Journey to the End of the Night Study Guide

Journey to the End of the Night by Louis-Ferdinand Céline

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

The novel opens in Paris, near the time of World War I, in 1914. Surrounded by the music of a military parade, a young Frenchman, Ferdinand Bardamu, decides, in a moment of heroism, to enlist in the army and join the fight against the Germans. Once at the front, faced with the horrors and absurdity of war, he quickly loses his enthusiasm. Bardamu cannot understand why he is supposed to shoot at the Germans, who have never personally harmed him. Bardamu also realizes he is, in the eyes of his countrymen, something of a coward.

Ferdinand Bardamu is given a reconnaissance mission, during which he meets a fellow soldier named Robinson, who is looking for a way to desert the army. They make plans to escape together, but their efforts fail. Wounded and traumatized by the war, Bardamu returns to Paris for treatment and is given a military medal. This is when he meets Lola, a pretty American nurse who has come to volunteer. Bardamu realizes how much profit stands to be made during wartime by those who are not actually forced to fight in the trenches. When he begins to resist going back to the front, Lola leaves him. Ferdinand's second girlfriend, a violinist named Musyne, who also works entertaining the troops, abandons him during a bombardment of the city.

Once cured of his illness, Ferdinand Bardamu decides to go to Africa, where he is faced with the unbearable heat and boredom of the colonies, as well as the cruel exploitation of the natives. Here, he meets Robinson again and takes over his position as manager of a colonial rubber trading post, a solitary and ramshackle hut in the middle of the African bush. Bardamu falls sick and becomes so delirious with fever that he sets fire to the post and deserts it. Bardamu leaves Africa in a terrible fever, aboard a Spanish ship, which has hired him as an oarsman, should he recover.

The ship docks in New York City, a place Bardamu has always dreamed of visiting. Bardamu manages to stay in the United States, but finds poverty and solitude, instead of the riches and friends of which he had dreamed. After an unfortunate meeting with Lola, he leaves New York for a job in Detroit. Working on the automobile assembly line for Ford, he nearly goes crazy with the mechanical repetitiveness of the work. A generous young prostitute named Molly falls for Bardamu and helps to buy his freedom from the plant. Molly offers to help him settle in the New World with her, but Bardamu's craving for adventure is too strong and he sacrifices his happy life with her in favor of returning to Paris. Bardamu leaves the United States with a heavy heart.

After earning his medical diploma, Bardamu continues to lead an impoverished existence. Bardamu sets up his medical practices in Rancy, a grim, underprivileged suburb. There, he uncovers some of the most desperate and repulsive sides of the human condition. Bardamu becomes involved in a sordid affair with the Henrouilles, a middle-aged couple, seeking to get rid of their elderly, clever mother-in-law. The couple pays Robinson to murder the old woman so that they can rent out her room, but Robinson's clumsiness in setting up the trap for his victim results in an explosion that injures him, leaving him temporarily blinded. Bardamu takes care of Robinson and helps

arrange for his exile in Toulouse. Grandmother Henrouille is sent away with him to prevent her from telling the police of the affair.

Bardamu leaves Rancy and gives up practicing medicine for a while. Bardamu visits Robinson in Toulouse, where, surprisingly, his friend is doing well, cooperating with Grandmother Henrouille (his former intended murder victim) in a small business. They work at a small church, showing the mummified corpses in the basement to the tourists. Bardamu meets Robinson's new fiancée, Madelon and, on a whim, has a short affair with her. Despite their romantic betrayals and uncertain loyalties, they all spend a few weeks together on holiday. It ends abruptly when Bardamu hears that Grandmother Henrouille has fallen down the stairs at her job, clearly having been pushed to her death by Robinson, who wanted the business to himself.

Bardamu leaves the unpleasant scene and returns to Paris, where he takes a new job at a psychiatric institute, under the leadership of Dr. Baryton. Unfortunately for Bardamu, Robinson turns up again in a few months and asks to be sheltered at the Institute. Robinson has recovered his sight and left Madelon, who has been pursuing him and threatening to turn him into the police unless he marries her. In an effort to reconcile the three, who have all had quarrels with each other, one of the nurses at the clinic proposes a night at the carnival. Madelon refuses to join in the fun. During the taxi ride home and when Robinson continues to reject her declarations of love as meaningless, she shoots and kills him. After watching his friend die, Bardamu finds himself wondering if Robinson had actually planned for Madelon to shoot him all along. After all, Robinson had sought a way out of the war by surrendering, maybe he was just looking for an easy way out of life, which, thinks Bardamu, in the end is just a carnival full of empty, cheap pleasures meant to distract us from our troubles.

Section 1

Section 1 Summary

This section begins with the sentence, "Here's how it started."

Thus, Ferdinand Bardamu, the novel's hero and narrator, begins to recount his adventures during World War I and beyond. Bardamu's journey started when he was sitting at a café with a friend, watching the parade of newly conscripted soldiers pass. Moved by the spectacle, Bardamu's companion patriotically claims the French are the finest nation in the world. Bardamu, distrustful of nationalist rhetoric and vanity, strongly disagrees. For him, the war shows, once again, how ordinary working people do all the difficult and dangerous work for the nation, while the upper classes reap the profits.

People like Bardamu and his companion are "down in the ship's hold, heaving and panting," while the rich ones are up on deck, "with beautiful pink and perfumed women on their laps." The patriotic appeals for heroic men to defend France merely seduce the poor, powerless men into sacrificing their lives for the honor and fame of being a hero, says Bardamu. At that moment, a regiment marches past and Bardamu suddenly jumps up enthusiastically saying, "I'll just go and see if that's the way it is." Bardamu spontaneously joins the recruits and while he marches in the parade, people throw flowers from café terraces and cheer. The longer they march, the less attention they get. At the end of the parade, he tries to slip away, but he is trapped like a rat.

Section 1 Analysis

World War I has just broken out and the French government is calling for recruits. In the early days of World War I, people were enthusiastic about it and had romantic misconceptions of what war really meant. They commonly expected a short war, with a few sharp actions to 'teach the enemy a lesson', ending with a triumphant capture of the enemy capital, followed by a victory parade at home.

Bardamu does not share these popular fantasies of the war. Bardamu is an independent thinker, who refuses to swallow the nationalist rhetoric that inflames his compatriots. As the novel proceeds, Bardamu will be one of the few people who will not blindly accept the importance of the nation and the cause of the war. Bardamu's thoughts are directly and vividly conveyed to the reader through the first person narrative point of view, where the main character tells his own story.

Section 2

Section 2 Summary

This section begins with the phrase, "When you're in, you're in."

Bardamu finds himself in the army at the age of twenty, fighting a war he does not believe in or understand. Bardamu says he has no idea why the Germans are shooting at him, since he has always been friendly and polite to them. To him, it seems the whole world has been caught up in some new feeling that he does not share. Bardamu is curious about their motives, but in the end, his only desire is to escape. Bardamu wonders if he might be the only coward among the others, who he calls 'stark raving heroic madmen' in their desire to demolish everything on two continents.

