Islands Study Guide

Islands by Aleksandar Hemon

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BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

When Aleksandar Hemon traveled to Chicago from his native Bosnia in 1992 on a brief cultural visa, he did not expect to become a prominent and successful writer in English within six years. This is what he did, however, immigrating to the United States as a refugee when war broke out in Bosnia-Herzegovina (one of the former Yugoslavian states) and mastering the English language. Hemon began to write semi-autobiographical short stories characterized by a frank and immediate voice, often dealing with political themes, including the war in the former Yugoslavia and with Yugoslavian history. Sophisticated and striking, his stories brought him nearly immediate recognition as an important and gifted writer.

One of these stories, entitled "Islands," is steeped in the rich history of 1970s Yugoslavia, before the dictator Marshal Tito died and the region fell into instability and civil war. In it, a young boy from Sarajevo, Bosnia, travels to a Croatian island with his parents in order to vacation at his Uncle Julius's house. Deeply affected by his uncle's stories about Joseph Stalin's Soviet labor camps of the 1940s, the young narrator becomes self-conscious about his place in politics and society. "Islands" is composed of thirty-three short scenes that comment on themes ranging from memory and childhood trauma to self-consciousness and the concept of authority. Originally published in the spring 1998 edition of *Ploughshares*, the story was reprinted as the opening tale of Hemon's debut collection of short fiction, *The Question of Bruno* (2000).

Author Biography

Aleksandar Hemon is a Bosnian who was born in Sarajevo, the capitol of what is now Bosnia-Herzegovina, in 1964. He was interested in soccer and spying as a child, among other things, and later he worked as a journalist. In 1990, he received a bachelor's degree from the University of Sarajevo, and in 1992 he came to Chicago as part of a government-sponsored journalist exchange program. He had only a basic command of English and intended to stay for only a short time, but when war erupted in his country he applied to stay in the United States as a refugee. His application was successful, and Hemon held a series of part-time jobs while improving his English, including a kitchen worker, a bicycle messenger, and a fund-raiser for Greenpeace.

Hemon began writing in English within three years of his arrival in the United States, and he earned a master's degree from Northwestern University in 1995. "Islands" was originally published in the spring 1998 edition of *Ploughshares*, and it was included in Hemon's collection of short fiction, *The Question of Bruno* (2000). His short stories have also been published in magazines, including the *New Yorker*, *Esquire*, and *Triquarterly*, and "Islands" was included in *Best American Short Stories 1999*. In 2002, Hemon published his first novel *Nowhere Man*, which follows Josef Pronek, the protagonist of a story in *The Question of Bruno*, through his adolescence and his move to Chicago as war is breaking out in Bosnia. Critically acclaimed, the novel has been compared to the work of Vladimir Nabokov, the famous Russian emigré to the United States, and praised for its imaginative treatment of political and psychological themes. Hemon has received numerous awards for his writings, and in 2004 he was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship.

Plot Summary

Scenes 1—5

"Islands" begins with the young unnamed narrator driving with his family from Sarajevo to the coast, where they take a ship to the island of Mljet, which is part of the neighboring state of Croatia. On the ship, the narrator loses his hat in the wind and, realizing he will never see it again, sobs himself to sleep. The family is greeted on Mljet by Uncle Julius, whose lack of teeth disturbs the narrator. While they walk back to the house, Uncle Julius explains that Mljet used to be overrun by snakes until someone brought a group of young mongooses to the island. Now the mongooses have killed all the snakes and overrun the island themselves.

Scenes 6—12

At the house, Aunt Lyudmila gives the narrator a slobbery kiss. He walks upstairs to a room with a picture of the Yugoslav dictator Josip Tito and an image of the island. Later that night, the narrator wakes up and finds the adults talking and drinking wine outside. He overhears Uncle Julius saying that his grandfather was a beekeeper, and the narrator tells them he is thirsty. Aunt Lyudmila offers him a cup of water, but he refuses because he sees a slug in the water tank.

