

The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman: A Novel Study Guide

The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman: A Novel by Angela Carter

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Plot Summary

The *Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* is a novel by British author Angela Carter. This novel is a journey through a world in which all of man's desires come true with the help of a machine built by rogue scientist Dr. Hoffman. When Dr. Hoffman turns his machine on and focuses it on the capital city of a comparatively new and unstable country, he is surprised to have his machine met with resistance. A war begins between reality and desire that changes the way man looks at the world. Desiderio, a lost man looking for a master, finds himself an unwitting hero in the war when he denies his own desires and murders the woman he wants more than any other. *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* is a curious look at a world where man is given his every desire and finds it to be less than perfect.

Desiderio is a young man living in the capital city of an unnamed South American country. Desiderio works for the Minister of Determination during a war with Dr. Hoffman, a scientist who has created a machine that is capable of making all of man's desires come true. This machine has so altered reality that many people in the capital cannot tell the difference between what is real and what is not. The Minister of Determination is determined to fight this altered reality by creating his own machines that will tell him what is real and what is not, including a computer that renames all things to make reality even out of imaginary objects.

When Dr. Hoffman sends an ambassador to speak with the Minister about the war, Desiderio finds himself falling in love with the beautiful man's features. Desiderio believes that this man is really a woman named Albertina, a woman who has come to him in his dreams. This man's features haunt Desiderio even as his Minister sends him outside of the city to find and kill Dr. Hoffman. Desiderio's first stop is a seaside village where the mayor has gone missing. There Desiderio meets a peepshow proprietor whom he learns was once Dr. Hoffman's professor at university.

Desiderio spends the night at the mayor's house and finds himself fascinated with the mayor's young daughter. Desiderio makes love to this young woman. The following day, while searching again for the peepshow proprietor, Desiderio finds this young woman's body floating in the ocean. Desiderio attempts to save her, but finds her already dead. Desiderio is then arrested for her murder. Fortunately, Desiderio is able to escape police custody.

Desiderio is injured and sick as he escapes into the countryside from the police. Desiderio is taken in by a tribe of Indians who live on the river. These Indians take Desiderio and make him a part of their family, even allowing for his engagement to one of their daughters. However, Desiderio learns that they plan to eat him on his wedding day in order to absorb his knowledge. Desiderio runs away and joins a traveling carnival, becoming an assistant to the peepshow proprietor he met previously. During his time with the carnival, Desiderio learns more about Dr. Hoffman, but also has a violent experience with a group of acrobats. As Desiderio recovers from this event, a



landslide destroys the carnival and the town where they have stopped, killing the peepshow proprietor and destroying all of Dr. Hoffman's samples.

Desiderio meets up with a Count from Lithuania and his young assistant. Together these three travel all over the country, eventually making their way to the sea where they board a ship for Europe. The ship is hijacked by pirates and these three manage to escape during a storm that leaves them stranded on the coast of Africa. A tribe of Amazonian women captures the three survivors and takes them to their chief. The chief turns out to be a man the Count has been running from for years, a pimp whose prostitute the Count killed. The chief has the Count cooked, but when he attempts to cook his assistant, a young man Desiderio discovers is Albertina in disguise, Desiderio kills the chief and escapes with his love.

Desiderio and Albertina travel for days through a landscape that defies the imagination. Desiderio and Albertina happen on a village of centaurs and are nearly killed when the centaurs decide to shoe them, but are saved just in time by a helicopter sent from Dr. Hoffman's military camp. Desiderio and Albertina are taken to the castle where Dr. Hoffman's machine is located. Desiderio finds himself disappointed that the doctor's home is untouched by his own machines, that Dr. Hoffman seems to be a man who lacks all desire.

Dr. Hoffman takes Desiderio into his lab and shows him the machines that alter reality. The Desiderio is shown the eroto-energy generation room where lovers create energy with their lovemaking. Aware that Dr. Hoffman intends to make Desiderio and Albertina his newest energy producers, Desiderio attempts to escape. Dr. Hoffman is killed and Desiderio is forced to kill Albertina. For this, Desiderio lives the remainder of his life with regret.



Introduction and Chapter 1, The City Under Siege

Introduction and Chapter 1, The City Under Siege Summary

Angela Carter is a celebrated author who lived in London and taught in several universities, including Brown University in Rhode Island. The *Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* is one of Angela Carter's most original works.

Introduction. Desiderio is now an old man, looking back on his life with a sense of regret. Desiderio acknowledges that he is known as a hero for ending the war against Dr. Hoffman, but he had never wanted to be a hero and he regrets that his fame came at the expense of the one woman he would ever truly desire, Albertina Hoffman.

The City Under Siege. Desiderio is the son of a prostitute of Indian heritage and was raised by a group of nuns in an orphanage. Due to his Indian heritage, Desiderio has always felt as though he did not belong. For this reason, Desiderio finds himself anxious to please his superiors in an effort to fit in. Desiderio cannot remember how the war began, but recalls how his master, the Minister of Determination, became a city leader against the machines of Dr. Hoffman. A meeting had been called among all the city leaders. During the meeting one of the Minister's fell overboard on the boat they were all on. Desiderio's Minister rescued this man by walking on water because the boat and the sea did not really exist. It turns out that Desiderio's Minister did not have enough imagination to be fooled by the things Dr. Hoffman's machine created.

The city in which Desiderio lives is the capital of a new and unstable country in South America. This city is constantly changing thanks to Dr. Hoffman's machines. Desiderio finds himself unable to recognize the streets he travels from day to day because they are constantly changing, moving in time. Murders and rapes take place on a daily basis. The dead come back to haunt the living. People disappear without explanation. It is a chaotic world leaving the city in utter chaos. The Minister hires a group of scientists to find ways to make sense of the chaos, but they too become victims of Dr. Hoffman's machines, committing mass suicide. The Minister then comes up with a computer program that tests items to assign a reality to them, undermining the effect of the desire machines.

Dr. Hoffman sends the Minister a letter asking him to meet with an Ambassador. Desiderio believes this means Dr. Hoffman believes the city is ready to surrender. At the meeting, Desiderio finds the ambassador, a young man, irresistible. The young man is beautiful and bears a striking resemblance to a young woman named Albertina who has frequently visited Desiderio in his dreams and left him messages in his bedroom. After this meeting between the Ambassador and the Minister, the Minister asks Desiderio to leave the city and track down Dr. Hoffman. Desiderio is to kill Dr. Hoffman.



Introduction and Chapter 1, The City Under Siege Analysis

The introduction to this novel gives away the climax at the end of the novel. The narrator, an old man who is looking back on his youth, begins the story by telling his reader that he killed the one woman he ever desired and that he is haunted by this murder. The narrator also tells the reader that this woman's father was Dr. Hoffman, a man against whom his country waged war. The narrator also killed this man, making him a hero for ending the war. It is clear to the reader, however, that the narrator does not feel he is a hero, but instead regrets his actions on that night so long ago.

The narrator, Desiderio, begins his story by describing the war the country was undergoing. Dr. Hoffman has some kind of machine that allows all of man's desires to come true. This situation leads to a great deal of confusion as time becomes malleable, as people find it difficult to tell what is real and what is not, and people act out their deepest desires against one another, leading to an increase in crimes. The city is in chaos and the only defense against it is a Minister who so lacks in imagination that Dr. Hoffman's machines do not function against him. Desiderio too appears to be somewhat impervious to the machine's power. Although Desiderio sees the changes in the city and is visited nightly by a beautiful woman named Albertina, he does not seem to be taken in by the desires that are destroying his fellow city dwellers.