The frenzied rush of men astonishes him while they race about on horses, in cars and on motorcycles, hordes of them always crouching, digging, shooting, screeching and killing. Jail would be better, he thinks. Bardamu also thinks of how much he has changed since the days when the prison near his childhood home once frightened him. The warm safety of that jail, with no-one shooting at him, seems far kinder than the horrors and idiocies of men at war. *Men are what one should fear,* he thinks and *nothing else.*

Bardamu wonders if he can stop the war, at least for himself, by refusing to fight. When he approaches his commander to resign, the man is blown up by a shell. A gruesome scene of missing heads follows and Bardamu describes seeing blood "bubbling like jam in a kettle" and the tangled, bleeding meat all over the field.

Bardamu considers having himself taken prisoner but cannot figure out how to approach the enemy without them shooting at him. Bardamu dreams instead of returning to Paris as a hero and of being treated as a hero as long as he lives. Bardamu fantasizes that he will eat free at restaurants; heroes will pay their bills with little French flags, he thinks ironically. Then bullets fly at him from nowhere and interrupt his thoughts.

Returning to his own regiment, he is sent to get the food supplies for everyone. Everyone meets in a meadow where the pigs are being slaughtered to get their rations. Blood and meat are spread out all over the grass, making Bardamu vomit until he is carried away.

One of Bardamu's duties is to help with food supplies and also to act as messenger between the general and his regiment. To do this, he spends a lot of time wandering around in the night trying to find the village at which his men are stationed. Always exhausted, hungry and terrified, his worst fear is of being sent into the treacherous darkness of the forests. At times, to relieve their fears and boredom, he and the other men find whatever village is currently being burned and spend the long night watching it go up in flames. This is their only pleasure.

Bardamu vows never to forget the human viciousness he has seen. We forget such things too easily, he says, but we should do our best to record it 'without changing one word,' and then we can sink into our graves.

Bardamu's commander is General des Entrayes (General Entrails, a French pun on 'guts') who cares only for his own comfort and who likes warm meals and pleasant rose gardens to rest in while he plots the campaign. Another officer Bardamu detests is Major Pincon. This physically unimpressive man is important, because he has a map of the country. The map allows him to strategize how to send others to their death; others who have no maps, observes Bardamu. The situation grows worse when all the villages are burned and the roads cannot hold all the fleeing civilians and the marching armies. The soldiers cannot go anywhere and they just sit stagnantly in place.

Section 2 Analysis

Bardamu asks constantly why he should fight a war in which he does not believe. The usual motivations -loyalty to one's country, desire to be a hero-do not convince him. Bardamu thinks he and all the other poor ignorant boys are being asked to fight to protect the interests of the wealthy class, while receiving nothing but empty words and honors in exchange for losing their lives. Bardamu knows that he will not benefit from the war when it is over and that no restaurant will really accept his hero status as bill payment. Bardamu's joke about wanting to pay restaurant bills with French flags shows how little tangible value the French flag is really worth to Bardamu, or his countrymen; it will not even get him a meal. While a flag is normally given a great deal of symbolic value, it has little value for Bardamu. Bardamu sees patriotic rhetoric merely as a means for convincing the least powerful groups in society to sacrifice their lives for it, that is, as an ideology. Unlike the rest of the citizens, he will not risk his precious life for it. One of the novel's main themes have become clear: the rich support a war from which they stand to profit, while they convince poor boys that doing the dirty work is a form of 'heroism'. Deluding the masses in this way is only possible through nationalist rhetoric.

Bardamu's skepticism should be seen in the context of World War I, when young men died like slaughtered animals in long, bitter battles over a few feet of territory. Bardamu constantly emphasizes the uselessness, futility and endless chaos and stagnation of the war. The comparison between the field of dead bodies and the field of butchered livestock shows how the soldiers were brutally butchered just like animals. The only difference is that at least the animals served a purpose, as food, but the men seem to have been killed in vain.

Bardamu's concern for remembering the viciousness he has seen sounds odd to anyone raised to believe in the virtues of forgiving others. The author's point seems to be that truly awful acts are tolerated, because most people are lazy or have a short memory or really only care for their own comforts. On the other hand, Bardamu finds the dark side of human nature fascinating enough to describe it in great detail; he seems drawn to human evil and misery and wants to follow it to its most horrific depths.

Bardamu's need to uncover the worst in mankind and record it for all to see before he dies is indeed the driving force of the novel.

The enjoyment the soldiers take in the burning villages shows how desperate they are for any source of pleasure or beauty or amusement. At the same time, it shows how callous they had become toward destruction and loss. The soldiers are starting to lose any sympathy or memory of what civilized life in the villages is like while they wander in the fields like fearful animals. The stalemate reached at the end of this chapter is a typical outcome during World War I, where men battle for months, to the death, accomplishing little besides managing to stay in place.

Section 3

Section 3 Summary

This section begins with the phrase, "They gave us a short rest..."

The war nightmares continue and Bardamu survives many dreadful nights, filled with fear of attack, the backbreaking labor of moving supplies and the uncertain dread of carrying messages from post to post. On one of his missions, he has to discover whether the German enemy has captured the village Noirceur. While he searches for the village, he dreams of escaping the certain death of the war by being taken prisoner.

On the way, he meets a family mourning for their small son, who had been stabbed by the Germans; when he asks to buy a bottle of wine from them, the mother forgets her grief long enough to haggle the price.

Moving on, Bardamu finally spots Noirceur around two in the morning. Bardamu finds the village suspiciously calm, undamaged by flames or gunfire. It is here that he first meets Robinson, another French soldier whose cynicism and desire to escape the war is even stronger than his own. Robinson is even considering surrendering, a far less honorable idea than Bardamu's own of being taken prisoner. Together, these two reluctant soldiers enter the sleeping town and locate the mayor's home. When they ring his bell, the mayor himself comes to the door; he is somewhat embarrassed to see them, because he has been expecting the Germans instead. It seems he has cut a deal with the enemy to peacefully surrender the town. In return, the Germans will not harm the buildings or inhabitants. Defending his somewhat dishonorable capitulation, the mayor reminds them of his responsibility for the cities artistic heritage, such as the 15th century church. The mayor is anxious for Bardamu and Robinson to quickly depart, because the presence of any French soldiers would put him in a compromising position when the Germans arrive.

Bardamu and Robinson dread going back into the terrors of the night, but the mayor leaves them no choice. The two men leave Noirceur and go their separate ways.