Scenes 13—17

Uncle Julius tells a story about the time he spent at the Arkhangelsk labor camp in northern Russia, where Stalin began to send young children as punishment for missing school. They were abused and died frequently, but Uncle Julius met one named Vanyka who managed to survive. When Uncle Julius was sent to Siberia to be a gravedigger, he saw Vanyka again, begging to die, and he gave him a piece of bread. Vanyka told him what happened after he got drunk and shouted, "Thank you, Stalin, for my happy childhood!" The guards abused him and moved him to another camp, but Vanyka continued to speak out, steal from the weak, and find men who would protect him in exchange for sex. He began to kill as well and was sent to an island for the worst criminals, from which he fled with two other criminals. Vanyka killed and ate the two other men, but guards eventually caught him and put him in solitary confinement. He had been trying to kill himself, but the guards would not let him die. The narrator asks what happened to Vanyka, but Uncle Julius simply says, dismissively, he "was killed."

Scenes 18—26

Each morning on Mljet, the narrator wakes up, eats an unappetizing breakfast, walks down a path while frightened of mongooses, and arrives at the gravel beach. His parents allow him to swim, and he sees jellyfish and once a school of what look like

"miniature swordfish." One day, while walking up the path at sunset, the narrator and his parents see a man allow his German shepherd to kill a mongoose. Sometimes Uncle Julius takes the narrator to his apiary, which is a place where bees are raised for their honey. The narrator holds a flaming rag on a stick to repel the bees but runs away out of fear.

Scenes 27—33

One day, Uncle Julius takes the narrator and his parents to the island in the middle of one of Mljet's lakes. The narrator almost falls out of the boat, but Uncle Julius catches him. Uncle Julius says the island used to be a haven for pirates who took hostages for ransom, then was a German prison, and now houses a hotel that rarely has any tourists. They walk to the restaurant and Uncle Julius tells a story about his student days in Moscow, when he saw the "oldest man in the world." Uncle Julius explains that the man made him realize that everyone becomes like a child in old age and that there is no point to life because "nothing will change." The narrator and his parents take a ship to the mainland and the narrator sleeps on the way to Sarajevo. They find their plants withered and the cat starving because their neighbor who was supposed to feed them has died of a heart attack, and the cat looks at the narrator with "irreversible hatred."

Characters

Father

The narrator's father makes no individual appearances in the story but is grouped together with his mother. They are not neglectful parents, which is clear from the narrator's description of how specific they are in their rules about when and for how long he can swim, but their son tends not to notice them. He describes them as "sprightly," or lively and animated, although it is difficult to tell whether they are truly enjoying the trip.

German Tourists

The narrator encounters a number of older German tourists on his trip to Mljet, who tend to be somewhat oblivious. They are foreign sightseers who see this Slavic island region as outsiders, with apparently no real comprehension. They are sunburned, take numerous pictures, and one of them vomits over the side of the ship.

Uncle Julius

A Mljet native who deeply affects the narrator, Uncle Julius is a mysterious and somewhat disturbing old man. The story of his life is never spelled out, but the reader is able to piece together some key details of his years in Russia based on the stories he tells. He is from the Ukraine, which was a part of the former U.S.S.R., and he spent his student days in Moscow, where he studied biology. It is unclear how or why he became a prisoner in Stalin's labor camps, but by 1943 he was in the camp at Arkangelsk, Russia, where he met Vanyka for the first time. After this, Uncle Julius was transferred to different camps (for how long or how many he is unsure), but he ended up as a gravedigger in Siberia. Somehow he made his way to Mljet, where he is married to Aunt Lyudmila and keeps bees in the tradition of his Ukrainian family.

With his soft lips "like slugs," his stink of "rot and decay," his bulging eyes, his "peculiar, tranquil smile," and his stained gums missing their teeth, Uncle Julius cuts a rather fearsome figure to a young boy. The most frightening aspects of his character, however, are his horrific stories, which he says the narrator "should know." Someone, likely Aunt Lyudmila, says ominously that the narrator "won't be able to sleep ever again" if he hears Uncle Julius's stories, and the last story in which Uncle Julius tells the narrator "You might as well stop living now, my son," is particularly disturbing. In fact, Hemon seems to emphasize that the main subject of "Islands" is the impression that Uncle Julius makes on the young narrator, implying that it affected him for many years afterwards.