As the novel begins, the reader is plunged into a confusing world where reality is no longer the norm, where history is no longer concrete, where time itself is no longer a linear thing. The novel is so filled with imagery that the reader can get lost in the words. However, the conflict is presented in this imagery and the reader finds themselves holding their breath as Desiderio leaves the city in search of his claim to fame.



Chapter 2, The Mansion of Midnight

Chapter 2, The Mansion of Midnight Summary

The Mansion of Midnight. Desiderio leaves the capital city and arrives in the seaside village where the mayor has gone missing. Desiderio walks along the promenade and finds it abandoned, as though everyone simply stood up and walked away. Desiderio happens upon a peepshow. There is a blind man there who demands a quarter before he will let Desiderio look at his displays. Although customers before him have left bits of trash rather than currency, Desiderio offers the appropriate amount of money. Desiderio peeks into the displays and finds himself looking at exceedingly sexual displays of wax figures and slides magnified by the machines. Afterward, Desiderio takes the peepshow proprietor for a drink and learns that he was once Dr. Hoffman's university professor. The two talk about the doctor and his research partner in school, Mendoza, a man the Minister previously told Desiderio traveled with a traveling carnival and who reportedly had built a time machine.

After meeting with the professor, Desiderio goes to the town hall where he looks at evidence of the mayor's disappearance. After this initial meeting, the mayor's assistant arranges for Desiderio to stay at the mayor's house with his housekeeper and young daughter, Mary Anne. When Desiderio arrives, he finds the housekeeper working in darkness to conserve energy and the daughter playing the piano. Desiderio believes he has a conversation with Mary Anne before going to bed, and then has a sexual encounter with her once he goes to bed. However, Mary Anne is in a coma and Desiderio is aware of this, but reality is so altered that he believes her to be conscious. The next day, Desiderio goes back to the promenade to find the professor once again, but instead he finds innocent Mary Anne floating in the sea. Desiderio attempts to revive her, but Mary Anne is dead. The Determination Police come to arrest him with the professor as their guide. It is then that Desiderio realizes he has been set up by the mayor's assistant and housekeeper in their desire to hide what has happened to the mayor.

Desiderio is shot in his struggle to escape arrest. Desiderio is taken to the mayor's office where he is imprisoned for the night. Desiderio manages to climb up the chimney of the mayor's fireplace and escape over the rooftops of the city. Desiderio steals a bike and rides out into the country. However, Desiderio becomes so weakened and ill from his bullet wound that he collapses. An Indian rescues him and takes him to his barge.

Chapter 2, The Mansion of Midnight Analysis

Desiderio leaves the city in search of Dr. Hoffman and runs into one of the doctor's old professors almost immediately. This man runs a peepshow now consisting of sexually charged pictures, slides, and wax figures. This appears to be coincidental at first, but when the reader learns that Dr. Hoffman was once the peepshow proprietor's student,



the reader begins to wonder if the peepshow might have something to do with the doctor and his machines. The reader also learns about Mendoza, Dr. Hoffman's research partner in school, someone the Minister has already told Desiderio to keep an eye out for.

Desiderio has a brief affair with a young girl who is apparently in a coma of unknown origins, but she appears alive and well to Desiderio. The two have a conversation with the girl telling Desiderio that she believes her father committed suicide, a conclusion that Desiderio finds himself agreeing with. This, the reader soon realizes, is all a part of Dr. Hoffman's machines, creating a reality in which Desiderio interacts with the comatose girl because he desires to do so. In the end, Desiderio's enemies kill the girl to set him up, causing Desiderio to become a fugitive on the run, a situation that will haunt him throughout the rest of the novel. This girl's death also parallels the death of Albertina that Desiderio discusses in the introduction of this novel, foreshadowing in a way the death of Desiderio's only desire.



Chapter 3, The River People

Chapter 3, The River People Summary

The River People. Desiderio is taken in by a group of Indians who have taken to living on the river since the arrival of people from other countries in their lands. Desiderio, who is part Indian and has always been ashamed of his heritage, finds himself embracing his heritage as these kind people make him a part of their family. Desiderio quickly learns the unique singing language of these people and some of their customs. When he is healed from his wounds well enough, Desiderio joins the family in their daily activities. Nao-Kurai, the man who rescued him, asks Desiderio to teach him to read and write English. They begin their lessons in earnest, but Desiderio finds Nao-Kurai a difficult student.

Due to the war, most of the movement of commerce has been restricted on land, therefore the Indians find themselves inundated with a large amount of business moving products over the river. However, many of the customers are aware of the Indians' inability to read and often cheat them of their pay. One day while in a small village, Desiderio learns that a fellow Indian has been told that he did not deliver all the product he was supposed to and therefore owes for the missing product. This amount of money will ruin the Indian. Desiderio goes to talk to the customer, forcing him to admit his lie and to pay the Indian what he is owed. This causes Nao-Kurai and his people to hail Desiderio as a hero. At the same time, Desiderio finds himself part of a family for the first time in his life. Therefore, Desiderio jumps at the opportunity to marry Nao-Kurai's eldest daughter, nine year old Aoi.

Desiderio expects the engagement to be a long affair because of Aoi's age, but quickly learns that they are to marry quickly. Aoi begins coming to Desiderio at night, using her limited knowledge to bring him pleasure, but not allowing Desiderio to consummate the act. When Desiderio goes to Nao-Kurai's mother for clarification of this unfamiliar ritual as well as some oddities about Aoi's body, the older woman seduces Desiderio. Soon Desiderio finds himself with two lovers whom he makes every effort to satisfy.

As the day of the wedding approaches, Desiderio finds himself relegated to the sidelines as his new family gathers the supplies for the wedding feast. Desiderio thinks nothing of the secrecy of this feast until the night before the wedding. Desiderio goes on deck of the family barge and finds Nao-Kurai drunk and talkative. Nao-Kurai, thinking Desiderio is one of his own sons, tells him the story of a girl who became impregnated with a snake. This snake taught the girl about fire and allowed her to cook her food on his fire. When the girl's brothers and father learn of this, they kill the girl, steal the snake, and eat the snake in the hopes of learning the secrets of fire by ingesting it. Desiderio realizes then that Nao-Kurai and his Indian brothers intend to kill and eat Desiderio at the wedding. Desiderio silently wishes his new family goodbye and escapes to a nearby village. In the village, he finds a traveling carnival. Among the fairgrounds is the familiar



peepshow of Dr. Hoffman's professor. Desiderio takes refuge with this man, taking on the identity of his nephew and assistant.

Chapter 3, The River People Analysis

Desiderio has lived in shame of his Indian heritage until he meets the river people. These people are kind and generous, showing Desiderio the camaraderie of their lifestyle and making him a part of a family like he has never known before. With the knowledge that everyone believes him to either be a murderer or dead, Desiderio has no qualms about giving up his mission and his past life to embrace the life of his new family. Desiderio has found one of his desires, to be a part of a family, to be accepted and to feel as though he belongs.