Section 3 Analysis

Bardamu encounters Robinson for the first time here, but he will meet him many times before the novel's end. Robinson always appears when the situation hits rock bottom and people show their worst aspects. What is more, Robinson always shows Bardamu the way toward a path that is even more sinister or unthinkable. In this case, just like Bardamu contemplates being captured, his new acquaintance has the more effective, less honorable idea of surrendering. They find a kindred spirit in the mayor, who has already managed to surrender the whole city in order to protect it, that is, for the same exact reasons Bardamu and Robinson want to surrender themselves. Unfortunately, not everyone can surrender at once and the soldiers have to leave the city's shelter. What

happens next is not clear, but some commentators speculate that Bardamu intentionally wounded himself in order to be taken off of duty.

Section 4

Section 4 Summary

This section begins with the phrase, "If you want to be respected and looked up to..."

Mysteriously, this chapter begins with Bardamu's admission into a hospital for a war wound that is never explained. Bardamu is moved to a Paris hospital, because of the wound received in the war, of which he gives no details and he even receives a military medal. On the home front, people are getting organized; everyone wants to wear a uniform and participate in the struggle. Bardamu cynically notes that the men all have their fingers in each other's pockets or up women's skirts. People appear dutiful and patriotic on the surface, but their real motives are the familiar ones of profit and self-interest.

Bardamu's medal attracts a pretty American volunteer, the sexy, twenty-three year old Lola. Lola has come to assist France, a country she passionately admires, with the wartime effort. Though Bardamu has an "allergy to all heroism, whether verbal or real," he manages to put on a brave act for Lola so he can have access to her bed. Lola's body holds endless fascination for him, while her mind has less. Bardamu has to kiss her often to stop her from chattering about heroism and patriotic duties to France.

Lola's own wartime job is to oversee the supply of apple fritters to the hospitals. Since she cannot cook, Lola hires people to do the work, while she merely shows up each morning to test the fritters. After gaining two pounds, she despairs of her work. Bardamu laughs at this and takes over her duty, since, he says, "Lola was soon as afraid of fritters as I was of bullets."

Wartime Paris overflows with war-related fundraisers and propaganda. Bardamu says that the only activities permitted are those of lying, sex and dying. The atmosphere stinks of phoniness and hypocrisy. The sugar, coffee, shoes and photos are all fakes and the news is full of exaggerations and hate-filled myths.

To get away from the city, Bardamu often takes Lola on outings: to the horse races, to the woods. On one such outing, they wander into a nearby abandoned carnival, where they find a house of mirrors, a little theatre, candy stalls and even a shooting gallery. Bardamu observes in the shooting gallery how the little tin soldiers are full of tiny bullet holes, evidently inflicted in a spirit of vicious glee. People shot at the tin soldiers and more people are still waiting to shoot at him, Bardamu suddenly thinks.

Back in Paris, he hallucinates that everyone around him - the clerks, the people in the restaurants, the waiters - are being shot at also. Bardamu becomes mad with fear and is taken away by the military police.

Section 4 Analysis

Faced with the pro-war rhetoric in his nation's capital, Bardamu thinks about how easy it is to support a cause that poses so little danger to oneself. The rewards for supporting the war range from intangible benefits, such as pride and solidarity, to more tangible ones, such as profits. For Ferdinand Bardamu, the war remains nothing but "a suspended sentence to be murdered." Whether he displays cowardice or an intelligent refusal to be drawn into a nightmare of inhumane slaughter is a question that can be argued either way, depending on one's views about nationalism.

The question of reconciling the conflict between individual interests and the public good is a complex one. In Bardamu's account, however, the issue is made even more ambiguous, since the leaders in charge appear to be either hypocritical or incompetent.

The novel's depiction of how men in World War I were brutally and senselessly slaughtered is an accurate one and Celine depicts it with various metaphors (comparing men to butchered animals on the field, or tin soldiers to be shot at for fun) as well as literal descriptions (the blood gurgling in a decapitated man's neck stump is a grotesque recurrent image).

The bulk of the population refuses to ask the essential questions about why the war is being fought in the first place. Even Bardamu's own girlfriend shows a blind enthusiasm for the war, however, that is subordinate to her own trivial, personal interests. Lola's frivolous and minimal effort (quality control of apple fritters) is abandoned when she gains a bit of weight. In this atmosphere of unbearable falseness and hypocrisy, Bardamu loses control. The artifice and pretense is meaningless fun and profit for everyone else, but for him it is a question of life and death. They do not care if they are shooting at tin soldiers or real ones, he realizes when he sees the carnival shooting gallery and their indifference to the gravity of the situation sends him over the edge.

Section 5

Section 5 Summary

This section begins with the sentence, "There was quite a commotion."

Bardamu is taken to a hospital for soldiers who have psychological problems, or in his words, for men with "sick or impaired patriotism." The war and its "idealistic absurdities hemmed in by insane, bellicose platitudes" have driven many to respond with insanities of every order. The hospital staff suspects the patients of faking their problems and so they constantly scrutinize the men's behavior. Even the concierge, popular for her sexual generosity, is known for snitching to the authorities. From this hospital, the men are usually sent back to the front, shot for treason, or put in a real insane asylum.

Lola visits Bardamu to ask if he has gone mad and whether they will cure him. Bardamu responds that there is no cure for fear, causing her to lose all respect for him. Bardamu's protest that his death would mean nothing to his country, that battles of ages past are mere footnotes in history books, has no effect on her. Lola leaves him and does not return.

Bardamu talks with a fellow patient, Princhard, a teacher, just before the man is sent back to the front. Princhard's strategy for getting kicked out of the army was to steal food, since, by law, a thief cannot bear arms for his country. However, Princhard has been pardoned so that he can continue to fight. Soon, he says, he will be fertilizing fields for his country in the form of a rotting corpse. Princhard gives a brief history of how the common man became a patriotic soldier. When kings ruled, the monarch cared nothing at all for his subjects. Little by little, the philosophers started teaching people about freedom and about governing themselves, turning them from an illiterate mass of peasants into the newly educated public. Once capable of reading and filled with ideas of national glory, people were ready to fight upon hearing a few rousing phrases. No longer do soldiers need to be paid as mercenaries, now they can be gotten for free! Heroes can be mass-produced, says Princhard and their deaths will earn them a tiny spot under the shadow of their city 's war monument, no doubt to be cheaply and proudly set up by the lowest-bidder.

Section 5 Analysis

For Bardamu, the only rational response to the 'bellicose platitudes', the idiotic clichés of wartime meant to inspire him to die for a cause he has no sympathy for, is madness. Perceiving the ineptness and stubbornness of his generals and unconvinced by the reasons for the war, he cannot begin to see the logic in giving his life for it. The sheer pointlessness of the mass deaths is more convincing to him than any flimsy war slogan.