Aunt Lyudmila

Aunt Lyudmila is Uncle Julius's wife. The narrator says her face is like "a loaf of bread with a small tubby potato in the middle" and that her calves, ankles, and bare feet are bruised, swollen, and warped. This must be because she has been subject to very hard work throughout her life, with the implication that she is a tough and stolid woman. It is unclear how or when she met Uncle Julius. The narrator does not seem to like her because of the slobbery kiss she gives him and her failure to notice or object to the slug in the water tank.

Mother

The narrator's mother has slightly more presence in the narrative than does his father. She is the one who tends to speak to the narrator and take care of him, and he suggests that he is close to her early in the story when he hides his face in her skirt. Nevertheless, she is grouped with her husband as a rather abstract authority figure to whom the narrator generally pays little attention.

Narrator

A sensitive and perceptive nine-year-old boy who remains unnamed is the narrator and protagonist of Hemon's story. As he begins his island voyage, he wears a round straw hat painted with the seven dwarves from *Snow White*, but it blows away in the wind. He enjoys swimming and playing in the sand, but he is unenthusiastic about the trip to Mljet. A generally obedient boy, he is impressionable and curious. The main subject of the story is the narrator's experience as he listens to Uncle Julius's stories and his perceptions of his uncle's general attitude towards him. Uncle Julius is not necessarily trying to scare or traumatize the narrator, but he does seem to be imparting some type of lesson.

Because Hemon's collection *The Question of Bruno* is autobiographical, from the perspective of an older Bosnian man living in the United States, and because the story is organized in brief scenes like islands of memory, there is the sense that the narrator is an adult thinking back to his childhood. However, the narrative perspective is that of an observant child who is still forming his opinion about the world. He seems unsure quite how all of the pieces of the story fit together, but he seems to recognize that they are significant to his youth and development. This is perhaps why he speaks about waking up without knowing "where I was or who I was" and feeling "present in my own body" when he dives into the sea; he is forming an understanding of his place in his family and society.

Joseph Stalin

As brutal or more brutal than Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin (1879—1953) was the ruthless communist dictator who headed the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R.) between 1924 and 1953. Stalin attempted to industrialize the Soviet Union by destroying millions whom he thought stood in his way: farmers, intellectuals, religious people, political dissenters, and those who were undesirables for whatever reason. Under his command, more than 10 million people perished in labor camps that dotted Siberia.

Comrade Tito

Marshal Josip Broz Tito (1892—1980) was the communist president of the former Yugoslavia (a country consisting of six republics that was created in 1945) from 1953 until his death in 1980. A war hero and longtime Communist Party member, he unified the country imitating Stalin's government and policies but then broke away from the international Communist Party after a rift with Stalin.

Vanyka

The subject of Uncle Julius's story about the time he spent in Soviet labor camps, Vanyka is a resourceful and desperate blonde boy with blue eyes whose life is destroyed by Stalin's regime. He is only twelve when he is sent to Arkhangelsk camp either because he was "repeatedly late for school or missed several days with no excuse." Unlike most of the other children at the camp, he manages to survive by "lending himself" which means he offers himself sexually to criminals, as well as by stealing food and bribing guards.

Because of Vanyka's habit of speaking his mind, the guards beat him mercilessly and abuse him. He begins to kill and do "bad, bad things." He learns how to survive, but he continues to speak out so the authorities send him to a sort of pirates' island on which criminals are allowed to rob and kill each other. Vanyka attempts to escape, killing and eating three people in the process, but guards catch him and put him in solitary confinement, torturing him. He tries to kill himself and, when Uncle Julius meets him for the second time, all he wants is to die, but the guards keep him alive so he suffers more. The narrator is deeply affected by Vanyka's story and asks what happened to him, but Uncle Julius simply says dismissively that he was killed, frightening his nephew even more.

Themes

Memory

Partly because it is the first story in an autobiographical collection of fiction from the perspective of a Bosnian immigrant to the United States, there is the sense that "Islands" is a journey into childhood memory from the standpoint of an adult. The story's short scenes are like islands of memory that combine to form an array of impressions about the family trip to Mljet. They contain specific observations and piece together the overall impression or significance of the trip. For example, with the frame of reference of a little boy, the narrator describes "a Popsicle-yellow lizard, as big as a new pencil, on the stone wall behind Uncle Julius's back," with its "unblinking marble eye."