Unfortunately for the confused and lost Desiderio, his past life comes back to haunt him when his new family begins to envy his ability to read and write the language of the land people. The Indians believe they can gain knowledge by eating the possessor of that knowledge, therefore they decide to eat Desiderio. Desiderio learns that getting all he desires is not always a great thing. For this reason, Desiderio returns to the land people and finds himself made welcome by Dr. Hoffman's old professor, given refuge in his peepshow.



Chapter 4, The Acrobats of Desire

Chapter 4, The Acrobats of Desire Summary

The Acrobats of Desire. Desiderio learns that Albertina, the daughter of Dr. Hoffman, has told the professor to take Desiderio in. It seems that Dr. Hoffman has decided that Desiderio is not a threat to them. The professor also tells Desiderio that the peepshow items are samples that Dr. Hoffman created that help control the desire machine in some way. It is the professor's job to keep the samples safe. The professor also tells Desiderio more about the doctor's research partner, Mendoza. Mendoza had a theory that at the moment of perfect sexual release the body produces a perfect energy. This theory caused Mendoza to be kicked out of school, but Dr. Hoffman apparently continued to work with him. Eventually, however, Mendoza and Dr. Hoffman had a falling out over a woman, Albertina's mother.

Now Desiderio is to take on the persona of the professor's nephew and act as his assistant. Desiderio quickly finds friends among the carnival people, including the bearded woman, the female sharpshooter, and a man known as the Alligator man. Desiderio also finds himself left alone with the collection of Dr. Hoffman's samples often, so he searches through them, finding a great collection of pictures, slides, and wax figures that represent various sexual desires.

One day a group of acrobats join the carnival. They are a group of nine Moroccan men who appear to juggle their body parts. Somehow it appears that they remove their heads, their arms, and finally their eyes and juggle them. At first Desiderio cannot figure out how they do it and comes to believe it is real. The carnival continues to travel, coming to a small religious village toward the end of their season. The people of this village appear to have invited the carnival to their village to prove themselves impervious to sin. While there, Desiderio goes to watch the final performance of the acrobats. Afterward, the acrobats invite Desiderio back to their caravan where he discovers their act is achieved with mirrors.

The acrobats feed Desiderio some kind of strong coffee that causes him to be unable to resist when they begin assaulting him. Desiderio is repeatedly raped by all nine men. When it is over, the leader of the acrobats tells him he has been initiated for some purpose. The man wraps Desiderio in a cloak, gives him a purse, and sends him away. Embarrassed and ashamed of what has happened to him, Desiderio goes into the hills and hides in a cave. Desiderio opens the purse and finds it filled with eyes. Desiderio plays marbles with the eyes all day, oblivious to his surroundings until all the eyes have disappeared into the numerous holes and crevices in the cave. When Desiderio comes out of his cave, he discovers the great storm that broke the night before caused a landslide that buried both the village and the carnival. Desiderio is devastated by the loss of his friends.



Chapter 4, The Acrobats of Desire Analysis

When Desiderio finds himself in the tent of Dr. Hoffman's professor, he learns that Dr. Hoffman has decided he is no longer a threat. This is an interesting turn of events that causes Desiderio to find refuge in the hands of a past enemy. Desiderio also learns of Mendoza's research into the energy of desire, a research that will lead Desiderio to a crisis later in the novel, but at this point appears to be without consequence. Desiderio also learns that the professor has been charge with the care of Dr. Hoffman's samples, items that appear to have something to do with the function of the desire machine. As a consequence of his new circumstance, Desiderio finds himself also in charge of the care of these samples. Desiderio searches through them in an attempt to figure out their purpose, but he finds himself unable to completely understand their purpose.

When a group of acrobats come to the carnival, Desiderio finds himself fascinated by them. These acrobats appear capable of taking their bodies apart and juggling them, a trick that turns out to be done with mirrors. This seems to suggest to the reader that not all desires are realistic or capable of creation by Dr. Hoffman's machine. Later these acrobats rape Desiderio, leaving him devastated. When a landslide takes place soon afterward, killing everyone in both the village and the carnival, Desiderio cannot help but wonder if he brought it on with his ordeal or if Dr. Hoffman was behind it for some unknown reason. In the end it appears this landslide happened simply because of a storm, an act of nature that is as uncontrollable by Dr. Hoffman as by anyone else.



Chapter 5, The Erotic Traveler

Chapter 5, The Erotic Traveler Summary

The Erotic Traveler. Desiderio walks for a time after the landslide, unsure of where to go. Desiderio has little luck finding food or people sympathetic to him. One night, Desiderio is sitting by the side of the road when two men in a horse drawn carriage pull up beside him and offer him a ride. Desiderio is happy for the ride and quickly agrees, but is saddened again when they drive past the site of the landslide. The older, larger man who offered Desiderio a ride introduces himself as a Count from Lithuania. The Count claims to be a man who is aroused and excited by natural disasters, such as the landslide. With him is a younger man whose face is completely bandaged because of syphilis who appears to be the Count's assistant.

They stop at a small church for breakfast and Desiderio listens to the Count talk about himself. It seems the Count is on the run because he killed a prostitute in a brothel in Louisiana and her pimp has been searching for him ever since. Desiderio decides the Count is chronically narcissistic and begins to wonder if he might not be Dr. Hoffman in disguise. After breakfast, Desiderio's belief in the Count's narcissism increases as he listens to the man force his assistant into a sexual liaison.

Desiderio continues traveling with this tragic pair. When the Count sees signs for a brothel, he immediately directs his assistant, Lafleur, in the proper direction. Upon arriving at the gates of the brothel, the Count must show his wad of money before they will be allowed inside. Once inside, Lafleur disappears with the exhausted horses while the Count and Desiderio are taken to a room inside the house and forced to dress in a costume of tights and vests made of human skin that reveals their manhood, and given hoods to wear over their faces. After donning this suit, the men are taken to the Bestial Room where the furniture is all made of what appears to be living animals. In cages along the back of this room are female prostitutes displayed for the men to choose from. These women appear to be constructed of various animal parts. The Count chooses one who is all human, but has been badly beaten across her back, as the madam watches and rings up the purchase. The Count instructs Desiderio to pick one as well, but he is not aroused by any of the choices. The Madam saves Desiderio by offering to be his companion for the afternoon.

When Desiderio takes the Madam by the hand, he discovers that she is Albertina in disguise. Desiderio is deeply excited to be with this woman once again. As the Count and his choice for the afternoon make crude love in the other bed, Desiderio falls into a passionate embrace with Albertina. Unfortunately, they are interrupted by a warning outside the door. The Determination police have come in search of two murderers. Almost immediately the windows begin to explode with bullets. Albertina advises Desiderio to go with the porteress who will kind them out of the house. As they run through the hallway, Desiderio is shocked to see Albertina simply disappear. The Count and Desiderio follow the porteress out a back door and find Lefleur waiting for them in



the courtyard. They quickly escape and make their way quickly to the sea where the Count buys them passage on a ship.

Chapter 5, The Erotic Traveler Analysis

Desiderio is in a dark place, alone in the world without clothing, money, or friends. Desiderio finds himself taken in by the Count, a self-centered, highly sexed man. This man is cruel and oblivious to the people around him and their specific needs. This attitude is in complete opposition to the fact that he invited Desiderio to join him in a time of need, leaving the reader curious if maybe something else caused the Count to invite Desiderio on his travels with him. At the same time, the Count invites Desiderio to visit an expensive brothel with him, suggesting that either the Count has a sexual interest in Desiderio, or he finds his friendship comforting. Either way, it appears Desiderio will be traveling with the Count for some time.