Bardamu's dilemma is one faced by anyone who is asked to die for the nation-state. The conflict between the individual's best interests and that of society is a major

philosophical question, particularly if the individual dies in the conflict. Society itself is often considered to be a contract among all people to unite for common defense and the people in the society all agree to authorize a central power, a nation-state, to manage this question. Some consider that the government can legally ask certain members to give their lives. Do the individuals ever have the right to resist this request, for example, if the state sends them to certain, unnecessary deaths under incompetent commanders?

Princhard's speech critiques the misuse of the nationalist ideology. The emphasis on free, self-governing populations sounds noble, but in practice, he thinks it is just a story, propagated by the rich and clever to convince the poor to do their dirty work. Like we saw earlier, Celine mentions the way the rich prosper during the war, while the poorer and less educated people valiantly die in the trenches. Previous governments at least had to pay armies to defend them, but soldiers are now expected to freely serve their country for reasons of glory and patriotism. Bardamu and his colleagues find these rewards intangible at best, lies and empty rhetoric at worst. The use of ordinary citizens to defend their country, instead of mercenary soldiers like what was done previously, depended on inspiring the citizenry with national loyalty and the desire for heroism. Using citizens as soldiers, instead of hired soldiers, was first suggested by the 16th century political writer Machiavelli, who argued that people dedicated to their home country would be more motivated to defend it to the death than mercenaries.

Section 6

Section 6 Summary

This section begins with the phrase, "While the war was still on..."

Bardamu muses on the need for sex and love in wartime; "love is harder to give up than life" he admits and thinks we spent our time either killing, or adoring, or both. We do all we can to reproduce, as though that would make us immortal; it does not.

The place for satisfying such urges is Madame Herote's lingerie shop, in the rich end of town. Mme. Herote combines her physical attractiveness with her business acumen and thereby makes a small fortune. Mme. Herote's profit-motivation is so strong and pure that Bardamu refers to her "rapacious, pious mercantile aims."

Mme. Herote surrounds herself with beautiful, artistic friends and Bardamu falls in love with an angelic violinist named Musyne, who often performs for the troops. Their life together is quickly spoiled by her perpetual infidelities. Bardamu says his little "front-line violinist" often returns home at dawn from "complicated nights" where she mixes her musical performances with sexual ones, always within the highest social and military circles. Bardamu slowly realizes that there are two types of people, the rich and the poor, the gods and the mortals and that Musyne will always belong to the former. One should ask the price of things (and people) before setting one's heart on them, he observes.

One night he loses Musyne forever when they have to hide underground in a shelter and he refuses to go with her into the butcher's meat-storage room (which evidently reminds him of battles and death).

Bardamu is transferred to a new hospital with innovative methods. The doctor tries to gently coax the men into recovery by inspiring them with noble speeches about patriotic ethics. These speeches are reinforced, however, with electroshock therapy. The doctor thinks that the extreme conditions of war have shown the true nature of the human mind and Bardamu heartily agrees this is true. However, he disagrees on what this true nature is, really. Where the doctor sees altruism and patriotism, Bardamu sees only vile, self-serving hypocrisy.

The nurses make a particularly bad impression on Bardamu. On the surface, they cheerfully support the young, frightened soldier boys in their care, but their only thoughts, he surmises, are of their own romantic future once the war ends. While they watch their patients die, they daydream of living "longer and longer, to live and to love, to stroll in the park and copulate thousands and thousands of times." They look forward to the day their victorious officers will come marching home, heroes all, to marry them.

If all the world is a stage, Bardamu notes, then acting is the thing to do. Nothing is worse than a person who will not play any part, he adds. In order to keep up

appearances in front of the women, the patients all start mouthing dramatic and exaggerated patriotic clichés. They compete to tell the most adventurous war stories. Still, no women visit him anymore except his mother.

To amuse themselves, all the men in the hospital begin to compete with each other to appear the most passionately patriotic. Yet, no one seems to notice or care that these proclamations are completely insincere and untrue. Absurdly, the hospital becomes so famous for its great success in curing cowardice that visitors pour in from all over, including famous actors, journalists and politicians. The doctor delights in his fame and the 'prisoners' enjoy the attention. To entertain their visitors, the men make up fantastic stories of their heroic battle experiences. Bardamu tells a lovely French actress of his exploits and she helps to commission a poet to put Bardamu's deeds in verse. The piece is performed at one of Paris's most famous theatres, La Comedie Francaise. At the end, the audience clamors for the hero himself, but Bardamu's rival stands up in front of him and takes all the applause.

Section 6 Analysis

The narrator further depicts the degree of viciousness people can show whenever they can gain an advantage. The disparity between the ideals professed by people and the actions performed by them could not be any stronger. Madame Herote gets a steady profit from exploiting people's need for love. The doctor combines inspiring, thoughtful patriotism with electroshock treatments. The angelic violinist, Musyne, uses her musical talent as an entry into high-class prostitution. The nurses react to the war's senseless slaughter with a demand for heroic, courageous men whom they can marry. Thus, another the novel's main themes, the incredible hypocrisy found at all levels of society, is thoroughly established.

Musyne, whose name resembles "muse" and whose talent is for music, can be seen as representing how even the artistic world is subordinated to wartime propaganda. As figures who embody the arts, the ancient, divine muses have always protected the arts and inspired mortals to create their best works. In the novel, however, even the muse-like figure Musyne sells herself and her talent. Musyne's artistry, once valued, now simply serves to command a higher price.

The more people speak of heroism and bravery, the more profit-seeking they become. "The poetry of heroism holds an irresistible appeal for people who aren't involved in a war, especially when they are making piles of money out of one. It's only natural," Bardamu concludes. What is most disturbing is not that people act and think in such terrible ways, but that it is regarded as normal. One starts to understand why Bardamu had earlier insisted that it is wrong to forgive and forget too easily; it only encourages people to behave their worst, if they are so inclined. Bardamu himself tries to excuse people's greed and wickedness, since these things obviously stem from some previous sufferings. Yet, he reminds his listeners that there can be a very long delay between the time suffering ends and the time a person shows improvement, if indeed they ever do.

There seems to be no end to the lies during wartime Paris. Parisians are so eager to find and honor their heroes that they accept the mere appearance of bravery. Wild tales told by inventive soldiers are accepted without question; truth and sincerity have no meaning. It is not really important which soldier stands up to take the honor at the theatre, since the role of hero is one that none of them really fill, though anyone can pretend. Like everything else, art has been put into the service of propaganda. This chapter is clearly an exaggeration on real events, because it is written in a brief, dreamy style, with few details. By telling his story through pure hyperbole (that is, exaggeration), in these chapters, Celine gives the reader a sample of the sorts of wild distortion found in wartime communications.

Section 7

Section 7 Summary

This section begins with the phrase, "The plain truth, I may as well admit it..."