Hemon seems to be commenting, therefore, on the nature of memory and the process of extracting significance from past experience. He implies that the memory selects certain details to retain vividly, and these chosen parts act as beacons or signposts to what was significant or moving about an experience. These memories combine in complex and subtle ways; the narrator may remember the German shepherd's gums so vividly, for example, because they remind him of Uncle Julius's toothless gums, and he may remember his cat's "irreversible hatred" in such stark terms because he may feel that he has been neglected himself. Hemon implies that the memory categorizes and stores what is important to it in this sort of coded manner, particularly childhood memories when revisited or re-envisioned in adulthood.

Childhood Trauma

One of the key themes of "Islands" is the significance of the events of the story to the narrator's later life, particularly the trauma he feels during the vacation. Although he experiences a number of potentially traumatizing events, such as when he loses his hat or sees a German shepherd kill a mongoose, the narrator is most significantly troubled by the stories and general persona of his Uncle Julius.

Uncle Julius is not necessarily a malicious man, but he does seem to think it is a good idea for the narrator to hear some bone-chilling stories, as evidenced when he says "he should know" in reference to the story about Vanyka. If, as is likely, "Islands" is told from the point of view of an adult looking back on his childhood, these tales would have stayed in the narrator's memory for a long time and hold significance for him. Because they are filled with such a threatening vision of the world, however, they are emotionally disturbing and appear to become longstanding childhood trauma.

Self-Consciousness

The narrator of Hemon's story frequently talks about his sense of himself, usually in physical terms such as his awareness of his own body. When he is swimming, for

example, the narrator notes that "the shock of coldness would make me feel present in my own body," and when he is walking along the path to Uncle Julius's house he notes that "the sudden coolness made me conscious of how hot my shoulders felt." Perhaps the most important of these moments comes after Uncle Julius tells the story of Vanyka. After sleeping, the narrator wakes up "and didn't know where I was or who I was" and then gets up "out of my nonbeing." Although all of these moments are understandable and even common, they imply that the narrator is experiencing a period of self-consciousness, questioning his identity and his place in the world.

Authority

"Islands," a story about a child's relationship with adult family members, includes a lengthy passage about the dictatorship of Joseph Stalin. In this way, the story takes on the theme of power and influence over others. Uncle Julius seems to influence the narrator, and this resonates, in certain ways, with his horrific description of power and authority during Stalin's regime. It is clear that the narrator identifies with Vanyka, although their situations contrast sharply; he attempts to imagine what it would be like to have one's childhood and happiness taken away by a brutal and tyrannical system of authority. Interestingly, the narrator seems to have little tension or confrontation with his own parents (although they do have strict rules about swimming, for example), so Uncle Julius seems to inspire him to think about authority in a new way. Hemon is careful to bring up the theme of authority at the final moment of the story, in which the narrator views what he considers the "irreversible hatred" of a cat that has been neglected and (though accidentally) tortured by those who hold power over it.

Style

Short Scenes

The fact that "Islands" is made up of thirty-three short scenes is crucial to its storytelling format. Although they combine to form a chronological narrative, these scenes are like brief glimpses into specific moments of the narrator's childhood, or individual islands of memory that can seem somewhat distinct. In fact, some of the scenes focus on specific details that do not at first seem to correspond to the main point and progression of the story, such as the narrator's vivid description of the fish that he sees while swimming. All of the scenes are important either in developing the sense of place or developing the plot, but Hemon's emphasis on their distance from each other reinforces the sense that the narrator is searching through his clumps of significant memories to find the story. The format of the story, therefore, may be intended to imitate the way that the mind accesses its childhood memories. It is also significant in drawing attention to the idea of islands and isolation, ideas that frequently recur in the narrative and underscore the setting of the story as well as some of its content.

First-Person Childhood Perspective

Hemon is adept at developing a believable first-person narrative voice that speaks and thinks like a nine-year-old boy. Although there is the suggestion, given its place in the larger collection, that "Islands" is being told from the standpoint of an adult looking back on a childhood experience, Hemon is nevertheless careful to enter the narrator's childhood mind in his telling. The narrator's language and the nature of his observations reflect the curiosity, attention to detail, and impressionability of a nine-year-old. Hemon is thereby able to allow his readers to enter the world of a child and bring to life the true significance of the trip to Mljet.

Historical Context

Bosnia-Herzegovina

Given the autobiographical nature of Hemon's short story collection, and based on details from the story, "Islands" is likely set in the 1970s, a decade of relative prosperity in what is in 2005 Bosnia-Herzegovina. Hemon wrote the story in the 1990s, having recently emigrated from Bosnia to the United States. In order to understand the history of Bosnia-Herzegovina in the 1970s and the 1990s, however, it is necessary to have some knowledge of its long and turbulent history.

Bosnia-Herzegovina is one of the six major Balkan states that comprised the former Yugoslavia. It has many of its cultural roots in the Islamic tradition, because of the Ottoman Turkish domination between the fourteenth and nineteenth centuries. By 1908, however, the Austro-Hungarian Empire had officially annexed Bosnia-Herzegovina and attempted to use it as a buffer between the largely Catholic Croatia and the largely Eastern Orthodox Serbia. Ethnic tensions ran high throughout World War I and II, with a Serb-dominated coalition government in place until civil conflicts broke out during World War II. Communists led by Marshal Josip Broz Tito prevailed and set up the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

Tito was the communist dictator of the country for nearly five decades, and his style of leadership cannot be described simply as totalitarian, nor can his government be described simply as communist. A war hero revered in Yugoslavia and throughout the world, Tito brought stability and unity to the nation and instituted reforms that allowed the economy to prosper by the 1970s. He defied Stalin with pro-Yugoslavian policies, which led to a rift with the Soviet Union and Western aid to his country. However, throughout his rule, Tito retained control by suppressing nationalist tendencies and forcibly promoting Yugoslav unity.

By the 1970s, minority groups had dispersed into various republics, so Bosnia-Herzegovina was by no means simply a Muslim-dominated area. As evidenced in "Islands," it would be customary for Bosnians living in Sarajevo, as well as Germans and other tourists, to travel to the Croatian island of Mljet. After Tito's sudden death in 1980, however, nationalist tendencies that had been suppressed for years began to emerge in different regions of Yugoslavia. Slovenia and Croatia declared independence in 1990 and 1991, followed by Bosnia-Herzegovina in December of 1991. A number of conflicts began to break out at this point, and coalitions broke apart because of ethnic tensions and nationalistic aspirations. Bosnia was deep in civil war by 1992, with Bosnian Muslims besieged in Sarajevo by Serbian forces and Bosnian Muslims fighting with Bosnian Croats who desired to be a part of a greater Croatia. The situation in Sarajevo reached the point of ethnic cleansing, with Bosnian Muslims starving and dying in great numbers. The United Nations did little to help the situation, but the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina came to an end in 1995 with United Nations troops securing the peace.

Writers in English as a Second Language

Hemon has been compared to two influential European writers who wrote in English as a second language: Joseph Conrad and Vladimir Nabokov. Conrad, the author of *Heart of Darkness* and numerous other famous works, was Polish and learned English only as an adult living in Britain and working as maritime merchant. Nabokov, the sardonic and sophisticated author of novels, including *Lolita*, learned English at an early age but, unlike Conrad, began his writing career in his native language. He became a famous U.S. writer in the post—World War II period, and his writings particularly influenced Hemon. Like Hemon, Nabokov and Conrad were linguistic prodigies who explored the process of forging works in a language not native to them.

Critical Overview

Hemon's first short story collection was extremely well-reviewed in the press; as Richard Eder writes of the book in the *New York Times Book Review*: "Several of the shorter pieces are so good as to make the reader feel certain of having discovered not just an extraordinary story but an extraordinary writer: one who seems not simply gifted but necessary." Other reviewers were equally positive, and the collection received a significant amount of attention. Perhaps, in part, because of the continued crisis in the former Yugoslavia, reviewers tended to pay particular attention to Hemon's treatment of history and politics, praising his insights about Bosnian culture.

Although critics were almost entirely positive and the collection was nominated for a number of awards, some dissenting opinions emerged, including a *National Review* article, in which Stephen Schwartz writes, "In *The Question of Bruno*, Hemon has produced a first volume of narratives that is, in its essential part, a pure and simple imitation of the outstanding Yugoslav author Danilo Kis." Many critics would disagree with this contention, although some gave Hemon mixed reviews.

Sybil S. Steinberg, who calls Hemon's stories "expertly wrought," mentions "Islands" specifically in her *Publishers Weekly* review, writing that "History . . . erupts" into the narrative. One of the most thorough discussions of the story, however, appears in Daniel Orozco's *San Francisco Chronicle* review of the collection. After claiming that the story "is emblematic of Hemon's startling vision," Orozco writes, "This is a funny and horrifying child's perspective on a dread vacation. . . . this darkly comic story suddenly shifts into even darker territory, with the brutalities of Stalin's regime casting a deep, disquieting pall."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Trudell is an independent scholar with a bachelor's degree in English literature. In the following essay, Trudell discusses the narrator's loss of innocence in "Islands," particularly how this loss is articulated in his identification with the Soviet prisoner Vanyka.

Uncle Julius scares and traumatizes his nine-year-old nephew in a variety of ways during the short scenes that make up Hemon's story, "Islands." His toothless and smelly body, his description of the snakes and mongooses on Mljet, his characterization of the death of his grandfather, his comments about the former pirate island now sporting a hotel, and his story about the oldest man in the world during which he tells his nephew, "You might as well stop living now," are all frightening for a nine-year-old boy. Perhaps the aspect of the visit that has the greatest impact on the narrator, however, is Uncle Julius's story about Vanyka, the boy whose life is destroyed by the horrific series of circumstances to which he is subjected in the northern Russia.

In fact, "Islands" is balanced between the story of the nine-year-old protagonist on a trip to the Croatian island of Mljet to visit his Uncle Julius, and the story of the boy Vanyka and his experience with the brutal Soviet penal system of the 1940s. These stories describe vastly different circumstances in vastly different societies; in fact, they are like individual islands that do not seem to connect. Like the other islands in Hemon's story, however□Mljet, the pirate's island within Mljet, the prison island to which Vanyka is sent, and the short scenes of island memories themselves□these apparently distinct stories are actually related quite closely. Indeed, one of the central points of interest in "Islands" is how the two glimpses of childhood contrast, and what this says about the societies in which the boys were raised.

Uncle Julius, who seems to want to make an impression on his nephew, tells the story of Vanyka for his benefit, saying ominously that "he should know" the story. The fact that he asks how old the narrator is immediately before doing so suggests that Uncle Julius is imparting a cautionary tale in which Vanyka is meant to serve as a double for the narrator. Since they are nearly the same age, Uncle Julius implies, his nephew should learn something from Vanyka's experience. The essence of this lesson seems to be that the narrator must lose his innocence and recognize the horrible realities of the world.

For his part, the narrator clearly identifies with Vanyka and shows interest in his fate. Since no one else dares say anything when Uncle Julius falls silent, it is a sign of great curiosity that the narrator brings himself to ask, "So what happened to him?" Although the narrator does not mention Vankya for the rest of the story, the unfortunate prisoner's horror story seems to linger on in the narrator's fearful and confused thoughts.

For example, Vanyka's story seems related to the narrator's drama of self-perception. It is immediately after Vanyka's story that the narrator wakes up without knowing "where [he] was or who [he] was." Getting up "out of [his] nonbeing," the narrator is quite self-conscious, and his identity confusion continues throughout the story. Being cold is the

only thing that seems to give him some sense of himself; when he dives into the freezing water he feels "present in [his] own body," and the coolness of the path to the house makes him "conscious of how hot [his] shoulders felt." Since the only other extreme cold in the story is that of Arkhangelsk and Siberia, Hemon may be suggesting that Vanyka's story also provides the narrator with a sense of his identity.

Perhaps, more importantly, however, the narrator identifies with Vanyka and is influenced by his story because both boys undergo a loss of innocence. Vanyka attracted the attention of Uncle Julius because he was able to survive the brutal environment of the camp, but, more importantly, because he shouted out ironically, "Thank you, Stalin, for my happy childhood!" Circumstances have tortured Vanyka and robbed him of his joy and his health, but the most striking thing is that it all happened to him when he was less than fifteen years old, simply because he missed several days of school. Before he went to the camp Vanyka was at the stage of his life that Uncle Julius describes as "knowing nothing, remembering nothing," and within a short period of time he decided that he wanted to die because his life was worse than death.

The narrator is not injured, tortured or imprisoned, but he does experience a loss of innocence. Hemon, who throughout the story is interested in themes of birth, aging, and losing one's childhood, is careful to emphasize in the first sentence the "yolky" sun (an image signifying birth and innocence) and the naive, happy childishness of the narrator. Continually asking if they are there yet during the journey, the narrator innocently wears his straw hat painted with the seven dwarves until the wind suddenly snatches it from his head and he realizes he "would never, ever see it again." Although this could be written off as a funny and seemingly harmless detail, it makes the narrator sob himself to sleep and foreshadows the more shocking losses that follow.

Uncle Julius's intimidating presence wears down his nephew's innocence at every turn. The narrator is frightened or troubled by snakes, mongooses, slugs, Stalin, the futility of life, the lack of a sense of self, undergoing a process of sharp maturation and disillusionment. Instead of the bright yellow, yolky sun, the narrator is confronted with "smoldering soggy eggs" like a fried, melted childhood. This process climaxes when Uncle Julius tells him there is no point in living because "nothing will change," and when his starving cat in Sarajevo looks at him with "irreversible hatred." Here at the end of the story, the narrator seems to have aged years.

Vanyka's childhood trauma brings out the narrator's own loss of innocence, instead of minimizing it or overshadowing it, mainly because his story calls attention to the brutal ways in which authority and society force children to grow up. In fact, one of the most crucial aspects of the narrator's maturation process is clear only when, as in Vanyka's story, the political context is made explicit. This is the way that communism, the government, and society at large play a key role in a child's loss of innocence. Vanyka's loss of childhood is so explicitly related to Stalin and the Soviet labor camps that his experience causes the reader to consider whether the narrator's maturation process may also be affected by Yugoslav communist society.

Upon closer examination, it becomes clear that Hemon is, in fact, commenting on Marshal Tito's communist government and its treatment of Yugoslavian youth. The first clear signal of this is the fact that, in scene 1, the narrator sings communist songs for the entire journey to Mljet about "mournful mothers looking through graves for their dead sons." Communism is thus initially associated with the "yolky" sun and the youthful innocence of the narrator before he begins to experience doubt and fear. Hemon is then careful to emphasize that there is a picture of Tito in the narrator's bedroom "smiling, black-and-white," as well as one in the abandoned island hotel.

After Vanyka's story, however, the narrator begins to be disillusioned with life and human nature, particularly with communism and other systems of power and authority. It begins to be clear, for example, that the mongooses are similar to the communists who took over Russia in the sense that they have merely replaced one exploitative system (the Czarist reign signified by snakes) with another. This seems to reinforce Uncle Julius's comment that vermin follow "one pest after another, like revolutions," implying that the communist revolutions in Russia were simply methods of rearranging systems of power and oppression. The German shepherd that kills the mongoose underscores this point by signifying yet another disillusioning shift of power. Interestingly, the dog's "pink-and-brown gums" and "saliva" are sharply reminiscent of Uncle Julius's toothless pink, stained gums and his slobbery kiss. By the end of the story, the narrator himself (having matured and lost his innocence) is the authority figure that, though unwittingly, tortures and starves his cat so that it responds with "irreversible hatred."

Forms of authority and kinds of oppression combine, therefore, until the narrator seems to concede Uncle Julius's point that "Life is nothing if not a succession of evils" perpetrated by those in power. Although the narrator does not necessarily come to believe wholeheartedly in this conclusion, it is clear that it has made a lasting impression on him. He even comes to a point where he must decide whether Uncle Julius is right that he "might as well stop living now" and, like Vanyka, give up on anything except the hope of death. Hemon is able to articulate the great trauma of this experience only by doubling the narrator with Vanyka. It is through the juxtaposition of their stories that Hemon is able to communicate the great tragedy of a young boy's loss of innocence.

Source: Scott Trudell, Critical Essay on "Islands," in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Topics for Further Study

Research the history of the Bosnian Civil War between 1992 and 1995. What were its key causes? What parties and factions were involved? Describe the ethnically motivated violence and discuss why it could be considered genocide. What has happened to those accused of war crimes? Discuss the United Nations response, the nature of the peace settlement, and the outcome of the war.

Think of a family vacation you took when you were in elementary school, or a period of time spent with a relative that made an impression on you. What are your most vivid memories of it? Write down a series of memories and then form them into a series of short storytelling scenes. What was important about the episodes you chose? What are your lasting impressions? What do they say about your relationship with your family or your relative?

Read another story in *The Question of Bruno*, such as "A Coin" or "The Sorge Spy Ring," and compare it to "Islands." Describe the common features of the stories' narrative voices, technical styles, and storytelling structures. Describe their key differences. How do their themes relate, and how does a knowledge of another of Hemon's stories add to your appreciation of "Islands?"

Do research on the Soviet labor and prison camps of the 1930s and 1940s. Who was sent to the camps, and why? What was life like inside them? How did the camps differ (how would a camp in Arkhangelsk have differed from one in Siberia, for example), and how did they change during Stalin's long reign? How did the camps affect Soviet life and the perception, domestically and internationally, of communist governments?

What Do I Read Next?

Hemon's critically acclaimed novel *Nowhere Man* (2002) follows the early life and emigration to the United States of Josef Pronek, the protagonist of the longest story of *The Question of Bruno*.

In Vladimir Nabokov's intriguing novel *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941), the narrator searches for the essence of his half-brother but ends up raising more questions than he answers.

In Our Time (1925) is Ernest Hemingway's striking collection of early short stories, largely about a young man's experience growing up in the Michigan woods.

Viktor Meier's *Yugoslavia: A History of its Demise* (1999) provides an overview of the history of the former Yugoslavian states in order to analyze the devastating wars and ethnic conflicts that shook the region during the 1990s.

Further Study

Hemon, Aleksandar, "The Book of My Life," in the *New Yorker*, Vol. 76, No. 40, December 25, 2000—January 1, 2001, p. 94.

Hemon's autobiographical article for the *New Yorker* discusses his relationship with his literary mentor and his attitudes towards Serbian nationalism.

Radzinsky, Edvard, *Stalin: The First In-depth Biography Based on Explosive New Documents from Russia's Secret Archives*, Doubleday, 1996.

Radzinsky's intimate and compelling biography of Stalin provides the key context for Uncle Julius's stories about the Soviet labor camps during the 1930s and 1940s.

Rawicz, Slavomir, *The Long Walk*, Globe Pequot Press, 1997.

Rawicz's memoir recounts his escape from a Stalin labor camp in Siberia and how, along with several other prisoners, he walked south all the way to India. This remarkable eye-witness account depicts the horrible treatment of political prisoners, and its description of the topography crossed gives a clear idea of how remote Siberia is from Europe and from India.

Utterson, David, Review of *The Question of Bruno*, in *Times Literary Supplement*, No. 5067, May 12, 2000, p. 23.

Utterson's positive review provides a good example of the British reaction to Hemon's collection.

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Eder, Richard, "An Expatriate at War," in *New York Times Book Review*, July 30, 2000, p. 12.

Hemon, Aleksandar, "Islands," in *The Question of Bruno*, Vintage International, 2001, pp. 1—21; originally published in *Ploughshares*, Vol. 24, No. 1, Spring 1998, pp. 12—25.

Orozco, Daniel, "Funny, Startling Stories of War and Loneliness," in *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 4, 2000.

Schwartz, Stephen, "A Theft of Style," in *National Review*, Vol. 52, No. 20, October 23, 2000, pp. 79—81.

Steinberg, Sybil S., Review of *The Question of Bruno*, in *Publishers Weekly*, Vol. 247, No. 20, May 15, 2000, pp. 87—88.