At the brothel Desiderio finds himself in the company of Albertina, the woman who haunted his dreams in the capital city and the woman who disguised herself as Dr. Hoffman's ambassador. Through the professor, Desiderio and the reader have already learned that Albertina is Dr. Hoffman's daughter, suggesting an alliance with her could cause Desiderio to lose the focus of his mission. Desiderio, after all, has been sent to kill Dr. Hoffman to end the war between his machines and the capital city. However, it seems Desiderio has finally allowed his desires to take over common sense as he finds himself unable to resist Albertina. Along this same line of irony, the reader must not discount the Count's assistant, Lafleur. There is something odd about this strange little man that the reader has begun to notice even if Desiderio has not.



Chapter 6, The Coast of Africa

Chapter 6, The Coast of Africa Summary

The Coast of Africa. Boredom quickly sets in on the ship as the days and nights seem to run into one another. Desiderio and Lafleur find some relief in joining in the nightly entertainment with the ship's crew, but the Count isolates himself and does not participate. Then one day the captain of the ship hears on the radio that Desiderio and the Count are wanted for two separate murders, so the crew takes them into custody and chains them up in the bottom of the ship. This lasts for several days as the men fight over the meager rations they are allowed by the crew. A short time later, the ship is boarded by Asian pirates who behead the entire crew. When the pirates find Desiderio and his friends locked up, they feel a respect for them because of their crimes and invite them to join their ship.

Desiderio finds Lafleur seeking him out more and more, befriending him in a way he did not on land. This continues on the pirate ship even as the Count comes out of his self imposed isolation and begins to embrace the ways of the pirates. The pirates worship a sword and every morning participate in a bizarre ritual that the Count finds fascinating. Several weeks pass on the pirate ship, and then the full moon comes. It is traditional for these pirates to get drunk on the night of the full moon. When they get drunk, they become childish, causing the Count to lose respect for them. On this particular night, a storm brews up and the crew is too drunk to do anything about it. The Count takes their beloved sword and guides the ship, turning it toward land so that he, Desiderio, and Lafleur might survive.

As dawn breaks over the land on which the stranded friends have found themselves, a group of African people begin converging on them. The first group is chased away by another one, a group of Amazonian women. These women take Desiderio and his friends to their village. When they have been cleaned up, they are taken into the hills to meet the tribal chief. The Count is deeply afraid, convinced the pimp who has been searching for him will be there. In fact, the chief does appear to be the pimp or a manifestation of him. The chief tells the Count that he saw him kill the prostitute in the brothel in Louisiana and feels that they are one in the same. For this reason, the chief wants to cut into the Count and see if he has a heart and to taste his flesh. To do this, the Count has his chef place the Count in a pot of boiling water. The Count withstands it for a long time and then cries out to Lafleur that he can finally name his pain.

When the Count is silent, the chief orders Desiderio and Lafleur cooked as well. When the tribe members strip Lafleur of his clothing, Desiderio discovers Lafleur is Albertina. In an unplanned act of heroics, Desiderio rescues Albertina at gunpoint, killing the chief in their escape. Albertina gathers some clothing and as many weapons as she can carry and leads Desiderio into the unfamiliar jungle.



Chapter 6, The Coast of Africa Analysis

Desiderio has resigned himself to leaving his home country and finding a new place and a new life. This is the second time Desiderio has embraced a life different from his own. It seems to the reader that Desiderio's deepest desire is to not be himself, to be something better or different than the young bureaucrat who is discriminated against because of his Indian heritage.

Desiderio once again barely escapes prison when a group of pirates attack the ship he is on, a ship that is attacked because it turned around rather than continuing on its originally planned course. Ironically, the ship would not have been attacked had Desiderio and the Count been on board. In the end, however, the pirates prove to be too weak and too immature to survive the rough seas, leaving Desiderio and his companions left on the coast of a strange country where the Count comes face to face with his destiny.

The theme of this chapter seems to be the idea that a person cannot escape their destiny, no matter what might happen. This applies to the sailors, the pirates, and the Count himself. At the same time, Desiderio finds himself face to face with the woman of his own desires, suggesting he too cannot escape what is meant to be. Desiderio's fate, however, appears to be much happier than that of the other characters in this chapter, but this could change as the plot continues to develop.



Chapter 7, Lost in Nebulous Time

Chapter 7, Lost in Nebulous Time Summary

Lost in Nebulous Time. Desiderio and Albertina make their way through the strange jungle, finding themselves in a place where the vegetation and the animals are unnatural. Albertina explains that the machines her father has created have been out of control since the samples were destroyed. This makes the illusions created by the desire machines to be unpredictable. Albertina also explains how she happened to be with the Count. Albertina was to watch over him and draft him to her father's cause, but found him too self centered to be appropriate. After making this determination, Albertina continued to stay with the Count to keep an eye on him. It is for this reason Albertina was pretending to be Lafleur and how she was able to show herself to Desiderio at the brothel. Albertina claims to love Desiderio as well, but tells him they cannot be physical with one another because the time is not right.

After days of travelling on foot and looking for the aerial patrols Albertina insists her father sends all over the world, they find themselves on a hill where there is a tree that appears to be half tree and half horse. This tree is decorated by many items that make it appear humans live in the area. A moment later, Albertina notices four centaurs coming toward them. These centaurs force them to drop their weapons and accompany them to their village. In the village, the creatures appear fascinated with Desiderio and Albertina, especially their legs and feet. After inspecting them and removing their clothing, the centaurs perform some sort of ceremony while the humans lie on an altar of some type. Afterward, the bay centaur, one who seems to be in charge, takes Desiderio and Albertina into his home and lies them side by side on a table. The male centaurs then take turns raping Albertina while the female centaurs are forced to touch Desiderio's naked body.

The next morning, the bay centaur apologizes to Desiderio after his wife apparently has told him that Desiderio and Albertina are mates. For several weeks, Desiderio and the bay's wife care for Albertina as she recovers from her ordeal. Later, Albertina is put to work in the fields with the female centaurs while Desiderio spends time learning the traditions and beliefs of the centaurs. It turns out the centaurs believe they are the deformed children of a union between Sacred Stallion and the Bridal Mare because the Bridal Mare and her lover, Dark Archer once killed the Sacred Stallion so that they might together. The centaurs believe that they are to spend all of eternity making amends for this affair, which includes self administered beatings and tattooing, especially against the women.

For several weeks the centaurs struggle to figure out where and how Desiderio and Albertina came from and fit into their religion. Finally they decide that Desiderio and Albertina are a warning as to what could happen if the centaurs do not repent enough. For this reason the centaurs decide to tattoo and to nail shoes onto Desiderio and Albertina. The tattoos are painful and possibly poisonous, leaving both Desiderio and



Albertina in a great deal of pain. However, Desiderio is convinced they will not survive the shoeing. Just moments before the centaurs would most likely have begun the shoeing, a helicopter appears out of the sky and destroys the holy tree.

Chapter 7, Lost in Nebulous Time Analysis

Desiderio escapes with Albertina and they begin to explore the odd jungle in which they have found themselves. Desiderio believes he will finally be able to satisfy his desire for Albertina now that they are together and alone, but learns that the time is not right. Desiderio has no idea what this means, but the savvy reader will suspect its meaning.