Bardamu is haphazardly united with some old acquaintances. Needing money, he and a former co-worker named Voireuse go to visit their old employer, a jeweler named Puta. Puta has, says Bardamu, a bit of the artistic temperament to him. Puta enjoys "contemplating a shapely thigh." Mrs. Puta is "at one with the cash desk" and cares only for the business. The couple complains of the hardships of the war, the difficulties of driving at night and people's children dying (they have none), but they then stop complaining and remind themselves that all is for the good of the country. The Putas give the soldiers a paltry sum, five francs, before sending them on their way.

Voireuse has a better idea of who to hit up for money. Voireuse has been going to the wealthy old parents of a soldier he fought with and telling them stories about their son, recently killed. For this service, he might get a hundred francs. Bardamu and Voireuse head to the old couple's house, inventing a story while they go, but when they arrive, they see the old man already talking to Robinson. Robinson apparently has been doing the same thing and this time has beaten them to the house. Even so, the visit is useless, because the old woman had just hung herself from grief. The three men split up; Voireuse disappears for good, but Bardamu continues to run into Robinson when Robinson is always in the worst and most desperate conditions.

Section 7 Analysis

In this final chapter about the war, Bardamu and his fellows go on a hunt for extra cash that leads them from innocently requesting aid to being maliciously exploitative con artists. When they approach the gullible, old couple, they find Robinson already at the scene. The last time Robinson appeared was when Bardamu first thought of escaping the army by being captured. Robinson was thinking of simply deserting. Thus, Robinson always seems to be one step further down the road to ruthless, self-serving behavior than Bardamu himself, one step further on the voyage into depraved tricks for getting through unbearably hard times.

The contrast between the previous chapter and this one is stark: Bardamu's fictional stories of army life go from being featured at the theatre to being used as a cheap trick for earning spare cash. The keen mockery of Puta's artistic interest in the female thigh repeats one of Celine' favorite themes of rampant hypocrisy and all its myriad of forms. This time, he exposes the way people often use artistic pretensions to lend superficial respectability to their cruder instincts.

Section 8

Section 8 Summary

This section begins with the phrase, "The army finally dropped me..."

The army dismisses Bardamu and he buys himself a ticket to Africa on a steamboat. In Africa, it is said that anyone can make a fortune and Bardamu fantasizes about trading his razor blades for a houseful of slaves and colorful birds. When the ship heads south, the passengers are overwhelmed by relentless, stifling heat. Just like in the war, the miserable conditions bring out people's true natures. The heat makes their "rottenness rise to the surface." The stagnant filth sets in and frantic unbuttoning begins.

Bardamu is the only passenger who paid his own fare, the rest are on diplomatic or business missions. They regard him with unending suspicion and treat him like a criminal. Bardamu takes it in stride, reflecting that the "number of people who must want you dead each day number in the hundreds," because there are always people waiting in lines behind you for the train or toilet, people in less nice apartments and other things. However, the crowd of passengers will not leave him alone and they become more and more menacing. One hot night after dinner, they confront him and demand justification for his antisocial, disdainful behavior. Bardamu serves them an elaborate, patriotic speech, invoking his service to France that leaves everyone confused and apologetic. Bardamu's patriotic gimmick works especially well on the men and he spends the rest of the night flattering them and getting them drunk. At the end of this long sleepless night, the ship anchors on the coast of Africa.

Canoes of natives swarm around the ship, offering various services and Bardamu sneaks away with them to escape his fellow passengers. The canoes ferry him to Bambola-Fort-Gono, (a name which forms an obscene pun in French).

Bardamu finds the little African settlement filled with civil servants, traders, military men and native blacks. Each group quarrels with the other and the anarchy is "held in check, like crabs in a basket" by a secretive police force. The colors of objects are so vivid and unusual that Bardamu says you cannot get a good look at them. At night, this carnival atmosphere continues, while the hookers swarm the streets, whole families available for low prices. Bardamu cannot linger with them, however, since he needs to find a job. Bardamu finds a post as a manager of a trading post deep in the bush.

Bardamu spends a week in Ft. Gono before going to his new post. There he spends his days getting to know the town and his nights trying to ignore the vermin (rat, scorpions, snakes, mice and mosquitoes) that besiege his bed. Bardamu learns from the town's lowest civil servant, a man in charge of building roads through the jungle that all the roads disappear under new vegetation so quickly that they are lost before they are ever used.

At the shop where he gets his supplies, Bardamu sees an African family come in to trade the rubber they have spent months collecting. The clerk, another African, but one who has adopted the white man's ways, gives the family a few small coins for their enormous harvest. When they appear confused at the transaction, he takes the coins away and ties a great green scarf around their child's neck, knowing they will not be able to refuse a gift placed upon their smallest child. Perplexed at having been cheated by one of their own people, they sadly leave.

Section 8 Analysis

The perpetual envy, malevolence and distrust Bardamu encounters becomes almost routine. The disturbing, yet plausible, observation that people always wish their fellows dead and out of their way (for the train, toilet, etc), points to the incredible impersonality and antipathy, in particular of urban life.

Even though Bardamu has left the decadence of European civilization, he finds the same depraved, selfish dishonesty in his new destination. While the scenery has changed dramatically, he finds human nature relatively unchanged. Now, it is not the war but the lack of civilization that shows people's true natures. Some of the black natives, those less afraid of the whites, quickly learn the same habits of trickery and profiteering. Those who fail to be suspicious, like the family from the bush, are taken advantage of all the more easily. The similarity between the black clerk who cheats the bush family and their European counterparts (merchants like the Puta couple and Mme. Herote) is all the more striking, given the fact that they are supposed to live in completely different civilizations, according to very different belief systems.

Section 9

Section 9 Summary

This section begins with the phrase, "As I've told you, there were lots of blacks and small whites..."

Bardamu is still in Ft. Gono, about to depart for his new post in the bush. Observing the dockworkers, he marvels at the differences between the natives and the white men. The former must be driven to work with clubs and thus preserve some dignity, while the whites work voluntarily, having had their "hearts and minds crammed full of the hope of becoming rich and powerful." Bardamu's boss, the Director, takes great pride in having built an economy of peanuts and rubber. "This is life, Bardamu...peanuts!" he exclaims. However, his pride does not prevent him from an intense ambition to swindle the company.

Bardamu's only ambition is to get sick and return to the hospital. While everyone else in the town seems intent on putting on imitating a European lifestyle, despite the heat (cafés, dancing, long meals), he is attracted only to the local hospital, where men suffer from malaria, lying flat on their backs, between cigarette smoke and flies, covered in moldy sheets. The army and the business sectors both petition the hospital daily to get their workforce back, with little success. Wanting a break from the hardship of survival, Bardamu inquires about admission requirements and contemplates catching a disease. Meanwhile, the colonial life, with its three-hour aperitifs, continues, with the only conversation revolving around the corruption of the governor, plans for swindling and sex.

Finally, Bardamu is put on a boat for the inland jungle. The painfully slow steamboat drops him off at the last civilized post, where a couple of army officers hold down the chaos. Bardamu spends a few days with them, before going by canoe to his final destination and learns of their odd habits. The commander, Lt. Grappa, conducts a small army of natives who have no rifles, uniforms, or backpacks, but who are nonetheless capable of intricate drills with imaginary equipment, capable of "lunging into empty space to disembowel illusory enemies with illusory bayonets." Lt. Grappa has been waiting on his men's equipment for two years. Meanwhile, his assistant, Sergeant Alcide, has prepared, in advance, a stack of reports claiming "nothing to report." Their lives are testimonies to the futility of keeping up a civilization in the jungle. The steamboat comes once a month and, for each visit, they have to rebuild the dock, which takes exactly one month to be eaten by mollusks.

The natives show up every week for Grappa's legal hearings, which always end with floggings that they seem to enjoy. Payment for the native soldiers hardly ever arrives, but when it does, they have already used it up by taking credit from Alcide for his tobacco. In essence, they work to be able to smoke and never see a cent of pay. All is illusory and temporary; all is for show.

Alcide is the only exception. Bardamu and Alcide spend happy times fishing and teasing each other. Bardamu asks Alcide where he is stashing all his money from the years of service in the jungle. Bardamu then finds a photo of a pretty young girl hidden in Alcide's room. Alcide reveals that he sends every cent of his pay toward supporting his brother's orphaned daughter, whom he barely knows. Alcide pays for a good school, for piano and English lessons and for health care. Bardamu is stunned at the man's decision to sacrifice his whole life, spending it in "torrid monotony," for the girl. Watching Alcide sleep that night, Bardamu thinks that Alcide looks like all the other people, whereas there ought to be some sort of birthmark that allows us to discern such good people from the bad.

Section 9 Analysis

The sheer uselessness and fruitlessness of perpetually fighting off the natural order of the jungle is emphasized. Slow decay meets them at every turn: the malaria that takes men off their jobs, the pointless army with no equipment, the collapsing dock always being rebuilt, the endless dinners and the rampant corruption - all testify to the life of stagnation and the impossibility of building anything with lasting value. The sole exception is Sergeant Alcide, the first character whom the narrator says anything positive about. Alcide is generous, thoughtful and not trying to convert his futile presence in the jungle into something more tangible, instead, sending all his money toward improving the life of someone for whom he cares. Alcide's long tour of duty in the jungle is made more bearable by his sense of purpose.

Section 10

Section 10 Summary

This section begins with the sentence, "There are two ways of getting into the jungle."

Bardamu heads deeper into the jungle on a makeshift canoe, fearing what he will find. Bardamu's mission is to replace the present manager, take inventory and restore order. After ten days, he finds a dilapidated hut perched precariously between two boulders and a gruff bearded man within. The man says it is a terrible place, with mud to drink and canned casserole to eat for the entire year, but it is better than the war. There is so little to do that one feels a fever, not by one's temperature, it is too hot for that, but by noticing one is less bored. The wild animal sounds at night are quite disturbing, therefore, the man advises Bardamu to stuff his ears with cotton to silence them, like he does. Regarding the Company's business, the man advises Bardamu not to care about them any more than they do about their staff, which is not at all. The man passes on the pathetic, little inventory to Bardamu: scraps of cotton, loincloths, shoes and pepper, all of which is to be traded for rubber. The vast stores of canned casserole will help Bardamu survive and he can drink muddy water. As for the cash box, Robinson promises to leave it in case Bardamu ever decides to abandon his post and head for Europe. The man's name is hard to catch, but Bardamu dimly remembers that the man's name, Robinson, is familiar to him. They reminisce about Europe and agree that their present hellish situation is preferable to the war. Robinson reminds Bardamu to stuff his ears before sleeping and Bardamu complies even though he suspects a vile trick.

Sure enough, in the morning, Robinson and the cash box are gone. Bardamu half-heartedly sets about fixing the shack and taking up his post. Weeks pass in utter boredom. Bardamu's only companion is a chicken, until he eats it to break the monotony of the canned casseroles. The natives raid the hut and rob all the goods. The rains come and "make a porridge" of Bardamu's merchandise, his hopes and his account books. This means he has a new problem, since he is responsible for the Company's inventory and accounts. Bardamu has no idea how to repair the situation. Furthermore, he is haunted by his mother's idea that whoever will steal a pin will steal a pound and end up murdering his mother. Fortunately, Mom left him with a second adage, "nothing purifies like fire," and so he sets the tiny hut aflame and then unsure of where to go, he sets off into the woods. Distrusting everyone and fearing punishment for leaving his post, he decides to head into the unknown, wild bush, just like Robinson had done.

Section 10 Analysis

What remains when Bardamu finds himself alone in the jungle are a few simple ideas placed in his head as a child by his mother. Celine's portrayal of a soldier in the African bush following his mother's adages is somewhat ironic, especially since these sayings contradict each other (one voice counsels honesty, the other is interpreted by

Bardamu's feverish mind as advocating arson). Yet, the overall mood is that of a man who has lost all contact with reality and civilization by prolonged exposure to the wild conditions of the bush. Even his failure to recognize Robinson, which sounds implausible, may be seen as part of the general fading and rotting of the world he had once known. Even Bardamu's memories are fading, rotting away in jungle, so he does not recognize this Robinson who always seems to precede him in the darkest, most sinister paths he follows. It is quite an ominous moment when Bardamu follows in his steps, once again.

Section 11

Section 11 Summary

This section begins with the phrase, "Often on my way, I heard the beasts..."

Bardamu makes his way through the jungle with the help of some natives, even being carried at times when he is too sick with malarial fever to walk. The natives deliver him to a priest's hospital in the coastal town of San Tapeta. Bardamu is delirious in bed for a few days, wondering why the natives failed to just throw him in the river or eat him. Barduma soon learns why they did not, when, through his fever, he senses that whatever he is lying on is always in movement. Bardamu also feels the air grow cooler. Bardamu realizes that, while he lay dying, he has been swindled. Bardamu was sold to a sea captain, who hopes to revive him and thus, get a new oarsman. Relatively content to escape the heat, eat properly and be headed somewhere new, Bardamu recovers and sets about rowing to a destination, a place about which he is too timid to ask. After weeks of sailing, he wakes and sees a surprising sight from his porthole.

The ship docks in New York City, much to Bardamu's delight. Bardamu imagines contacting 'friends', for wealthy Lola must be there and no doubt his pal Robinson has already carved a niche in the business community. Bardamu counts his main, employable skill as the ability to count and classify fleas, a trick he picked up on the ship's long haul. Bardamu is sure the Americans, who are fans of all kinds of efficient techniques, will find a use for his new interest in flea populations and statistics. Ignoring the warnings of his shipmates, he deserts. Bardamu has trouble with the local authorities, but he manages to present himself as being good with statistics and a useful expert in flea counting. Bardamu is put to work, he says, counting all the foreign fleas who arrive in the States each day and classifying them by gender (by this metaphor, he means that he takes a job in the immigration office). The job is a decent one, but then he is asked to deliver some statistics to Manhattan. So, he shoves some papers in his pocket, in order to look like a businessman and heads for the island. Upon landing, he is swept away by a crowd of people on the streets and is disappointed to find that, in America, there can be poor people, just like in Europe.

Section 11 Analysis

Being made a galley slave is a lucky break for Bardamu, who had exhausted all his possibilities in Africa. Bardamu has dreamed of going to America ever since he met Lola and started imagining a land of endless wealth and beautiful women. As always, when he arrives in a new place, he does so with a head full of fanciful hopes and unrealistic expectations. For example, Bardamu fantasizes that his friends, whom in reality he barely knows, may also be there and even have important positions. New places always raise his hopes, since he has not yet learned or accepted the fact that human nature will be similar wherever he goes. Bardamu's new skill for counting actual fleas becomes his

inroad for a job counting metaphorical ones, that is, the anonymous immigrants who are not always welcomed or treated respectfully, because they came over in such great numbers.

Section 12

Section 12 Summary

This section begins with the phrase, "As if I knew were I was going..."

Bardamu compares Manhattan's banks to Europe's cathedrals. Just like in church, the faithful bank customers enter and go to a small booth where they whisper through the grill, just like one goes to whisper one's confession. Then they put the holy bread near their hearts...safe in their wallets, instead of in their mouths.

Bardamu ungenerously comments on what he observes about the New Yorkers; the men have monotonous, broad faces and the women look only at the shop windows. Bardamu checks into a grand and luxurious hotel where he is assigned to a tiny room on the top floor. Observing his neighbors, he is surprised at how tired the Americans look and how little the couples speak to each other. They strike him as "fat docile animals, used to being bored." Bardamu finds it sad that people should go to bed without even thinking of their larger purpose or whether they are getting what they originally hoped for out of life. Instead, they all seem preoccupied with figuring out how to survive the next grueling day.

Bardamu decide to go out to revive his own energy and morale and settles for a movie. Though he is well aware that the screen shows nothing but a "mirage of moving light," the film gives people a choice of dreams that move their souls and help them get through a few more days of the outside world. For his own dreams, he admits to picking the sexy ones, which are most likely to warm the soul: "when it comes to miracles, take the ones that will stay with you," he advises.

Section 12 Analysis

Bardamu quickly becomes disillusioned with the American rat race and realizes that the American's great financial success also appears to entail hard work, boredom and exhaustion. To better handle dealing with their fast-paced routines, Americans cheer themselves with movies that provide a steady supply of hopes and dreams. The cozy warmth of the movie house, where everyone is happy, is a stark contrast to the outside world that he sees as filled with hardship, labor and indifference.

Section 13

Section 13 Summary

This section begins with the phrase, "To eat cheaply in America..."

Bardamu runs out of money and continues to muse about the differences between the life of a rich person and a poor one. Bardamu imagines how the forbidding, hostile world around him would be transformed if only he had money. Then he would finally be free of the long frenzy of desires unable to be fulfilled. At a cheap cafeteria, he is moved by the smile of a pretty waitress, proposes marriage to her and is thrown out of the cafeteria. Back in his little room that night, he shouts at the indifferent crowd on the street, calling out insults, crying for help and all the things he says he does not dare say to them in the daytime, but no-one notices him. The taller and bigger the city, the less people care about each other, he concludes.

Having nowhere else to turn, Bardamu tracks down his ex-girlfriend Lola to ask for a loan, in spite of his great resentment toward her. In the past, he reflects, they were young and easily found excuses for each other's bad behavior, but now it has become clearer to him that people do rotten things to each other to survive and get ahead. Lola is not as surprised to see Bardamu as she is annoyed; their common past is of no interest to her now and talking about the war unpleasantly reminds her of her age. Lola's well-furnished apartment and arrogant airs make it clear to Bardamu that she has become wealthy, seemingly in some mysterious, slightly unrespectable manner. Bardamu exchanges friendly insults with her American colleagues; they think Europe is a museum full of old-fashioned, erotic lunatics. Bardamu tells them their city is a nauseating carnival, which fails, despite all their overwrought efforts.

Lola, despite her riches, has no interest in helping Bardamu. Lola's only thoughts are of herself. At the moment, she yearns to adopt a child and wonders if Bardamu has sired any nice children she might take in and raise as her own. Bardamu shows as little interest in her maternal fixation as she does in his survival quest. Lola tries to send him away into the night with a few dollars. As they are parting, he asks about Lola's mother and his concern suddenly rouses Lola's full attention. Lola's mother has liver cancer. Lola is terrified by the severity of the illness, but she feels certain the specialists will save her mother, like they have promised. When she asks Bardamu, the medical student, if he thinks her mother will recover, he spitefully tells her, "cancer of the liver is absolutely incurable." Bardamu also points out that the disease is hereditary. Bardamu has found Lola's vulnerable point for the first time in his life and pushes his advantage to the limit. Naturally, the doctors promise to cure her mother, he says, so she will pay their exorbitant fees. "Wouldn't you do the same in their place?" he asks her. Lola sees he is right and her strength crumples before him. Bardamu refuses to leave her alone until she pays him one hundred dollars. Triumphantly, Bardamu leaves the city and heads for Detroit.

Section 13 Analysis

Bardamu has grown disillusioned with America - the land of opportunity - and is now desperate for a way to survive even a few more days. Bardamu's habit of following unrealistic dreams from which he is always rudely awakened is finally beginning to wear on him. Bardamu says he has, "picked up and dropped so many dreams, my mind was cracked and fissured."

Seeing Lola and her colleagues, he realizes that there is just as much pretense and hypocrisy in America as there was in France and he reflects that this, "new farce you're having to play crushes you with its banality." Between the abandoning of the old ways and the adopting of the new, one has time to see people like they really are, "skeletons, as nothings, which you will nonetheless have to love, cherish and defend as if they existed."

Bardamu's encounter with Lola proves how a relationship in which two young lovers, temporarily enchanted with one another, turned out to be one of these 'nothings' as well. Their mutual cruelty and coldness toward each other demonstrates that indifference and hostility are not reserved for strangers only, indeed, they seem more spiteful toward each other than total strangers. Lola's lack of concern for his situation provokes Bardamu's to avenge himself by taunting her about her mother's possible death and her own, devastating the fashionable, young woman, whose worst nightmare is to gain a pound or age a few years.

The observations in this chapter add depth to the recurrent theme of how people's real nature is radically different from their social masks.

Section 14

Section 14 Summary

This section begins with the phrase, "The passers-by spoke to me the way the sergeant had spoken..."

Bardamu looks for a job in Detroit and is hired by Ford, where he is warned never to look intelligent, because what the factory needs are monkeys, not men. The grueling work turns the men into machines. All day long, men are whirling striking, clanking and calibrating. To revive himself, Bardamu begins to frequent a brothel. A kind prostitute named Molly takes an interest in him and begins to try to save him from his factory job and wandering ways. Molly buys Bardamu a suit, supports him so he can look for better work, such as translating and encourages him to stay with her. Yet, Bardamu thinks it is too late for him, he has been the restless type for so long now that it has become his nature. Bardamu fears that the passion spent on Molly will reduce his long-standing drive to unearth all the most wonderful and most awful secrets of life, for "the true mistress of all real men" is life.

On a late-night ride in the suburbs, Bardamu loses himself in the empty streets where tired men walk like shadows, too tired to speak after working the night shift cleaning offices. These Americans were less anxious, perhaps since they had "sunk to the very bottom of things." Here, Bardamu runs into his acquaintance, Robinson, again and learns Robinson has not become a successful businessman, but rather a janitor. They agree it is time to return to France. Bardamu tells Molly about his decision and she shows a real unhappiness. Molly understands, however, that he has a sickness of "wanting to know more and more" and she takes comfort in the fact that Bardamu is doing exactly what he truly wants. Bardamu himself is not so certain and is genuinely, deeply sad to leave her. Later, when he looks back, he will be thankful for Molly's kindness and the dreams she rekindled in him.

Section 14 Analysis

Bardamu grows closer to Molly than any other woman in the novel. Molly encourages him not to settle for less than he is capable of in life and revives his ambitions and confidence. Yet, he ultimately chooses to leave her and return to France, for his restless urge to explore pushes him onward. It also appears he has run out of options in America; working in the factory makes him realize that he would be better off with a profession rather than to work as a laborer.

As usual, when Bardamu begins to think he has found the lowest level of existence (in this case, working the night shift in the suburbs), he runs into Robinson. Again, without meaning to, he follows Robinson into the darker side of life, following him into the night, so to speak.

Section 15

Section 15 Summary

This section begins with the sentence, "Getting back from the Other World isn't the half of it."

Bardamu returns to France, finishes his medical studies and opens his office in a dreary suburb, Garenne-Rancy (loose translation: rancid rabbit-pen). Rancy is yet another impoverished place where masses of unkempt, uninspired people daily crush themselves into the streetcars ("long electric sewers") for fear of losing their mundane jobs. Bardamu studies the people with all the more interest now that he is a doctor. Studying has given him both pride in himself and a sharper eye for understanding people. Bardamu feels "closer to people, animals everything" and prepares himself to "plunge straight into the heart of things." Yet, patients only slowly trickle into his new practice, in spite of the fact that he is the cheapest doctor in town. Often, he even treats people simply out of curiosity, since people seem ready to confide all their troubles and display all their miseries to him.

One family he often treats is composed of his concierge and her nephew, Bebert, an orphan. The aunt is a hypochondriac who only calls Bardamu when she wants a free consultation or an 'anti-vice' prescription for her nephew, who masturbates. "Don't make it sweet whatever you do...he steals enough sugar from me already" she requests, denying the child even that pleasure. Then she asks Bardamu to visit her friend, Madame Henrouille, whose family also needs a cheap doctor.

Bardamu consults the Henrouille family, whose one and only purpose in life has been to buy a house. Bardamu infers that they "had thought of house-buying even before they were married. First separately then together." Now that the house has been paid for, the Henrouilles have space in their minds for other thoughts, most of which revolve around preserving their newly paid for security. They spend little money, but now that the house is paid for, they allow themselves to get the daily paper. Their greatest fear is that their son, who is in the unstable business of dealing in feathers, will find himself in financial trouble and ask them for a loan. This idea disturbs them so much they have vowed in advance to refuse him. Another problem is Monsieur Henrouille's dizzy spells, which came to his attention after the house was paid for and he had time to notice them. Monsieur Henrouille now fears dying of high blood pressure. Bardamu thinks the man is simply afraid, in general and needs to attach his fear to something specific, first poverty, now death.

Mme. Henrouille wants Bardamu to commit her mother-in-law to the convent or asylum, since she refuses to leave the tiny house in the yard where she lives, screams at the family and pisses in the corners. The mother-in-law threatens to get a job at the age of eighty if the family refuses to hand over her pension money that they put in safekeeping. Grandma Henrouille barricades herself inside, because she thinks that opening the door

would let hostile forces "burst in, grab her and finish her off." Grandma Henrouille lets Bardamu inside after half an hour and he finds her to be the most lucid, smiling, sane person he has ever met. Grandma Henrouille is filthy and discontent, he says, but merry. Grandma Henrouille's voice is bright and full of life and her voice has a vibrant tone from many years of singing and storytelling. Grandma Henrouille fears nothing from within, being absolutely sure of her own mind and the only dread she knows is directed at the outside world. It is as though "cold, horror and death could only come from that direction." Bardamu is tempted, nevertheless, to commit her, since the family is ready to pay him an enormous fee and recommend new patients to him. Pretending that committing the old woman is for her own good, the Henrouilles accidentally mention that they would also like to rent out her house, revealing their true motives. The old woman surmises they are plotting against her and returns in a livid rage, yelling such accurate insults at Bardamu that he runs away.

Section 15 Analysis

Bardamu has entered a new phase in his life and has taken on a respectable profession. This relieves him of the desperation of his previous hand-to-mouth existence, gives him a place in society and restores his pride. Furthermore, it gives him a new outlook on people and brings him directly into their private crises and intimate lives.

The Henrouille family displays a new form of hypocrisy and this time it is the aging against the more aged, family against family. The family's pretense of helping Grandmother Henrouille is revealed as a sham when they let slip their desire to rent out her house. What appears to be a crazy old lady making excessive demands upon an obliging family and living in paranoid isolation turns out to be the contrary. In reality, the family is indeed scheming to put her out of her house and to retain her money. The hostile forces Grandma Henrouille fears are indeed real and worse, they are disguising themselves as her loved ones. The Henrouille couple is all the more hypocritical sine they have sworn in advance not to help their son financially, while all the while they are plotting to take advantage of Grandmother Henrouille. Bardamu is called, because he is known as a desperate practitioner, without scruples and the Henrouilles hope he will give them the medical declaration of infirmity that a more respectable doctor would never authorize.

Section 16

Section 16 Summary

This section begins with the sentence, "In the aedicule at hip height, I found Bebert."

Bardamu is called for the most desperate, shameful cases. After the Henrouille family, he visits a beautiful, young woman in a dangerous condition after having had an abortion, her third and whom he cannot help but admire for her exquisite form and her unabashed love of pleasure. While the girl is bleeding to death, her mother rants incessantly about the family honor and repeatedly refuses to send the girl to the hospital, where immediate surgery to save her could be performed. