two Summary

The jailers bring Cincinnatus the morning papers, and they are filled with photos of his house and family. Cincinnatus is an orphan, son of Cecilia C. and a stranger. Cincinnatus grew up in an orphanage and only met his mother when he was in his twenties. All his life, Cincinnatus has not been like other people, and he has managed to hide his strangeness. When he's not on guard, though, others perceive that his soul is opaque. Even as a child, the other children shun Cincinnatus when they detect how different he is.

At fifteen, Cincinnatus goes to work building toys, an assignment given to him by the government. At night, he reads avidly. He is brought out of his solitary life when he meets Marthe, who also works at the toy factory. They walk together in the park and make love.

In the jail cell, Cincinnatus pulls the screeching table over to the window and climbs atop it to look out on open sky. However, the opening is too deep to see out, and on the wall, Cincinnatus reads, "You cannot see anything. I tried it too." Rodion comes in and ushers Cincinnatus off the table. In his mind, Cincinnatus kicks Rodion in the head, but in actuality, he clamors down. Rodion joyously sings a song alone, but in chorus. The next moment, Cincinnatus realizes the table is immovable and has always been bolted down.

At twenty-two, Cincinnatus becomes a kindergarten teacher, teaching the most hopeless of young children. He marries Marthe, and almost simultaneously, complaints against him begin to surface. The government investigates Cincinnatus and performs tests on him. However, Cincinnatus is able to pass the tests by hiding his abnormality.

Marthe begins openly cheating on Cincinnatus. She has two children by other fathers, a crippled and mean boy and a fat, stupid, nearly blind girl. Both end up in Cincinnatus's class of misfits. Distressed by Marthe's unfaithfulness, Cincinnatus stops guarding his behavior, and he is arrested for his unnamed condition.

In the prison cell, Cincinnatus says to himself that the execution will probably be the next day. He begins undressing and ends up taking apart his entire body, leaving himself free at last. Then, Rodion enters, and Cincinnatus's body rejoins itself.

## Chapter Two Analysis

Chapter Two describes Cincinnatus's crime. He is sentenced to death not for doing something, but instead for being something. Everyone around him realizes that he's different, and the text describes him as dark, black, and opaque. Everyone else is translucent. They barely need to communicate with each other, because there is no



depth in them to communicate. Cincinnatus's crime, therefore, is a depth of soul that separates him from other people. He cannot be immediately understood, and so he is shunned and cast out.

Cincinnatus could be compared to a difficult novel, like Nabokov's, that requires some effort of understanding on the part of the reader, while the other people in Cincinnatus's world seem to be mass-market paperbacks, simplistic in their characterization and obvious in their plots. Because understanding and connection with Cincinnatus requires effort, the shallow people around him simply reject him and ultimately want to destroy him. Cincinnatus's plight can be compared to those persecuted for disagreeing with a culture or regime: for having the wrong politics, the wrong religion, the wrong skin color, or the wrong sexual orientation.

Cincinnatus has several episodes in the book where an imaginary self does something Cincinnatus really wants to do, like kick Rodion in the head, while Cincinnatus himself does what he's supposed to do. This separates Cincinnatus's imagination and desires from his life, where he is bound not only by a prison cell but also by the prison of social norms.





# Chapter Three

## Chapter Three Summary

Cincinnatus awakes to noises, and he believes it must be time for his execution. His lawyer comes in, worriedly looking for his lost cufflink. That's what all the fuss is about. Cincinnatus lies down in the cot and tells the lawyer, Roman Vissarionovich, that the people around him aren't real. He presses Roman to let him know when the execution is scheduled. Roman avoids the question, chiding Cincinnatus at his unnatural behavior. Instead, he offers the prisoner copies of the trial transcript. Cincinnatus tears up the special envelope for requesting transcripts.

The prison director, Rodrig Ivanovich, enters. He has found the lawyer's cufflink. He also informs Cincinnatus that another prisoner is coming to the prison and will keep Cincinnatus company. When Cincinnatus again asks how much time he has, the lawyer and prison director accuse him of being arrogant and ill-mannered. Rodrig Ivanovich seems to transform into Rodion during the conversation.

The lawyer and Rodion lead Cincinnatus up an impossibly long staircase to the prison roof. Cincinnatus looks out over the beautiful vista, surveying the surrounding landscape and its air of freedom. Then, he is led back to his prison cell. Rodion has again become Rodrig Ivanovich.

## Chapter Three Analysis

Cincinnatus is desperate to know the date of his execution, but this is the one thing his captors seem bound to deny him. Perhaps he is denied knowing simply because he wants to know. The lawyer and the prison officials seem inhuman, as if the situation of Cincinnatus's impending execution is insignificant. The lawyer is more concerned with his cufflinks than with his prisoner's feelings.

Rodrig Ivanovich becomes intertwined with the prison guard, Rodion, throughout this chapter. The two become fungible. As Cincinnatus tells his lawyer, other people are not real. Rodrig and Rodion are simply representatives of the society that keeps Cincinnatus imprisoned. They are not human, and so they are interchangeable.



# Chapter Four

## Chapter Four Summary

When Rodion comes in to Cincinnatus's cell, Emmie slips past him. When Rodion leaves, she comes out of her hiding place. She is quiet but mischievous, tooting a tune on his water jug and running around restlessly. Cincinnatus asks her about his execution date, but she does not respond. Cincinnatus says if she were older, she would help him escape. Rodion finally comes in and shoos her out. Cincinnatus says he's through with his books and asks for the library catalogue.

Cincinnatus walks around his cell, distressed, examining the walls and reading the nonsensical rules for prisoners, which include a quiet time between one and three in the afternoon and singing with the guards only "my mutual consent and on certain days." The sixth rule outlaws pleasurable dreams. Cincinnatus looks through an old magazine, marveling at the pictures of bygone days and wondering if he's idealizing the past. He writes down his thoughts in disconnected segments, trying to compose his feelings and wondering about the possibility that Emmie could rescue him.

Rodion and the librarian come in, with Cincinnatus's meal and the library catalogue, respectively. Cincinnatus picks out books from the catalogue, which contains the library's extensive selections organized by number of pages. There are child's drawings on the back of one of the catalogue's pages.

## Chapter Four Analysis

Emmie is mysterious, never indicating what her thoughts and feelings are. However, her presence and her energy give Cincinnatus hope. At least she is not begging him to eat prison food like the director or asking him to request trial transcripts like his lawyer. She seems more real than the other characters, but actually, this reality is merely Cincinnatus reading into the child's silence.

Cincinnatus tries to communicate his thoughts and ideas through writing while he is in the prison. The results are disconnected and confused. His fellow countrymen have condemned him for being "opaque," and his writings show how difficult it is for Cincinnatus to communicate his feelings, even with himself through a personal journal.



# Chapter Five

## Chapter Five Summary

The director enters Cincinnatus's cell and begins to make a formal announcement. Cincinnatus assumes his execution is about to begin, but the director is announcing that the fellow prisoner has arrived. In addition, Cincinnatus will be allowed to meet with Marthe. The world begins dissolving, and the director chides Cincinnatus for his nerves. Cincinnatus asks when he will be able to meet Marthe, but the director assumes he's talking about the new prisoner.

The prison director takes Cincinnatus to the new prisoner's cell. Cincinnatus is allowed to look through the peephole, and he sees the fat little man sitting at the table. Rodion ushers Cincinnatus back to his cell, leaving the director peeking through the door. Guards are lined up behind the director to peek in at the man. Back in his cell, Cincinnatus worries over what he will say to his wife. He longs to make a true connection with her.

Then, Cincinnatus looks over the child's drawings in the library catalog. They look tantalizingly like a story of Emmie helping him to escape, but Cincinnatus chides himself for reading into the pictures. He looks forward to seeing Marthe the next day, and he has asked for a tub to bathe himself. While he waits for the water, he writes about his wife, mourning his discovery that she was nagging and inflexible as well as unfaithful. He recalls sitting at a table with his wife and another man and leaning down for a dropped napkin to find the two intertwined beneath the table. He writes that he still loves her.

Rodion brings in the tub, and Cincinnatus bathes. His jutting ribs mimic the prison bars. After bathing, he goes to bed, but he does not sleep. After a while, Rodion turns on the light and removes the tub. Cincinnatus sees Emmie pass by the door, and a ball rolls in on the floor, bounces off Rodion unnoticed, and rolls out. The light goes out again, and Cincinnatus sleeps restlessly.

## Chapter Five Analysis

Cincinnatus is concerned with meeting his wife one last time. Although she has been completely uncaring and unfaithful, Cincinnatus clings to the idea that he loves her. He continues to hope to make a human connection with her, something that he has not had with any human being.

Meanwhile, the prison employees are completely without empathy for Cincinnatus. They can't understand what seem to be his basic human emotions. Rodion and the director are both obsessed with the arrival of the new prisoner, and they assume that Cincinnatus shares their obsession, unable to see that Cincinnatus has other concerns.

This lack of empathy makes the guards inhuman. Cincinnatus's soul is opaque to them; they cannot understand him.



# Chapter Six

## Chapter Six Summary

Cincinnatus wakes up with the happy thought that Marthe is coming. However, immediately he gets a letter saying that no meeting can be allowed until a week after the trial, so his engagement is postponed one more day. The director comes in and repeats the entire letter word for word. Cincinnatus does not plan to complain about the mix-up, but he sarcastically asks if there's any reason he should believe the promise of a meeting the next day.

The director again transforms into Rodion, who sends Cincinnatus out of the cell so the guards can clean it. Cincinnatus wanders through the hallways. He thinks about his situation and craves freedom, imagining Marthe and the world outside the prison. He comes across Emmie bouncing a ball in front of what he first thinks is a window. Actually, it's a lighted picture of the Tamara Gardens, where he used to walk with Marthe. Cincinnatus begs Emmie to take him away from the prison. Then, Rodion comes upon them and tells Cincinnatus it's time to return to his cell. Cincinnatus realizes that he's walked around in a circle, and it's just a short distance down the hall to his cell. As Cincinnatus walks past the open door of the other prisoner's cell, Rodion chides him not to peek.

## Chapter Six Analysis

During Chapter Six, Nabokov names Cincinnatus's crime, calling it "gnostical turpitude." Literally, this means a depravity of too much (perhaps spiritual) knowledge. Cincinnatus is too deep and complex. He is opaque and impenetrable, somehow beyond all the other people in his world. Again, this is a condemnation of something inherent in Cincinnatus. His "gnostical turpitude" is his humanity.

Tamara Gardens symbolizes freedom to Cincinnatus. The time he spent there was before his marriage and Marthe's infidelity, and Cincinnatus wants to recapture the time in Tamara Gardens. The picture of the gardens is an imitation or fake, a motif that appears throughout the story. Everything in the world seems unreal, a false front like a movie set.



# Chapter Seven

## Chapter Seven Summary

Cincinnatus awakes the next morning and dresses in his best clothes in anticipation of meeting Marthe. Rodion places flowers not quite in the center of the table and brings in a stool and a chair. Rodrig Ivanovich enters at ten o'clock and inspects the room. Then, Rodrig goes and gets the guest—not Marthe, but the other prisoner, M'sieur Pierre.

Pierre makes absurd and polite conversation with the disappointed Cincinnatus while the director hovers and fauns over Pierre. Pierre says he's a photographer and pulls out a stack of photos, all of himself. The director gushes over them. Then, Pierre performs an absurd card trick and tells a nonsensical joke. He brags about his brilliance and sensitivity, while Cincinnatus sits morosely.

The librarian comes in with some new books for Cincinnatus, and the director begs Pierre to do the card trick again. The librarian refuses to participate, and the director runs after him but fails to bring him back. Cincinnatus begins reading a book. Pierre insists he's enjoying himself greatly and promises to return many times. The director leads Pierre off, chiding Cincinnatus for his poor behavior.

## Chapter Seven Analysis

The guards' lack of empathy culminates in Chapter Seven's misunderstanding. Cincinnatus anticipates meeting his wife Marthe, but the whole prison seems overwhelmed with the presence of M'sieur Pierre. Pierre turns out to be completely arrogant and self-obsessed. This arrogance is underlined by Pierre's photographs, which are all portraits of himself. While Pierre pretends to be solicitous, in actuality, he only sees his own perceived greatness. The prison director buys into Pierre's self-perception, practically falling over himself to praise Pierre. No one understands Cincinnatus's disinterest. The librarian is the only character who seems immune to Pierre. Perhaps his bookish life makes him disinterested in Pierre's self-aggrandizement.



# Chapter Eight

## Chapter Eight Summary

Cincinnatus has been imprisoned for eight days, and he continues writing his thoughts. He anticipates his death, still uncertain of its hour, and he feels a soul within himself. He still has trouble expressing his thoughts, and he is haunted by fear. He dreams of a world that is real and vibrant. He can vaguely sense how to combine words into real, meaningful thoughts, but he fails to achieve the true communication he desires.

Cincinnatus compares his feeling to lying on the ground with eyes closed and detecting the sun coming out and warming the world. He imagines a world where people understand deeper meanings, where "freaks" are not tortured, where time is unending, where his beloved gardens appear in their true form, and where the soul is fulfilled. He sees only a dim reflection of this vision in the world. Again, Cincinnatus loses his word and fails to communicate. He says there are no human beings in the world, and he is mired in fear.

Cincinnatus remembers being a child, left out of the other children's game. He is sitting in a window above the other children, until one of the teachers walks up and tells him to join the other children in the garden. Cincinnatus walks directly out the window and finds himself walking on the air.

## Chapter Eight Analysis

Chapter Eight gives Cincinnatus's thoughts, as he writes them down. A single eight-page paragraph takes up most of the chapter, as Cincinnatus struggles to solidify what he thinks and feels. The world seems unreal to Cincinnatus because part of him has past beyond this world into a spiritual world. He envisions a paradise or heaven without the absurdities and shallowness of the world around him. The story that Cincinnatus relates of walking out the window and into the air shows that Cincinnatus is beyond normal existence. The material world is meaningless to him, and he can manipulate it and defy it.



# Chapter Nine

## Chapter Nine Summary

The following day, Cincinnatus awakes to another commotion. Marthe has arrived, and she has brought her entire family along with all of their furniture. Marthe's father is there, as well as her brothers, who are identical twins. Marthe's mother's parents are also there, and three female cousins aren't allowed entry for some unknown reason. Marthe's children, Diomedon and Pauline, are also part of the gathering, and Marthe brings a solicitous male companion.

Among the furniture brought into the cell are chairs, parts of walls, a fishbowl containing a goldfish, a tricycle, a table, and a mirrored wardrobe that permanently reflects a corner of Cincinnatus's bedroom. Marthe's father begins to lecture Cincinnatus. Marthe talks quietly with her companion, who asks her if she's cold, and she chides her son for misbehavior. The lawyer comes in and sits in one corner. Marthe's father continues to yell at Cincinnatus.

Marthe's grandfather goes to light Marthe's father's cigarette, but the flame goes out. Suddenly, everyone talks at once. Marthe's brother is singing, and Diomedon is strangling the cat. The other brother begs Cincinnatus to repent. Cincinnatus tries to get past them to talk to his wife, and when he finally gets past the obstacles, he begs to talk with her in private.

Rodion comes in and signals that the time for the interview is over. The men start carrying out the furniture, and Marthe waves goodbye. Her father says a conciliatory farewell to Cincinnatus, and the lawyer leads away the two children. Emmie runs up to Cincinnatus, but Rodion drags her out of the room. The room is nearly emptied, but Rodion comes to remove the dead cat.

## Chapter Nine Analysis

When Cincinnatus's long-awaited interview with Marthe happens, he cannot even attempt to talk to her. The whole of society seems to separate the two of them, and Marthe literally brings with her all of her emotional "baggage."

Any meeting of the minds between Cincinnatus and Marthe is blocked by Marthe's father's criticisms, her brothers' concerns, and her children's awkward behavior, not to mention her caring lover who constantly hovers over her. All of the obstacles to real, human communication are in Cincinnatus's cell with the husband and wife when they finally meet, just as these obstacles have been with them every day of their married life.





# Chapter Ten

## Chapter Ten Summary

M'sieur Pierre visits Cincinnatus again, commenting on the progress he's making in befriending the other prisoner. Pierre admits that the director fauns over him, chiding Cincinnatus for acting jealous. Then, Pierre says that he sees something on Cincinnatus's neck, and he examines his fellow prisoner's neck almost lovingly. He finds Cincinnatus's neck in good order.

Pierre tells Cincinnatus that he is accused of trying to help Cincinnatus escape. He claims never to lie, but he will not say if the charges are true. He adds that they will walk up the scaffold together. Cincinnatus decides to believe Pierre and even thanks him. Then, Pierre defends both Rodion and the prison director to Cincinnatus, who obviously dislikes both men. Cincinnatus asks again about the date of the execution, but Pierre chides him for his curiosity.

Cincinnatus hints that someone else might try to help him escape, too, but he's vague when Pierre asks about it. Cincinnatus asks Pierre if he would like to escape, and Pierre is surprised. To where would he want to escape? Cincinnatus comments that Pierre's physique would make escape difficult, and Pierre immediately becomes offended. He shows his tattooed muscular arm.

Pierre exhibits his strength by balancing a chair above his head and then standing on his hands. There is applause from outside the cell. Pierre then hops on the table and lifts the chair with his teeth. The director comes in, dressed as a ringmaster. Pierre somersaults to the floor, but his dentures are still stuck in the chair. Pierre leaves with the chair. Rodrig Ivanovich applauds.

## Chapter Ten Analysis

Pierre's fondling of Cincinnatus's neck is the first overt hint of his identity. When Pierre says he is accused of wanting to help Cincinnatus escape, it is partially true. Pierre is the executioner, and he wants to help Cincinnatus make his way into the next life, his only escape. When Pierre says that he will mount the scaffold with Cincinnatus, this too is true. He will mount the scaffold as Cincinnatus's executioner.

Despite Pierre's insistence on truth, Pierre's "friendship" with Cincinnatus is based on deception. Cincinnatus finds, not another human being he can connect with on a fundamental level, but instead a self-absorbed, pompous front of a man who insists that Cincinnatus is his friend to benefit his own self-image. Pierre's exhibition of his strength is another instance of his self-aggrandizement.



# Chapter Eleven

## Chapter Eleven Summary

As all references to the execution are clipped out of Cincinnatus's daily papers, Cincinnatus asks the guards to stop bringing the papers. Instead of hot chocolate, the guards bring tea. Rodion's dislike of Cincinnatus is becoming obvious. Rodion brings back Cincinnatus's chair, with Pierre's teeth-marks, and a note from Pierre again emphasizing his strength.

Cincinnatus knows his cell better than any other room. There are four yellow walls, darkened by shadow except where the sunlight from the window hits them. The single-bulb light on the ceiling is maddeningly not quite in the center. The furniture consists of a cot, a table, and a chair, and only the chair can be moved. The spider lives up in the window, and the walls have been wiped clean of all writing. The water pitcher is gone, and the room seems like a waiting room. Library books are piled on the table, along with Cincinnatus's pencil and papers filled with scribbled writings.

Cincinnatus has written a letter to Marthe, but he can't decide whether to send it. Cincinnatus himself, pacing through his cell, seems almost ethereal, as if at any moment he could pass out of the world.

The library books on the table are a modern novel called *Quercus*, an anthology of classic literature, a bound group of magazines, and several volumes in an unknown language. *Quercus* is a biography of an oak tree, spanning several centuries and chronicling the people who pass by the ancient tree. Though the book is unquestionably great, it seems meaningless to Cincinnatus, so near to his death.

Cincinnatus asks Rodion about the schedule for his execution, but Rodion ignores him. Then, he asks about seeing Marthe again, and again he gets no answer. Rodion chastises Cincinnatus for ingratitude. When Cincinnatus goes to bed with his novel, he wonders if anyone will save him. A giant fake acorn falls from the sky.

## Chapter Eleven Analysis

Cincinnatus's character is distancing him from Rodion, causing tension to mount. As Cincinnatus merely wanders through his cell, the guards who eternally watching him become uncomfortable. Obviously, there is something otherworldly about Cincinnatus, something the other people cannot understand. Cincinnatus's lengthy diary is an attempt to communicate the uncommunicatable, the reality within him that exists, immutable, beneath the surface.

The book *Quercus* pokes gentle fun at literary novels. It's plot is intellectual, allowing the author to trace history from the perspective of a tree, and it is filled with descriptions of the tree itself and the surrounding nature. Cincinnatus thinks of the author's mortality.



The author is the god of his story, its creator and the decider of all fates, and yet that god is mortal like Cincinnatus. Cincinnatus himself is a god of his own reality, since he controls, dreamlike, everything around him. When Cincinnatus wonders if anyone will save him, the acorn falling from the ceiling suggests that the author is above Cincinnatus, watching and responding to his call for help.



# Chapter Twelve

## Chapter Twelve Summary

Cincinnatus is awoken by scratching noises. He lies in bed, listening to the sounds. Then, he sits up, tensing, and trying to locate the sounds. Cincinnatus accidentally bumps into a tray, making a noise, and the scratching sounds stop. After a while, they start up again. Cincinnatus goes back toward the cot to get his slippers, but he bumps into the chair, making another noise. The sounds stop again. It's almost morning, and the sounds don't recur.

That day, there's a thunderstorm. Rodrig Ivanovich comes in to tell Cincinnatus that he's mother has come to see him. Does Cincinnatus want to see her? Cincinnatus, who barely knows his mother, declines. The director assents, goes out, and leads Cecilia C. in to meet with her son. Cecilia comments on the horrible weather and says the cell is quiet and clean. She straightens the bed and the table. Cecilia bears a strong resemblance to her son. She looks at a magazine and accidentally knocks the pencil off the table. Then, she gives Cincinnatus a bag of candy.

Cecilia complains about the long climb up the stairs, and Cincinnatus asks why she came. She accuses her of being unreal, noting that while her coat is wet, her shoes are dry. She responds that she left her galoshes in the office, and tells him she came because she's his mother. He laughs and tells her not to make it a farce. He asks about his father, and she tells him that she never saw his father's face. It was just a tryst in the park. She says, though, that Cincinnatus's father was like him.

The sky is clearing, and Cecilia talks about how beautiful it is outside. She doesn't know why she's there. Cincinnatus calls her a parody and says everything in the prison is fake. He says that the prison clock has no dial, and the watchman paints on new clock hands every hour and makes the ringing noise. Cecilia tells him about "nonnons," misshapen lumps that came with a special distorted mirror. The mirror would make everything look strange and distended, but the nonnons, held in front of the mirror, reflected back as beautiful pictures. Cincinnatus asks what the point of the story is, and for a moment, he sees a glance of real emotion in his mother's eye. Rodrig Ivanovich comes to lead Cincinnatus's mother away, and M'sieur Pierre comes to visit Cincinnatus, bringing with him a Punch doll and a number of games.

## Chapter Twelve Analysis

The tantalizing scratching seems like an answer to Cincinnatus's plaintive cries at the end of the last chapter. Perhaps escape is possible and salvation is scratching at the walls. Still, everything about Cincinnatus's world is deceptive and unreliable, and it is likely that the scratching is a false hope.



Cecilia goes through all of the motherly attitudes when she visits her son. She straightens up the room, although there are hardly any contents, and she gives him a bag of candy as if he is a little boy. Cincinnatus sees all these trappings of the idea of "mother" as more falseness and deception. Especially considering that Cincinnatus has never known his mother, her attitude reeks of societal artifice, the taking on of a role determined by the culture. He sees not a person, but a performance.

The story of the clock and the story of the nonnons are both tales of artifice. Cincinnatus's story shows that he sees the world around him as unreal and deceptive. His mother's countering tale indicates that there may be some distorted truth behind the deceptive appearances of the world. Cincinnatus even believes he sees a hint of real, human emotion in his mother's glance. This is the first indication that Cincinnatus is not completely alone in the world.



# Chapter Thirteen

## Chapter Thirteen Summary

In the night, Cincinnatus again hears the scratching noises in the walls. He wants to believe in a savior tunneling toward him. He takes a chair and knocks on the walls, trying to communicate with the digger. The digging noises pause and then continue, and Cincinnatus believes he has communicated with the other. Cincinnatus considers creating a tapping alphabet, but the morning is breaking. The noises disappear. All through the day, Cincinnatus is filled with hope.

Cincinnatus's letter to Marthe is still unsent. It is an attempt to communicate the reality of his situation to his wife. He begs her to have some human feeling toward him, if only for a moment. He bemoans her infidelities and the torture of their married life. He cannot express why he feels so betrayed, and he says he knows she is not real. Still, he begs her to understand the horror of what's happening. He also begs to see her again, alone.

When Rodion brings dinner, Cincinnatus asks him to deliver the letter. Cincinnatus also asks if there are any other prisoners and whether the executioner has arrived. Rodion responds angrily, and Pierre enters with more games.

Cincinnatus and Pierre play a game of chess, and Pierre talks about sex through the entire game. Every time Cincinnatus makes a good move or forces Pierre to check or checkmate, Pierre insists on taking back previous moves and replaying the last part of the game. In the end, Pierre accuses Cincinnatus of cheating, knocks over the chessboard, and says Cincinnatus does not know how to play. Pierre pulls out another game and again goes into a temper when Cincinnatus begins winning. Finally, Cincinnatus complains that Pierre's feet smell, and Pierre chides Cincinnatus for his rudeness.

## Chapter Thirteen Analysis

Chapter 13 compares Cincinnatus with Pierre. Cincinnatus is full of emotion and tries to focus Marthe on his plight. The letter is self-absorbed, begging Marthe to feel pity and anguish for Cincinnatus's sake. In his plight, Cincinnatus wants to be the center of Marthe's thoughts, if only for a moment. His focus is inward, on his emotional processes and his personal reality. He strains to communicate his inner turmoil to another human being through his letter to Marthe.

Pierre is also self-absorbed. He insists on maintaining his high opinion of himself, and he wants to manipulate the facts of the world to match that opinion. Instead of being focused on his inner thoughts and emotions, Pierre focuses on his appearance to the world. He is a master of the social artifices that Cincinnatus abhors. By insisting that he's a great chess player, Pierre becomes a great chess player. Only the reality of

Cincinnatus's mastery interferes with Pierre's self-aggrandizement. Rather than admit to superficial imperfection, Pierre has a tantrum.



# Chapter Fourteen

## Chapter Fourteen Summary

The sounds in the walls are nearly upon Cincinnatus that night, and he anticipates the arrival of his rescuer at any moment. In the morning, when Rodion comes in, some rustling is still audible. Emmie takes advantage of Rodion's entry to rush in and hide until he leaves. She playfully attacks Cincinnatus and cuddles up to him. Then, she tells Cincinnatus that she plans to rescue him the following day. She says that they should run off and be married.

Cincinnatus asks for details of the rescue plan, and Emmie whispers in his ear, but he cannot make out anything that she says. He begins to fall asleep with Emmie still crawling over him, and Rodion comes to take her away. The sounds start up again, even though it's daylight.

In the evening, M'sieur Pierre comes to visit again. He smokes a pipe and begins lecturing Cincinnatus on pleasure, starting with erotic pleasures. Rodrig Ivanovich comes in to listen to the lesson, and Pierre starts over to make sure the director doesn't miss anything. Pierre discusses the pleasure of a spring day. He consults his notes as he speaks, and then mentions spiritual pleasures and the pleasures of art. Then, he mentions the pleasures of food and goes on to list other miscellaneous pleasures. The director begs to add his favorite food to the list but stops when he sees Pierre is offended.

Cincinnatus calls Pierre's speech nonsense, but Pierre protests that Cincinnatus really does appreciate Pierre's pleasures. Rodrig complains that Cincinnatus should repent, and Pierre mourns the fact that he forgot to mention something about gymnastics. Rodrig praises the speech, and both men leave. Cincinnatus crawls into his cot, telling himself that the digging sounds are probably just maintenance workers.

Rodion comes in and sits on the stool, but when Cincinnatus asks again about the executioner, Rodion immediately takes the stool and leaves. Cincinnatus looks back on his time in the prison. His considerations of the characters that surround him give them reality.

## Chapter Fourteen Analysis

Cincinnatus has two avenues of rescue opening for him, but like the rest of the world, they seem vague and unreal. The digging sounds in the wall go unnoticed by the guards, and they are completely disembodied noises. Similarly, Emmie's childish talk of rescuing Cincinnatus seems to have no substance. She whispers her plans in his ear, but they are just the noise of murmuring. They have no reality.





Pierre's list of the pleasures of life is all physical pleasures. He counts only sex as part of the pleasure of love. He mentions spiritual pleasures briefly but blends them into the visceral pleasure of viewing art. Pierre exists in the physical, material world, while Cincinnatus is centered in a spiritual, emotional, internalized world. Pierre imposes on Cincinnatus his idea of what Cincinnatus should be, much as society imposes on all of us a societal idea of normalcy. Cincinnatus is uninterested in Pierre's drivel, but Pierre protests that this is impossible. Cincinnatus must feel the pull of these normal pleasures.



# Chapter Fifteen

## Chapter Fifteen Summary

In the late afternoon, Cincinnatus hears the noises beginning again. A loud noise indicates a breakthrough, and Cincinnatus gets his few possessions together in anticipation of the diggers. With a tremendous crash, the wall falls in. From the clouds of dust emerge M'sieur Pierre and Rodrig Ivanovich, laughing at their joke.

Pierre tells Cincinnatus that the tunnel is for the two friends to visit, and he insistently ushers Cincinnatus through to have tea. With no other choice, Cincinnatus crawls ahead of Pierre through the tight, uncomfortable tunnel. Finally, they come out in M'sieur Pierre's cell. Pierre brushes the dust off of his guest and changes his clothes. He brags that his cell, though the same as Cincinnatus's, is decorated. There is a wall calendar and a quilt on the cot, as well as pictures and a fan on the wall.

Pierre mentions his great friendship with Cincinnatus, saying he knows Cincinnatus better than anyone does. He chides Cincinnatus for being rude to the director, who prepared such a wonderful surprise. Pierre also says how much he likes Cincinnatus, and he opens the large case that he has in his room, revealing the shining ax inside, all the time talking in his friendly, chatty tone.

Pierre suggests that Cincinnatus should go back to his room, using the tunnel. Cincinnatus crawls again into the tight, uncomfortable labyrinth. He makes his way through the darkness, and eventually it leads, not back to his cell, but outside. Cincinnatus has finally broken free of the prison. Emmie appears and leads Cincinnatus off. She takes him around and through a door, and Cincinnatus finds himself back in the director's home, where the director and his wife are dining with Pierre. Emmie's mother says the event is just one last prank before Emmie goes back to school. Emmie ignores Cincinnatus and sits down to eat. Rodrig Ivanovich gives Cincinnatus a "photohoroscope" that Pierre has made for Emmie.

## Chapter Fifteen Analysis

Cincinnatus's hopes of rescue on both fronts are dashed. Yet again, the world around Cincinnatus turns out to be deceptive and dangerous. Instead of a tunnel to freedom, Cincinnatus finds only a tunnel to another cell. Worse yet, he realizes that the executioner has arrived and has been with him for days. That means his execution cannot be far away. If Cincinnatus puts his hopes in Emmie, those hopes also are dashed. Emmie leads Cincinnatus not to freedom but back into captivity. The director's family and the executioner are not angry or appalled. They merely take in stride Cincinnatus's appearance at the back door. His escape isn't possible. As in the first chapter, Cincinnatus merely runs in circles, always leading back into the prison.



Because Cincinnatus has at least some control over the dreamlike world that surrounds him and often seems like a figment of his imagination, the constant entrapment that he feels must be of his own doing. Cincinnatus always leads himself back into captivity, and so on some level, he condemns himself, as well as being condemned by society.



# Chapter Sixteen

## Chapter Sixteen Summary

The spider in Cincinnatus's cell has fed hungrily and is still looking for more. Cincinnatus is scraped up, but he's in one piece. Two of the prison employees have plastered the wall, closing off the tunnel. Cincinnatus still has the photohoroscope album of Emmie, which contains pictures of Emmie's face superimposed on photographs of other people. It documents her future life, up to her death at forty years old. Rodion takes away the album, since Emmie is leaving for school. He laments over her departure and notes that Cincinnatus has stopped asking when the executioner will arrive.

M'sieur Pierre comes into the cell with Rodrig Ivanovich and Cincinnatus's lawyer. They sit down at the table. Cincinnatus paces and finally sits. The lawyer takes out a pad and pencil to take notes. Pierre takes a drink of water and then begins to speak. He explains how cleverly he has developed a sympathy and friendship between himself and Pierre and he condemns how, in the past, the executioner and the executed were strangers. He describes how he pretended to be a prisoner to gain Cincinnatus's friendship for the greater good, and while insisting he has nothing to be sorry for, asks Cincinnatus's forgiveness. When Cincinnatus won't shake Pierre's hand, the director reacts angrily, but M'sieur Pierre says it does not matter.

Pierre continues talking about his friendship with Cincinnatus, describing their wonderful time together, how Cincinnatus loves him, and how this will take the fear out of Cincinnatus's execution. Pierre then asks the director to formally announce that Pierre is the executioner, but the director performs his announcement poorly. Pierre finds the program and tells Cincinnatus that the execution is scheduled for the day after next in Thriller Square. He reads the program, indicating that it will be an entertaining public spectacle. The day before the execution, Pierre and Cincinnatus will meet with the city's officials.

Pierre turns the floor over to Cincinnatus, despite the director's objections, but Cincinnatus does not speak. After one minute, Pierre disbands the meeting. As the men leave, the director whispers to the others about some antiquated system that he wished they still could use. After they're gone, the librarian comes to get the books. Cincinnatus tells him that, since the execution is soon, he won't have any new books. Cincinnatus tries to express himself to the man but cannot. The librarian suggests a book about gods, but Cincinnatus declines. Again, Cincinnatus tries to express his inner thoughts, but the librarian flees the room.

## Chapter Sixteen Analysis

All hope of escape is gone, and Cincinnatus's death sentence becomes real. The photohoroscope album is a reminder of mortality, depicting the whole of Emmie's life



and death, but it is also a reminder of the basic falseness of Cincinnatus's world. All the pictures are faked, and the wrinkles on Emmie's young face are false wrinkles. Her death is a false death. At every turn, Cincinnatus has been deceived, and Pierre, the maker of the album, is the prime deceiver. Even his gift to Emmie is one of falseness.

The meeting between Cincinnatus, the lawyer, the director, and Pierre is a farce. Pierre waxes on about the great friendship he's built with Cincinnatus, another deception. Pierre's character tries to make things true by putting them into words. This is a way he controls the world around him. He makes speeches, designating "truths." He says that he is a great chess player and that Cincinnatus doesn't know how to play. He confirms that he has successfully built a true bond and sympathetic understanding with Cincinnatus. The director, and the rest of society, seem to believe Pierre's "truth," simply because it is stated. Cincinnatus is the only one who sees through and rejects the falseness.

The librarian, the man of books and learning, seems to be the most sympathetic character among Cincinnatus's captors. Cincinnatus tries to reach out to him, as the time of execution nears. However, the librarian maintains his own isolation. The librarian's refusal to talk with Cincinnatus may be a defense mechanism against the society that condemns Cincinnatus's being.



# Chapter Seventeen

## Chapter Seventeen Summary

The city officials gather at the deputy city manager's house, so that they can all meet with Pierre and Cincinnatus together. The gathering is lively, despite a coffin on display. The jocular party goes to the dining room for supper, and the guests look toward Pierre and Cincinnatus. Pierre begins to entertain the party through his talk while Cincinnatus fidgets with his knife. Pierre is kindly and solicitous toward Cincinnatus, who does not eat. Pierre tells the same unfunny joke he previously told Cincinnatus, to uproarious laughter. Pierre anoints himself and Cincinnatus with a drop of wine. Everyone at the table congratulates Pierre.

The party moves outside. Pierre stays constantly at Cincinnatus's side, lecturing on himself. Suddenly Cincinnatus realizes that the backyard borders on Tamara Gardens. The park superintendent asks Pierre's permission to speak to Cincinnatus and tells him that there's a special surprise. The chief engineer runs off to his preparations. At midnight, lights begin to blaze throughout the garden, and everyone is amazed at the show. The initials "P" and "C" are supposed to appear in lights, but they don't work.

The party begins breaking up. M'sieur Pierre organizes photographs of himself and Cincinnatus. As Pierre and Cincinnatus walk back to the prison, Pierre chides Cincinnatus for his surly behavior and then comments that he's feeling unwell and suspects the food.

## Chapter Seventeen Analysis

Cincinnatus's death is made into a spectacle. Pierre feeds off of Cincinnatus's misery to glorify himself, becoming the center of all attention at the party. Both the society, represented by the officials, and Cincinnatus have their own subjective realities. The societal reality of the officials contrasts starkly with the personal reality of Cincinnatus. The societal reality is superficial and adorned with meaningless acts. Happiness is enforced by food, drink, and the expectation of happy behavior. The feelings and emotions of the prisoner himself, the guest of honor, have no place in the celebratory gathering of the society's officials.



# Chapter Eighteen

## Chapter Eighteen Summary

Cincinnatus does not sleep. In the morning, he scribbles his final thoughts, expecting his execution any minute. He is filled with fear and at the same time ashamed of his own fear because he believes that death is nothing to fear and perhaps a freeing of the soul. He imagines himself running head first into the wall, but in reality, he sits at the table waiting for the next words to come. Cincinnatus begs his future reader to preserve his words. Time passes. No one comes. Cincinnatus continues disjointedly recording his thoughts. Breakfast comes as usual. More time passes. Cincinnatus realizes that he's been deceived again. There is no execution.

In the mid-afternoon, Marthe rushes into Cincinnatus's cell. She is slightly in disarray. Marthe gives Cincinnatus some cornflowers and complains that it was difficult to get permission to see him, implying that she slept with an official to attain the interview. She tells Cincinnatus that the execution was delayed because everyone was too tired, but she doesn't know how long the delay will be, perhaps a long time.

Marthe begins crying and says she's worn out, scolding Cincinnatus for getting into this position. She tells Cincinnatus that Cecilia C. came up to her and introduced herself as Cincinnatus's mother. Cecilia asked Marthe for a paper certifying that she had never been to Marthe's house or visited Cincinnatus. Although this is true, Marthe will not give the certificate because she's afraid of being suspected of knowing too much about her husband. Marthe asks Cincinnatus why he's not happy and then offers to have sex with him. He refuses, and she mentions that their former neighbor has asked her to marry him, to her horror.

Rodion comes to the door. Marthe objects that she still has time left, and when she hears Rodion's request, she objects again. The agreement was that she would only have sex with the director. Still, Rodion insists, and she leaves for forty-five minutes. When she returns, she complains that her lover could not perform.

Cincinnatus asks Marthe if she read his letter. She reacts angrily, saying it was a horrible letter. She says the letter was criminal and that she'll be in trouble for receiving it. She begs Cincinnatus to repent for her sake and the children's sake. Cincinnatus does not know what he is supposed to repent. Cincinnatus tells her good-bye, and the guards come to lead Marthe away.

## Chapter Eighteen Analysis

Cincinnatus is deceived again about the time of his death. The anticipated execution never arrives. This gives Cincinnatus the opportunity he needs to resolve his final unresolved issue: his relationship with Marthe. Throughout his time in prison, Cincinnatus has anticipated a final meeting with his wife in order to establish some kind

of real, human connection with her. During their first meeting, his attempts to communicate are constantly thwarted.

When Marthe arrives for the second meeting, she maintains her persona from their marriage. Marthe has slept with the director to gain entrance to the prison, and she thinks nothing of sleeping with a guard to maintain her access. She pouts when Cincinnatus seems unhappy, completely unable to empathize with his position. She selfishly refuses to help Cincinnatus's mother, choosing to preserve her own safety at the potential cost of another's.

Cincinnatus finally brings the meeting to its core when he mentions his letter. His only real desire is to achieve some connection or communication with Marthe and to make her understand him. However, she is horrified at his desires, equating them with his criminal behavior. She cannot even think about making a real connection with Cincinnatus, and this is the one thing he cannot forgive. He dismisses Marthe forever, removing his last tie to the world.





# Chapter Nineteen

## Chapter Nineteen Summary

The next morning, Cincinnatus gets the newspaper. Most of the article about the postponed execution is blacked out, but Cincinnatus gathers that Pierre is ill and the execution is delayed until further notice. Rodion comes in, saying that he has a treat for the spider. He has it wrapped in a towel, but Rodion accidentally lets it go. It is a large, beautiful moth. For a moment, it mounts on the table, and then it disappears from view. Cincinnatus has seen it land, but Rodion cannot find it. Rodion contents the spider with a fly and leaves.

Cincinnatus writes about how life has tricked him. Everything is false, so how could he have looked for redemption in this life? He laments his inability to express himself well. He runs out of paper, and then he finds another sheet to finish his last sentence, that he's not afraid of . . . The last word is "death." He writes it down and then crosses it off, looking for a better term. Suddenly, he remembers the moth and goes to the cot, where it's settled. He examines the beautiful creature and touches it.

The door opens, and M'sieur Pierre enters with the director and the lawyer. Both look exhausted and are not made up or dressed up. They look strikingly similar to each other. Cincinnatus is surprised to discover that it's time for his execution. He had been certain it would be at dawn. Cincinnatus asks for time to prepare, but Pierre says he's had plenty of time. Pierre reads a list of acceptable last requests, including a glass of wine or a trip to the toilet. Pierre is angered to find on the list "composing an address to the director expressing . . . expressing gratitude for his considerate . . ." He accuses the director of sneaking this option onto the list, and although the director denies it, Pierre begins a rant. He is ill. The food was bad. He gets no respect. He threatens to quit.

The director attempts to calm Pierre, buttering him up and apologizing for the mistake. Pierre agrees to continue. He asks Cincinnatus for his last wish, and Cincinnatus says he wants to finish his writing. In the same instant, Cincinnatus realizes he has nothing more to write. Pierre says he doesn't understand, and Cincinnatus instead asks for three minutes of privacy. Reluctantly, Pierre agrees after attempting to bargain him down. During the three minutes, the men hang around the cell, and Rodrig begins cleaning up the room. The whole cell begins to collapse, now that it's no longer needed to contain Cincinnatus. The spider proves to be mechanical. Then, the time is up. Cincinnatus is horrified at his own fear. The party leaves for the execution.

## Chapter Nineteen Analysis

At the beginning of the chapter, the beautiful and unusual moth, scheduled for his own execution, escapes death. This gives Cincinnatus hope. However, just as Cincinnatus feels he has lost his fear, the time for his execution unexpectedly comes. For all the



times Cincinnatus has anticipated death, it catches him unawares, one last deception of the false world.

When Cincinnatus is faced with the reality of his execution, all of his fear comes back to him. He begs for more time, but the three minutes that he grudgingly gets is filled with noise and commotion. The prison begins dissolving around Cincinnatus. It was never real. The spider itself is a mechanical toy, despite its devouring of living insects. The prison shows itself to lack solidity. Only Cincinnatus himself gives the world around him reality.



# Chapter Twenty

## Chapter Twenty Summary

Cincinnatus leaves the prison in a procession with Pierre, Rodrig, and Roman. The whole prison is crumbling. The upwards stairs lead downwards, and down leads up. Cincinnatus is overcome with his fear. Cincinnatus understands that everything around him is an illusion, but he cannot defeat his own terror. They ride in a carriage to the square, and the townspeople gather, seeing them passing. Women throw flowers into the carriage. They drive past Cincinnatus's house, and he can't help but look. Marthe is sitting in an apple tree, waving. Pierre calls Cincinnatus heartless.

The party arrives in Thriller Square, the site of the execution. A scaffold has been raised not quite in the center of the square. Cincinnatus insists on exiting the carriage and walking up to the platform without assistance. There is a large block atop the platform. Cincinnatus does not quite know what to do with himself. The world around him begins to look unreal. The spectators farthest away look badly painted.

The deputy city director comes up to the platform and announces that the younger people are walking too fast, a furniture exhibit is opening, and a comedic opera is playing that night. In addition, there is a sale of belts. After the announcements, Pierre tries to remove Cincinnatus's shirt, and Cincinnatus insists on doing it himself. Then, Pierre shows Cincinnatus how to lie on the block, and Cincinnatus takes his place. Pierre tells Cincinnatus to relax and asks him to begin counting.

One part of Cincinnatus begins counting, but another asks himself why he is there. He gets up from the block and looks at the crowd. The librarian is vomiting. The others are fading away. Cincinnatus walks down from the scaffold and away from the square. Roman, who melds with Rodrig, runs after him and tries to drag him back, but he has become small and meaningless. A woman goes by, carrying the now puny Pierre. As the world completely collapses, Cincinnatus walks off toward where he hears the voices of others like him.

## Chapter Twenty Analysis

Cincinnatus struggles with his own fear as he makes his way toward the execution. Fear is the only thing that holds Cincinnatus back from freedom. As he makes his way to the chopping block, Cincinnatus insists on doing everything himself. By controlling his own actions, he is becoming independent of the forces that have been oppressing him. However, he is still allowing himself to be controlled, because the actions that Cincinnatus takes are at the direction of those around him.

Only at the final moment, when Cincinnatus is spread on the chopping block, does he realize his true freedom. He wonders to himself why he is agreeing to participate in this sham of a society. He steps off the chopping block and out into the world, and

everything that has oppressed him begins to dissolve. The oppressors have no power that Cincinnatus has not given them himself.



# Characters

## Cincinnatus C.

Cincinnatus C. is a prisoner sentenced to death. His crime is not something he's done, but instead a condition of his being. Cincinnatus is introverted, focusing constantly on some internalized idea of the soul, heaven, and humanity. Everything surrounding Cincinnatus in the world seems false and illusory.

Without realizing, Cincinnatus has power over the world around him. As if he exists in a dream, Cincinnatus mentally controls the illusions that surround him. As a child, Cincinnatus walks out of a window and hangs in the air, defying gravity. His own hopes and fears seem to actualize into events. When he imagines Emmie coming to save him, she performs a (deceptive) rescue attempt. The deceptiveness of this attempt reflects Cincinnatus's ingrained belief that he cannot escape his imprisonment.

Because of Cincinnatus's power over the world, his imprisonment is a self-imprisonment. His condemnation is a self-condemnation. The society imposes itself on Cincinnatus's mind, forcing him to conform to its expectations. Only at the end of the novel does Cincinnatus realize his power. While he lies on the chopping block with the ax raised above his head, Cincinnatus wonders what he is doing there. Why is he complying with the death sentence? Society's expectations are so deeply ingrained that Cincinnatus has not been able to escape them. At the last moment, though, he is overcome with realization and rises up from his appointed place. The world begins dissolving to nothing around him. Cincinnatus can only be destroyed by his persecutors with his own assent, and in the end, he finds the strength to deny that assent.

## M'sieur Pierre

M'sieur Pierre is the executioner who is supposed to chop off Cincinnatus's head. At first, Pierre pretends to be a prisoner in order to befriend Cincinnatus and lure him into complacency on the chopping block. Pierre is a childish and self-centered man. His hobby is photography, but he only takes photographs of himself. He boasts and brags at every possible moment. He gets angry when Cincinnatus begins to beat him at chess and childishly takes back his previous moves, finally overturning the chess pieces when he finds he cannot defeat his opponent.

While Pierre always says that he is acting out of kindness and goodness toward others, Pierre's true motivation is always his own self-aggrandizement. Pierre boasts of his friendship and understanding toward Cincinnatus, but there is no true friendship or understanding. Pierre is a manipulator who expects that his self-loving words will be accepted by others as true. In order to make truth, he claims truth, and everyone but Cincinnatus accepts Pierre at his word and fauns over him.



Pierre values visceral, material pleasures; he considers love to be nothing more than sex. His entire focus is outward, performing for society, while Cincinnatus's focus is inward, examining his inner self.

## **Marthe**

Marthe is Cincinnatus's wife. She is constantly unfaithful to him while they are married, placing no value on fidelity and sleeping with lovers every day. Cincinnatus is desperate to talk with Marthe while he is in prison, but his two meetings with her are unsatisfactory. At the first, Marthe comes with her whole family as well as a male escort, and Cincinnatus cannot even exchange one private word with his wife. Then, he writes her a letter, trying to express his feelings. At their second meeting, they argue, and Marthe calls his letter horrible. She accuses him of trying to make her seem like an accessory and begs him to repent, but Cincinnatus doesn't know what he is supposed to be repenting. Marthe seems as unreal and inhuman as the other characters to Cincinnatus.

## **Rodion**

Rodion is the jailer who guards Cincinnatus during his stay in the prison. He is in charge of feeding the spider that lives in Cincinnatus's cell. Rodion often melds into the prison director, Rodrig Ivanovich.

## **Rodrig Ivanovich**

Rodrig is the prison director. He fauns over the executioner, M'sieur Pierre, and tries to get Cincinnatus to write a letter of thanks to him for his treatment of the prisoner. Rodrig often melds into the prison guard, Rodion.

## **Roman Vissarionovich**

Cincinnatus is represented by an unhelpful lawyer, Roman Vissarionovich, whose abilities win Cincinnatus decapitation instead of some worse fate.

## **The Librarian**

A quiet, solemn librarian brings Cincinnatus books in prison. This man is not talkative and seems the most human of Cincinnatus's captors. At the beheading, the librarian is sick.



## **Cecilia C.**

Cecilia is Cincinnatus's mother. She had Cincinnatus after a tryst with a stranger in her teens, and Cincinnatus did not meet her until his twenties.

## **Emmie**

Emmie is the twelve-year-old daughter of the prison director. She is quiet and active. She tells Cincinnatus that she will help him escape, and when Pierre's tunnel leads Cincinnatus out of the prison instead of back to his cell, Emmie meets him outside. However, she leads him back to the prison director's home. Her escapade is put down to a last trick to play on her father before she goes back to school.

## **Diomedon**

Diomedon is Marthe's son by one of her lovers. He is evil and crippled.

## **Pauline**

Pauline is Marthe's daughter by one of her lovers. She is fat and awkward.



# Objects/Places

## The Prison

The large prison overshadows the town, cropping out of the top of a mountain. Cincinnatus is the only prisoner.

## Cincinnatus's Cell

Cincinnatus's cell contains only a cot, a table and chair. It has one high-up window that Cincinnatus cannot see out of, and there is writing on the cell walls.

## Tamara Gardens

Cincinnatus used to walk through the Tamara Gardens with Marthe before they were married, and he has fond memories of the location. The gardens seem to symbolize happiness and freedom to Cincinnatus.

## The Library Catalogue

The catalogue lists all the library's selections, organized by number of pages. Cincinnatus finds a child's drawings, perhaps showing a plan for escape, on one of the pages.

## M'sieur Pierre's Cell

M'sieur Pierre's cell is just like Cincinnatus's, but he has decorated it with a calendar, a blanket, and other items.

## The Spider

Cincinnatus has a regulation spider that lives in his cell. Every day, the prison guard feeds the spider a fly or moth, a miniature reenactment of Cincinnatus's beheading to come. The spider makes its web across the only window opening in Cincinnatus's cell, reinforcing the idea of his imprisonment. When Cincinnatus finally leaves his cell to be beheaded, the spider turns into a toy made of springs and elastic.

## Quercus

Cincinnatus reads a modern novel called Quercus, which is the biography of an oak tree over several centuries.





## Thriller Square

Thriller Square is the town square where the execution takes place.

## The Light

The light in the ceiling of Cincinnatus's cell is hung slightly off center, and this lack of symmetry is maddening to Cincinnatus. It reflects the off-kilter nature of Cincinnatus's absurd world.

## The Window

Cincinnatus's cell has a single window, high up and deep in the wall, so that the prisoner cannot see out of it. The window casts a parallelogram of light that moves along the wall throughout the day. When Cincinnatus climbs up, or imagines climbing up, to look through the window, he still can't see anything and finds graffiti from a prisoner who tried the same thing before. The window, an opening to the outside world, is a symbol of unattainable freedom, and it is guarded by the spider, who makes his web there.

## The Photohroscope Album

M'sieur Pierre makes a "photohroscope" album for Emmie. The album is full of doctored photos, with Emmie's head pasted onto photos of other people. It depicts Emmie's future life, including her death at age forty.



# Themes

## Constructed Reality

The world that Nabokov presents in his novel is full of impossible, dreamlike occurrences. From the beginning of Cincinnatus's imprisonment, the reader understands that there's something not quite right about the world he inhabits. To some extent, the world that Cincinnatus lives in is a reality constructed by him, through his own fears, doubts, and insecurities.

However, another kind of constructed reality is important to Nabokov's novel. Cincinnatus's enemy is the society he inhabits, and the people of that society act according to a set of rules and proprieties that they observe. These rules of interaction that create superficial connections between people are a construction, not of one person, but of a group of people. The ridiculous laws of the culture, which state that the judge must whisper a coded phrase in the convict's ear to sentence him to death, are part of a constructed reality, an unconscious agreement between all of the characters to act according to certain rules.

Cincinnatus rebels against the constructed, agreed upon reality of all of the characters. He does not want to be bound by the artifice of society, which interferes with real human connection. He rejects the proprieties and niceties that everyone expects. Because of this rejection of the constructed reality of society, the characters constantly chastise Cincinnatus for being rude and ungrateful. He constantly breaks the unspoken rules of the world, and this makes Cincinnatus a criminal.

## Human Connection

Cincinnatus strives to make a connection with another human being throughout the novel. He is different from everyone around him, and he has an internal depth that the other characters lack, which is why Cincinnatus has been shunned ever since his childhood. His difference from other people isolates Cincinnatus, who is incapable of understanding others or of being understood. The world is impossible and full of nonsense from his point of view, and Cincinnatus craves something in synch with his own psyche.

When Cincinnatus writes about his feelings and desires, his writings are jumbled, disorganized, and disjointed. Cincinnatus tries to find the words to express something that is inexpressible. This desire to express himself is part of Cincinnatus's need to find connection with another human being in a world devoid of humanity.

The person Cincinnatus most desires to connect with is his wife Marthe. He loves her despite her unfaithfulness and apparent lack of caring or concern for him. The one thing he needs from her is a single moment of connection or understanding. When Cincinnatus writes his letter to Marthe, he is begging for connection. He asks her to



come to him alone, as her true self, unhampered by all of the everyday concerns and emotional baggage that interfere with communication. However, when Marthe arrives, she is angered by his letter. She sees it as criminal. Communication frightens her, because society abhors any depth of emotion. Marthe's rejection of real human connection creates a final break for Cincinnatus. He realizes that his love for Marthe is impossible without the connection that he craves.

## Oppression

Cincinnatus is oppressed for being something different from the other people who surround him. The other children he plays with, his workmates, and the officials of the town realize that Cincinnatus is different, and they oppress him for his ideas and his nature. This aligns Cincinnatus with people who are oppressed for political or religious views or for characteristics they cannot control, such as race or sexual orientation. Because Cincinnatus's particular difference is ill-defined, his plight is the plight of all oppressed people. However, this oppression is not only on the part of the society. While society is certainly oppressive to Cincinnatus, Cincinnatus himself takes part in his oppression.

The world of the novel is a subjective world that Cincinnatus controls. When he is imprisoned and isolated, he could conceivably walk out of the prison at any time. This makes Cincinnatus an unconscious participant in his own oppression. Society and fear have so ingrained in Cincinnatus the idea that he is somehow wrong or "illegal," that Cincinnatus himself internalizes that idea.

Cincinnatus is also oppressed by his desire to make the world around him fit into his ideals. He wants Marthe to break through her barriers and make a connection with him. He tries to get the officials to tell him when his execution will be or to show an ounce of empathy for his plight. The impossibility of making a real connection with another human being is part of his oppression.



# Style

## Point of View

Most of Nabokov's novel is told from a third person semi-omniscient point of view, from the perspective of Cincinnatus. Most of the characters are unreal, cardboard cutout imitations of people. Cincinnatus calls them "parodies." His perspective is the point of view of the novel because it is the only valid perspective among all the superficial, unreal characters. Any thoughts or emotions that the other characters possess are hidden under layers of artifice built up by societal expectations.

The novel moves into first person when Cincinnatus writes down his thoughts and ideas. However, Cincinnatus's words are halting, uncertain, and disjointed. They often flow into elongated sentences twisting into exaggerated paragraphs full of disparate thoughts and ellipses. In these first person passages, Cincinnatus is attempting to express his inner self and make a connection with some unknown and unimaginable reader. Cincinnatus is unable to make connections with the people in his world, so he tries to make connections through his writing.

The narration of the novel from Cincinnatus's point of view is unreliable. The world is filled with strange and impossible events, including the collapse of the prison when Cincinnatus leaves, Cincinnatus's early escape from the prison only to find himself still incarcerated, and the melding together of the prison officials. The surreal events either indicate that Cincinnatus himself is controlling the material world around him, as a dreamer unconsciously controls his dream, or that the world the reader sees is a world that exists only in Cincinnatus's mind.

## Setting

Nabokov's novel takes place in an unnamed country and an unknown time, giving it a sense of being lost in both time and space. The main setting is the prison, a towering structure set atop a mountain, with numerous stairs leading up and down. The prison, where Cincinnatus is the only inmate, isolates the main character. It is also an impossible structure. Why would there be only one inmate in such a massive place? The prison lends to the unreality of Cincinnatus's world.

Cincinnatus's cell is the center of his world. He is confined to an area with four walls, an iron door, and a window that is too high and deep to see. While he is completely isolated, Cincinnatus is also under constant observation through the peephole in the door. The cell reflects Cincinnatus's experience of life. He has no real communication with anyone and lives in isolation, and yet he is constantly watched and criticized at every move. The unreachable window is the promise of freedom, which seems impossible to achieve.



The beheading itself takes place in the middle of the town, in Thriller Square. The name of the square indicates the townspeople's perception of the event. They all come out to experience thrill and excitement. The true meaning of murdering another human being seems to mean nothing to the onlookers. The town and the square, like the prison, turn out to be insubstantial and unreal.

## Language and Meaning

Nabokov creates an irrational world through bizarre events, and he builds these events through his language. At one moment, Rodion is speaking, and in the next moment, without transition or explanation, Rodrig is the one continuing the conversation. The two men are merged into one through Nabokov's language, just as later, Rodrig is merged with the lawyer, Roman.

Just as Nabokov manipulates the world through language, he creates characters that have the same manipulative capacity. M'sieur Pierre uses language to try to build up his reputation and create the reality that he desires. The representatives of society who surround Pierre buy into his eloquence, accepting the smooth lies that Pierre tells as the truth. Pierre tells a joke that is really no joke, and everyone but Cincinnatus laughs. Pierre claims that he has built up a loving friendship with Cincinnatus, and everyone but Cincinnatus believes him.

Cincinnatus, however, struggles with language. Unlike Pierre, who wants to paint a beautiful but false picture with words, Cincinnatus wants to express something true and deep with his words. While everyone lines up to absorb Pierre's false words, no one wants to take time and effort to understand Cincinnatus's words. Everyone is appalled at Cincinnatus's desire to create genuine expression. His wife rejects his letter to her as criminal, and this is the final straw that separates Cincinnatus from the world.

## Structure

Nabokov's novel takes place over the weeks between Cincinnatus's death sentence and his execution. At the beginning of the novel, Cincinnatus arrives at his prison cell. The early pages of the novel contain surreal events, such as the director walking into the room, suddenly disappearing, and then walking in again as if the scene in being replayed. This establishes the dreamlike quality of Cincinnatus's world.

In the early chapters, the condemned looks back on his life and gives the reader an overview of his childhood and young adulthood. These retrospective looks at Cincinnatus give the reader a vague idea of Cincinnatus's crimes. He is condemned for being different from others in the society. He is unintelligible, and he has depth that others lack.

During Cincinnatus's wait for his execution, he believes that he might escape, and two avenues of escape seem to open for him midway through the novel. Perhaps young Emmie will take pity on the prisoner and help him flee the prison, or perhaps the



mysterious digging sounds will turn out to be rescuers. Three quarters of the way through the book, all of Cincinnatus's hopes collapse as in one chapter, both rescue attempts turn out to be cruel ruses.

The final chapters lead up to Cincinnatus's execution. His fate is sealed, and Cincinnatus finally works through his last emotional tangle by realizing that he will never make a connection with his wife. Cincinnatus still struggles with his unreasoning fear of death, but at the last moment, on the scaffold, Cincinnatus is able to let go of his fear and free himself from the confines of the lopsided, unreal world he has inhabited.



## Quotes

"So we are nearing the end. The right-hand, still untasted part of the novel, which, during our delectable reading, we would lightly feel, mechanically testing whether there were still plenty left (and our fingers were always gladdened by the placid, faithful thickness) has suddenly, for no reason at all, become quite meager: a few minutes of quick reading, already downhill, and—O horrible!" —Chapter One, page 12

"In the first one he found the façade of his house: the children looking out from the balcony, his father-in-law looking out of the kitchen window, a photographer looking out of Marthe's window; in the second one there was the familiar view from this window, looking out on the garden, showing the apple tree, the open gate and the figure of the photographer shooting the façade." —Chapter Two, page 23

"Cautiously, in the form of a conjecture, there was expressed the suggestion of Cincinnatus's basic illegality." —Chapter Two, page 30

"I am surrounded by some sort of wretched specters, not by people. They torment me as can torment only senseless visions, bad dreams, dregs of delirium, the drivel of nightmares and everything that passes down here for real life. In theory one would wish to wake up. But wake up I cannot without outside help, and yet I fear this help terribly, and my very soul has grown lazy and accustomed to its snug swaddling clothes." — Chapter Three, page 36

"It is desirable that the inmate should not have at all, or if he does, should immediately suppress nocturnal dreams whose content might be incompatible with the condition and status of the prisoner, such as: resplendent landscapes, outings with friends, family dinners, as well as sexual intercourse with persons who in real life and in the waking state would not suffer said individual to come near, which individual will therefore be considered by the law to be guilty of rape." —Chapter Four, page 49

"Accused of the most terrible of crimes, gnostical turpitude, so rare and so unutterable that it was necessary to use circumlocutions like 'impenetrability,' 'opacity,' 'occlusion'; sentenced for that crime to death by beheading; emprisoned in the fortress in expectation of the unknown but near and inexorable date (which he distinctly anticipated as the wrenching, yanking and crunch of a monstrous tooth, his whole body being the inflamed gum, and his head that tooth); standing now in the prison corridor with a sinking heart—still alive, still unimpaired, still Cincinnatic—Cincinnatus C. felt a fierce longing for freedom, the most ordinary, physical, physically feasible kind of freedom, and instantly he imagined, with such sensuous clarity as though it all was a fluctuating corona emanating from him, the town beyond the shallowed river, the town, from every point of which one could see—now in this vista, now in that, now in crayon, and now in ink—the tall fortress within which he was." —Chapter Six, pages 72-73

"I don't want to boast, but in me, my dear colleague, you will find a rare combination of outward sociability and inward delicacy, the art of the causerie and the ability to keep



silent, playfulness and seriousness... Who will console a sobbing infant, and glue his broken toy together? M'sieur Pierre. Who will intercede for a poor widow? M'sieur Pierre. Who will provide sober advice, who will recommend a medicine, who will bring glad tidings? Who? Who? M'sieur Pierre." —Chapter Seven, page 85

"There, there are the originals of those gardens where we used to roam and hide in the world; there everything strikes one by its bewitching evidence, by the simplicity of perfect good; there everything pleases one's soul, everything is filled with the kind of fun that children know; there shines the mirror that now and then sends a chance reflection here . . ." —Chapter Eight, page 94

"Cincinnatus kept going; he had to get around a large table, set for ten persons, and then squeeze between the screen and the wardrobe in order to reach Marthe, who reclined on the couch. The young man had covered her feet with a shawl. Cincinnatus almost made it, but just then there was an angry shriek from Diomedon." —Chapter Nine, page 104

"With his small but muscular hand he was rapidly touching Cincinnatus's neck and examining it carefully, breathing through the nose with a slight wheeze." —Chapter Ten, page 109

"For I can see perfectly well that you are just as much of a parody as everybody and everything else. And if they treat me to such a clever parody of a mother . . . But imagine, for instance, that I have pinned my hopes on some distant sound—how can I have faith in it, if even you are a fraud?" —Chapter Twelve, page 132

"The game dragged on for a long time. M'sieur Pierre would grow purple, stamp his feet, fume, crawl under the table after the dice and emerge holding them in his palm and swearing that that was exactly the way they had been lying on the floor." —Chapter Thirteen, page 146

"Many other things must be forsaken as well: festive music, favorite knick-knacks, such as a camera or pipe; friendly talks; the bliss of relieving oneself, which some hold to be on a par with the pleasure of love; sleep after dinner; smoking . . . What else? Favorite knick-knacks . . . Yes, we already had that' (again the crib notes appeared) 'pleasure . . . I've said that too. Well, various other trifles . . .'" —Chapter Fourteen, page 153

"He opened the case. There, upon black velvet, lay a broad, shiny ax." —Chapter Fifteen, page 163

"Cincinnatus got up, made a running start and smashed headlong into the wall—the real Cincinnatus, however, remained sitting at the table, staring at the wall, chewing his pencil, and presently shuffled his feet under the table and continued to write, a little less rapidly." —Chapter Eighteen, page 193

"To finish writing something,' whispered Cincinnatus half questioningly but then he frowned, straining his thoughts, and suddenly understood that everything had in fact been written already." —Chapter Nineteen, page 209





"'I am not doing anything yet,' said M'sieur Pierre with an extraneous note of gasping effort, and the shadow of his swing was already running along the boards, when Cincinnatus began counting loudly and firmly: one Cincinnatus was counting, but the other Cincinnatus had already stopped heeding the sound of the unnecessary count which was fading away in the distance; and, with a clarity he had never experienced before—at first almost painful, so suddenly did it come, but then suffusing him with joy, he reflected: why am I here? Why am I lying like this? And, having asked himself these simple questions, he answered them by getting up and looking around." —Chapter Twenty, page 222



## Topics for Discussion

Compare Cincinnatus's character with M'sieur Pierre's character. Both are self-absorbed. How does their self-absorption differ?

In the end of the novel, Cincinnatus walks away from the chopping block. Is this really Cincinnatus's realization of his power over the material world, or is Cincinnatus's escape actually him passing over into death?

Does Cincinnatus actually control the material world around him, or are the surreal events of the novel merely part of Cincinnatus's internal experience of the world?

Why do the people in Cincinnatus's society admire M'sieur Pierre?

Why does Cincinnatus's letter make Marthe so angry?

Define Cincinnatus's crime of "gnostic turpitude."

What role does Cincinnatus take in his own imprisonment and oppression?