Desiderio and Albertina find themselves living with a group of centaurs who are violent and confuses about the origins of their species. This has caused them to worship an odd god, similar to the sword the pirates worshipped. As part of this, the centaurs believe women to be the lowest form of life and treat their women with an utter lack of respect. This follows along with the discrimination against women that has been implicit throughout the novel. This situation causes Albertina to be badly abused and Desiderio powerless to do anything about it. Desiderio's reaction to this situation is curiously dispassionate, leaving the reader wondering if Desiderio's desire for Albertina is strictly physical rather than emotional.

The samples were destroyed in chapter 4. Apparently since that time the desire machines have been working without control, suggesting the samples somehow controlled the machines. This has resulted in some strange events worldwide. Albertina wonders if this is why she and Desiderio have encountered the centaurs, if perhaps she has somehow desired the treatment she receives from these creatures. Desiderio, on the other hand, cannot imagine that she could want something so dark and painful to happen to her. Besides, if Albertina had wanted the centaurs to rape her, that implies that Desiderio wanted to be raped by the acrobats, an event that directly parallels Albertina's experience. Desiderio cannot possibly believe this to be true, so he denies the whole thing.



Chapter 8, The Castle

Chapter 8, The Castle Summary

The Castle. Desiderio and Albertina are picked up by the helicopter where Albertina instantly dresses in flight gear and contacts her father over the radio. They land in a military camp not far from Dr. Hoffman's castle. Albertina tells Desiderio that the Minister has completed his computer program and managed to find a defense against the desire machines. This has liberated the capital city to a certain degree.

Albertina takes Desiderio to her father's castle. When Desiderio is introduced to Dr. Hoffman, he finds him sitting quietly with his long dead wife who has been preserved in some manner. After their initial meeting, Desiderio is escorted to a room where an unseen servant brings him an expensive change of clothing for dinner. At dinner, Desiderio is disappointed to find Dr. Hoffman anticlimactic. In fact, Desiderio finds Dr. Hoffman to be a man without desires. Desiderio is disappointed that there is no change in reality in Dr. Hoffman's home. Desiderio had expected Dr. Hoffman's house would be the most affected by the desire machines, but it appears the machines have no affect on Dr. Hoffman's personal space.

After dinner, Albertina takes Desiderio for a walk on the property and shows him an Indian burial site that has been excavated on the property. Desiderio is aware he should be outraged by this treatment of his heritage, but all he can think about is Albertina. Desiderio attempts to become intimate with Albertina, but she once again tells him the time is not right. Albertina then sends Desiderio off to tour the lab with her father.

Desiderio goes to Dr. Hoffman's lab where he finds the entire situation purely clinical. Dr. Hoffman explains his machines, showing Desiderio how they work. As he talks, Desiderio comes to the conclusion that Dr. Hoffman is something of a hypocrite. In the final room, Dr. Hoffman shows Desiderio from where they get their energy to run the machines. There is a room filled with mesh cages in which couples participate in varying acts of sexual intercourse. Dr. Hoffman explains how these couples are fed hormones intravenously in order to keep up their stamina day and night until eventually each couple with explode into pure sex and pure energy. All this is based on Mendoza's research.

Albertina, who was disguised as the hermaphrodite supervisor in the energy room, joins Dr. Hoffman and Desiderio. It is then that Desiderio sees an empty mesh bed. Desiderio realizes that Dr. Hoffman plans for he and Albertina to become one of these couples. Desiderio refuses and attempts to run from the room. Dr. Hoffman chases him in a wheelchair, firing a gun. Desiderio causes Dr. Hoffman to fall over in the wheelchair, breaking his neck almost instantly. Albertina comes after Desiderio with a knife and they struggle with it over the body of Dr. Hoffman. Eventually Desiderio gets control of the knife and kills Albertina.



Desiderio escapes from the room by killing a technician who has come in response to an alarm. Desiderio then slips into the emergency exit, forced to kill another technician as he pauses to destroy the machine, and the Hoffman family dog. Finally Desiderio escapes the castle, burns the bridge, and escapes into the hills. Eventually Desiderio finds his way back to the city where he is welcomed as a hero. Now Desiderio looks back on his life and regrets his actions because Albertina continues to haunt his dreams.

Chapter 8, The Castle Analysis

Desiderio finally meets Dr. Hoffman and finds him disappointing. Of all people to embrace desire, one would expect that person to be Dr. Hoffman. However, of all the places Desiderio has met during this war, Dr. Hoffman is the most rooted in reality. Desiderio has come to the castle to be with Albertina, but instead he finds himself forced to make a choice between reality and desire.

The entire novel works on the idea of what it would be like if man were to have all he desires. Ironically, the man who makes this dream come true has as few desires as the man he fights against. The Minister is able to survive and fight the desire machines because he lacks in imagination. Dr. Hoffman lacks in desire. This leaves Desiderio to decide between a world of desire and a world of reality, between having what he thinks will make him happy or giving up happiness to have order. Desiderio makes his choice almost by accident when he kills Dr. Hoffman, a decision he has regretted ever since even though the people of the capital city hail him as a hero.

Ironically Desiderio has wanted nothing more throughout this novel than to, first, have a master, and second, have Albertina. Desiderio is presented both these things in one moment. Dr. Hoffman is willing to be Desiderio's master if he will commit his life to making energy through sexual contact with Albertina. It seems like the ultimate scenario of desire. However, Desiderio balks when he realizes this will lead to a death beyond his understanding. Desiderio turns from his desires and regrets it for the rest of his life.



Characters

Desiderio

Desiderio is the son of a prostitute who was raised in an orphanage by nuns. Desiderio has some Indian blood in a country where there is a great deal of prejudice against those with Indian heritage. For this reason, Desiderio often finds himself in a position where he expects to be discriminated against. Desiderio has a sense of inferiority in most situations even though he is the assistant to a powerful minister in the capitol city of his country.

When Dr. Hoffman turns on his machines and odd things begin to happen throughout the city, Desiderio finds himself able to ignore them. The only part of the war Desiderio cannot ignore is the dreams he has while still living in the city. Desiderio finds himself drawn to the beautiful woman who often visits him in his dreams. After seeing the face of this creature on the Ambassador Dr. Hoffman sends to speak with the Minister, Desiderio finds himself desiring this woman more than he has ever desired anyone before.

Desiderio is the type of man who needs someone to guide him, a master. Desiderio spends much of the novel looking for just this type of person. Desiderio turns first to Nao-Kurai, then the Count, and finally the Bay, but each of these people lets him down. Desiderio then finds himself in a position to decide between the Minister and Dr. Hoffman as his master. Desiderio inadvertently picks the Minister when he realizes what it is Dr. Hoffman wants from him. However, Desiderio spends the remainder of his life regretting this choice because he has lived with his desire for the one woman he can never have as a result of this choice.

Albertina Hoffman

Albertina Hoffman is Dr. Hoffman's daughter. Albertina begins appearing to Desiderio in his dreams when the city first comes under siege. Desiderio successfully ignores these dreams, taking them at face value rather than with the understanding that some of it is true. Later, when Desiderio meets Albertina while she is disguised as her father's Ambassador, Desiderio falls deeply in lust for her. Throughout the rest of the novel, Desiderio finds himself obsessed with this young woman, even after he learns she is Dr. Hoffman's daughter.

Albertina has the ability to appear in various disguises throughout the novel. First Albertina appears as a strong, virile male who has come to try to make peace with the Minister. Later, Albertina disguises herself as the Madam of a brothel while Desiderio is there with the Count. Later, Desiderio learns that Albertina is Lafleur, the young assistant that has been traveling with the Count for more than a year. Finally, Albertina appears as a hermaphrodite who has been given charge of the eroto-energy generating



room in Dr. Hoffman's castle. At the same time, Albertina tells Desiderio that he has never seen her true form, leaving the reader wondering if perhaps one of these disguises was closer to the truth than Desiderio knows.

Albertina is the object of Desiderio's ultimate desire. Albertina appears to realize this and she strings him along, making him wait to consummate their desire until her father decides it is the right time. What Albertina is really doing is waiting until she can force Desiderio to be her partner in the eroto-energy generating room. It is this knowledge that drives Desiderio over the edge, that leads to the murder of Albertina. Desiderio values his life over his desire for Albertina, forcing him to make a decision he regrets for the rest of his life.

Dr. Hoffman

Dr. Hoffman is a researcher who became interested in the thin line between reality and fantasy in university. This interest was fueled when Dr. Hoffman met a fellow student, Mendoza, who believed that the ultimate sexual release could create a perfect energy. These two worked together for several years until a falling out over Dr. Hoffman's wife led to a splitting of the ways.

Dr. Hoffman has taken his theories and those of Mendoza, combined them, and made a machine that makes it possible for the line between reality and fantasy to disappear. This machine, when focused on the capitol city, creates a world in which time becomes malleable, where the dead come back to life, and where men can have all they have ever desired just by thinking or dreaming of it. It is a world of chaos that leads to many crimes, including murder. It is also a world in which a man with a great number of desires can find complete happiness.

When Desiderio meets Dr. Hoffman, he is disappointed by the lack of desire in the man. Dr. Hoffman has created a machine that allows fantasy to become reality, but there is nothing in Dr. Hoffman's reality that is fantastic. It appears that the machine does not touch Dr. Hoffman's home. In fact, Dr. Hoffman has his dead wife's body preserved and sitting in his living room, but he has not used his machine to bring her back to life. It is an interesting paradox that leaves Desiderio saddened and unwilling to become Dr. Hoffman's puppet.

The Minister

The Minister is a high official in the capitol city. When Dr. Hoffman first assails the city with his desire machine, the Minister is one of a few who is immune to its affects. The Minister has such a lack of imagination that the machine cannot confuse his reality. For this reason, the Minister is able to come up with a computer program that will tell the difference between fantasy and reality, giving name to all objects so that the city can overcome the effects of Dr. Hoffman's machines. For this reason, a war breaks out between the capitol city and Dr. Hoffman's missionaries. Desiderio serves this Minister



and it is at the Minister's urging that Desiderio leaves the capitol city on a mission to kill Dr. Hoffman, which he eventually does.

The Professor

The Professor is a blind old man who runs a peepshow. Desiderio first finds the professor when he arrives in a city outside the capitol where the mayor has disappeared. Desiderio sees the man's show and will later make a connection between it and Dr. Hoffman. It is at this first meeting that Desiderio learns the Professor is connected to Dr. Hoffman. However, before Desiderio can learn more, the Professor and a couple of locals implicate him in a murder.

Desiderio finds the Professor again after he leaves the River People. This time the Professor has been given orders from Albertina to take care of Desiderio. From the Professor, Desiderio learns about Mendoza, Dr. Hoffman's research partner, and the samples that are used in the peepshow and are an important component to the desire machine. Unfortunately, the Professor dies a short time later when a landslide destroys the carnival he is traveling with.

Nao-Kurai

Nao-Kurai is an Indian who is part of the River People tribe. Nao-Kurai finds Desiderio shortly after he runs away from police custody, shot and running for her freedom. Nao-Kurai mistakes Desiderio for an Indian and takes him onto his barge, helping to heal his wounds. When Nao-Kurai learns that Desiderio can read and write, he asks to learn to do this as well to help in deals with the land people. However, Nao-Kurai is not a good student and is unable to learn.

After Desiderio helps a fellow Indian with a crooked customer, Nao-Kurai agrees to allow Desiderio to marry his nine year old daughter. However, Desiderio learns that Nao-Kurai and his male tribesmen plan to cook and eat Desiderio in a misguided attempt to learn how to read and write the common language. For this reason, Desiderio leaves the River People even though he has found the first family he has ever known among them.

Aoi

Aoi is Nao-Kurai's nine year old daughter. After saving a fellow tribesman from being cheated by a land person, Desiderio is given the honor of marrying Aoi. The child begins coming to Desiderio at night after the engagement is announced. Desiderio is not allowed to consummate the relationship, but the girl uses some very grown up skills to give pleasure to Desiderio. Desiderio is not in love with Aoi, but he is content with the relationship and happy to be made a part of the tribe.



Mama

Mama is Nao-Kurai's mother. Mama helps raise the children because Nao-Kurai's wife died while giving birth to his youngest son. Mama also takes Desiderio into the home with much affection, caring for him like her own child. When Desiderio comes to Mama with questions about the marriage process, Mama begins a sexual relationship with him. Soon Desiderio finds himself with two willing lovers. It is this relationship that hurts Desiderio the most when he realizes he must leave the tribe to save his own life.

The Count

The Count is a man from Lithuania. Desiderio meets the Count on the road after the landslide destroys the carnival he was traveling with. The Count is a self centered man who focuses on nothing but himself. The Count seems to live in a different world. Many of the things he claims having seen and done are things that existed hundreds of years previous to the setting of the novel. For example, the Count claims to have seen Vesuvius erupt and to cause slave riots in the United States. The Count claims to be on the run from a pimp because he killed the man's prostitute during a sexual act.

The Count drags Desiderio after him as he attempts to flee the country. Unfortunately, they end up on the coast of Africa where there is a tribe that is led by a man who is either the pimp himself, or a man who greatly resembles him. This chief decides that he wants to cook and eat the Count so that he might be able to eat someone who is his own soul mate. In the end, the Count is cooked, but Desiderio kills the chief before anyone can eat him.

Lafleur

Lafleur is the Count's assistant. The Count believes Lafleur is a French Canadian who suffers from syphilis that he contracted at birth. Lafleur wears bandages over his face so that no one can see the damage the disease has done to his face. The Count treats Lafleur badly and Desiderio often wonders why the young man remains with the Count. Later, Desiderio will learn that Lafleur is Albertina, sent to watch over the Count by her father. At first Albertina was going to enlist the Count into her father's cause, but later realized he would not be appropriate for that and stayed with him only to keep a watch over him.

The Bay

The Bay is the centaur who appears to be in charge. When Desiderio and Albertina happen on the centaurs, it is the Bay who investigates their legs and sexual organs, the Bay who appears to instruct the men of the village to rape Albertina, and the Bay who takes responsibility for Desiderio and Albertina by allowing them to live in his stable. From the Bay, Desiderio learns about the religion of the centaurs and the reasons for

many of their actions. In fact, when the centaurs decides how to incorporate Desiderio and Albertina into their religion, it is the Bay who appears to lead the movement.



Objects/Places

Cauldron

The Count is cooked to death in a large cauldron while visiting with the chief of an Amazonian tribe in Africa.

Knife

Desiderio kills Albertina with a simple kitchen knife that she has brought into the eroto-energy generating room at the end of the novel.

Statue

A statue is erected of Desiderio after the war because he is considered a hero who single-handedly ended the war.

Bridge

There is a single, fragile bridge that leads to Dr. Hoffman's castle. Desiderio burns this when he escapes from the castle after killing Dr. Hoffman and Albertina.

Helicopter

Desiderio and Albertina are rescued by a helicopter moments before they are to be shoed like a horse.

Cathedral

There is a cathedral in the capitol city that appears impervious to Dr. Hoffman's machine until the day it burns down. The cathedral is later rebuilt and Desiderio anticipates being buried there.

Dr. Hoffman's Samples

Dr. Hoffman's samples are a group of pictures, slides, and wax figures depicting different sexual desires that are important to the control of the desire machine. These samples are given into the care of Dr. Hoffman's old blind professor. Desiderio comes across these samples twice in the story, but never really understands their purpose.



Dr. Hoffman's Castle

Dr. Hoffman is reported to live in a castle complete with a deep crevice all around it. However, Desiderio discovers the castle is a simple vacation home that has been modified to contain the desire machine.

Dr. Hoffman's Machine

Dr. Hoffman has created a machine that runs off of eroto-energy that causes the line between reality and fantasy to disappear, allowing the desires of all men to be set free.

Barges

The River People live on barges. The River People also use these barges to move products after the war has caused the destruction and closing of many roads and railways.

The Mayor's Mansion

While investigating the disappearance of a town's mayor, Desiderio stays in his home. This home is a large mansion that has fallen into deep disrepair, disrepair that clearly began before the mayor disappeared.

Louisiana

The Count admits to having killed a young prostitute in a brothel in Louisiana that has caused her pimp to chase after him with the intention of killing him.



Themes

Reality versus Fantasy

This entire novel is based on one question: What would happen if man could have all he desires? The war the narrator describes in the opening pages of the novel is a war between reality and fantasy. Dr. Hoffman has built a machine that allows the line between reality and fantasy to blur. Suddenly time no longer exists. One day Desiderio walks to work and the streets look normal, but the next the streets are cobblestone, suddenly becoming the streets that existed over a hundred years before. Dead people begin to walk and talk again, coming back to their loved ones. Lovers begin to find it difficult to tell the difference between consent and refusal. Murders begin to take place on a regular basis when people find it difficult to tell the difference between real affronts, real people, and fantasy.

Desiderio finds it easy to ignore these changes in his city because there is little in life he has ever desired. Desiderio wants a master and he has found one in his Minister. Desiderio wants a woman to love and he finds one in Albertina. Everything else Desiderio is able to ignore. However, as time goes on and Desiderio finds himself outside the city walls, he begins to have experiences that cannot be real, but he believes they are. Desiderio refuses to see the truth, to believe that what has happened cannot be real.

At the end of the book, Desiderio finds himself trapped between the Minister, a man with such a lack of imagination that little of the desire machine has been able to touch his world, and Dr. Hoffman, a man who has created the desire machine but appears to have a lack of real desire in his own life. Desiderio must make a choice not only between these two masters, but between a world of reality where everything is simple and understood, and a world of fantasy where almost anything can happen at any time. In the end it is neither of these things Desiderio chooses, but instead a desire to save his own life. However, Desiderio eventually comes to the realization that he saved his life, but in return he had to give up everything he ever desired.

Desire

Desiderio's very name means one who is desired. However, Desiderio has never felt desired. Abandoned by his mother, a prostitute, Desiderio was raised in an orphanage by a group of nuns who were unable to show the affection a child deserves from his parent. As an adult, Desiderio has found discrimination against him because of his Indian heritage. This has left Desiderio feeling like an outsider even though he has gotten a good job and made a good life for himself.

Desiderio leaves the capitol city in order to find Dr. Hoffman and kill him. Almost immediately Desiderio finds himself accused of murder and arrested, once again the



outsider. However, upon his escape Desiderio is taken in by the River People, a group of Indians who have taken to living on the river to escape the outsiders who have taken over their lands. Desiderio finds acceptance among these people and finally finds reason to embrace the heritage his mother disdained and he hid for so many years. Unfortunately, this acceptance comes to an end when Desiderio learns these people want to eat him and he once again finds himself an outcast, sent out to face the world alone.

As Desiderio travels the country in search of Dr. Hoffman, he becomes obsessed with a young woman he eventually learns is Dr. Hoffman's only daughter. Desiderio dreams of this woman and eventually finds himself in her company. Desiderio believes there is nothing more that he could want than to be with this woman. However, Albertina continually puts off Desiderio's passions even as she admits her love for him. When the time finally comes for them to consummate their relationship, Desiderio learns he must give up his life to do so. Desiderio balks at this and kills Albertina, forcing him to live the rest of his life knowing that he took away from himself the only thing he ever desired.

Finding One Self

Desiderio spends most of the book trying to find Dr. Hoffman, but the reader comes to the conclusion that Desiderio has also spent much of this time trying to define himself in the people around him. Desiderio begins the novel as an orphan of an undesirable heritage who has made himself an important and respected man through the minister he serves. When the Minister sends Desiderio out into the world, Desiderio clings to his responsibility for the Minister in order to define himself. However, when he is arrested and his identity changes irrevocably, Desiderio finds himself lost.

Desiderio comes to live with the River People and is so content to finally be a part of a family, he consents to almost anything they want from him. Desiderio identifies himself as the one thing he so desperately sought to deny in the city, as an Indian. Desiderio would do anything for these River People, including marrying a nine year old child. However, when Desiderio learns his life is in danger, he realizes he cannot give up his life for his identity and he runs away.

Desiderio spends many weeks after leaving the Indians as a member of a carnival, identifying himself with the unique characters around him until a violent act forces him to flee. Desiderio then spends weeks in the company of a narcissistic killer, aware that he can never be any of importance to this man, but still willing to define himself by this man's desires. Finally Desiderio comes to Albertina and he defines himself by her parameters. However, even Albertina has her own interests in mind and plots to bring Desiderio to his death. Desiderio reacts out of a sense of self-preservation, but eventually decides his decision was a bad one and he should have chosen Albertina over anything. This suggests to the reader that Desiderio never found his own identity despite his adventures.



Style

Point of View

The novel is written in the first person point of view. The narrator is an older Desiderio who is looking back over fifty years to his adventures during the war. Due to the fact that the narrator is looking back on the action, there are often points in which Desiderio makes comments directly to the reader that give away certain aspects of the plot. For an example, Desiderio tells the reader in the introduction that he killed Albertina and he continues to regret it. There is also a time in chapter 4 when Desiderio tells the reader there is going to be a landslide several pages before the landslide actually happens.

The point of view of this novel is common in some modern literature. This point of view allows the reader to become intimately familiar with the main character, Desiderio, as well as learning some aspects of the plot long before they take place because Desiderio already knows what is about to happen. This point of view is more like having a conversation with a confidant than reading a novel and it builds suspense by giving the reader the conclusion of the chapter or the plot as a whole, but not giving away how that conclusion will be reached. This point of view works well with this plot.

Setting

The novel is set in an unnamed South American country in an unknown time period. The author has used only first initials for many of the locations Desiderio visits in the novel and never names the capitol city or the country in which the novel is set. Desiderio often mentions the common language, but he never says what it is. The reader knows it is not English, German, French, or Spanish because of references to these languages in the plot. For this reason and other subtle hints in the plot, the reader suspects the South American country might be Brazil, where the common language is Portugese, but the author never says for certain.

When Desiderio meets the Count, the Count is riding in a horse drawn carriage and speaks of being present during slave uprisings in the United States and seeing the eruption of Mount Vesuvius, suggesting a different time period from the one in which Desiderio had existed before the landslide. Desiderio has already told the reader that time has become malleable due to Dr. Hoffman's desire machine, therefore it is possible that Desiderio existed in many time periods throughout the novel.

The setting of the novel is of less consequence than it would be in a different novel. The setting of this novel could be any country in the world. However, the reality of that setting is so distorted by Dr. Hoffman's desire machine that the reader might not have recognized the setting if it was their hometown. For this reason, the author's use of initials for the cities Desiderio visits seems appropriate, as does the refusal to admit which country the novel is set.



Language and Meaning

The language of this novel is more formal than modern novelists often use. The language incorporates many words that are from a highly developed understanding of language, as though showing the reader just how educated the narrator really is. The language is often at odds with the plot, using such complicated words in situations that are often vulgar and as basic as human behavior can be. There are often foreign phrases in the novel, turns of phrase that are used to describe clothing, attitude, and behavior. These phrases are not explained in the text, giving the impression that the author anticipates her audience will be familiar with such sophisticated language.

Language is used in the novel in many different ways. The author uses complicated, educated language to tell her story, while placing her characters in situations in which they are forced to learn languages that are sung or created with complicated sounds that lack grammar and structure.

The language of this novel both works with and against the main plot of the novel. The formal language that Desiderio uses implies that he is a well educated man who has embraced a life of responsibility and respect. However, Desiderio finds himself in situations that are the most basic of the human condition, situations in which vulgar language is the only appropriate language. For this reason, the language both paints a picture the reader cannot help but admire and raises the most vulgar situations up to an almost respectable level. For this reason, the language of this novel works well with the author's intentions.

Structure

The novel begins with a simple introduction that describes the ending of the plot. The novel is then divided into eight chapters that each are titled with a word or phrase that describes the characters or situations presented in that chapter. The novel is told mostly in exposition as the narrator, an old man looking back on his life, tells his story with many interruptions to explain his feelings in regards to those situations or to clarify a piece of information.

The novel has a main plot and many subplots. The main plot describes a war between Dr. Hoffman's desire machine and the Minister of the capitol city of an unnamed South American country. As the war wages into its third year, the Minister sends his assistant, Desiderio, to track down Dr. Hoffman and kill him. On the way, Desiderio has many adventures, most of them touched by the fantasy created by Dr. Hoffman's machines. One subplot follows Desiderio's search for a master to emulate and to find his own identity through this master. Another subplot follows Desiderio's quickly growing desire for Albertina, Dr. Hoffman's daughter. All the plots come to a conclusion at the end of the novel.



Quotes

"I remember everything." Introduction, pg. 11

"And the Doctor started his activities in very small ways. Sugar tasted a little salty, sometimes. A door one had always seen to be blue modulated by scarcely perceptible stages until, suddenly, it was a green door." Chapter 1, The City Under Siege, pg. 15

"But, for myself, I was bewildered, for certain timbres in the young man's voice had reawakened all my last night's dream and, as if his voice had struck those mysterious notes which are supposed to shatter glass, a fine tracery of cracks had all at once appeared in the surface of my indifference." Chapter 1, The City Under Siege, pg. 39

"Yet, if she was asleep, she was dreaming of passion and afterwards I slept without dreaming for I had experienced a dream in actuality." Chapter 2, The Mansion of Midnight, pg. 56

"Then, for a long time, nothing more." Chapter 2, The Mansion of Midnight, pg. 66

"T. was a small, old-fashioned town so far to the inland north that a few sandstone outcrops of the mountains lay beyond the river." Chapter 3, The River People, pg. 77

"I had nothing to take with me from the ship except memories." Chapter 3, The River People, pg. 92

"The town had vanished from the face of the earth, leaving behind it only its sandstone corpse as its own gravestone." Chapter 4, The Acrobats of Desire, pg. 110

"I did not know then that she traveled with me for she was inextricably mingled with my idea of her and her substance was so flexible she could have worn a left glove on her right hand—if she had wanted to, that is." Chapter 5, The Erotic Traveler, pg. 142

"I am happy only in that I am a monster." Chapter 6, The Coast of Africa, pg. 161

"Yet we ate the bread of the centaurs and were nourished by it." Chapter 7, Lost in Nebulous Time, pg. 186

"Unbidden, she comes." Chapter 8, The Castle, pg. 221



Topics for Discussion

Who is Desiderio? What has happened to the city where he lives? What has caused this change? How does Desiderio respond to the change? What haunts his dreams? What happens to the roads that lead him to work? What has happened to time? Why does Desiderio work with the Minister? What does the Minister hope to do about the changes in his city? Is there hope this will work? What experiences suggests this change will not be undone? Explain.

Why does the Minister send Desiderio out of the capitol city? What does he hope Desiderio will accomplish? Where does Desiderio go first? What is Desiderio looking for in this place? What does he find? Who is the peepshow proprietor? Why does Desiderio find it important to talk to this man? Who does Desiderio meet when he goes to the home of the city's mayor? What is unusual about this woman? What does Desiderio do to this woman? How does she die? Who is to blame?

Who are the River People? What is unusual about their language? Why do they take Desiderio in? What does Desiderio want from these people? Why does Desiderio stay with the River People after he recovers from his wounds? Who is Desiderio to marry? What is unusual about this arrangement? What does Desiderio learn is planned for him at the wedding? Why does Desiderio decide to leave the River People? What influenced this decision? What does this say about Desiderio's character? What does it foreshadow within the plot?

Why does Desiderio agree to act as the Professor's nephew? What does he learn about Dr. Hoffman from the Professor? Who does Desiderio while with the carnival? Why does he talk about these people? What impact did they have on his life? His mission? What happens when the acrobats join the carnival? What does Desiderio believe brought on this act? Who is to blame? Who does Desiderio blame for the landslide? What do you think caused it?

Who is the Count? What role does he play in Desiderio's life? Why does Desiderio agree to leave the country with the Count? What does Desiderio notice about the Count's assistant during the sea journey? What causes this change? Why does Desiderio not notice it sooner? Why is the Count cooked? What did he do? Why does Desiderio call his act of bravery in Africa a single act that was unintentional? Was Desiderio capable of doing such a thing again? Does he? Compare Desiderio's actions to save Albertina to his actions in saving his own life.

Discuss language. Why does Desiderio come into contact with two groups of people who speak odd, grammar-less languages? What do you think the writer is trying to suggest with these languages? How does Desiderio come to understand these languages? What does this say about Desiderio that he is capable of doing such a thing? How is language important in communication? Why is language not something that was changed by the desire machine? Or was it?



Discuss the desire machine. What is it? How was it built? What does it do? Why did Dr. Hoffman create it? How does he power it? What does it do to the capitol city? Why did Dr. Hoffman think he could use this machine on people without some of them rebelling? Why would a man want all his desires to come true? Why does Dr. Hoffman not use the machine on himself? Desiderio calls Dr. Hoffman a hypocrite. Why?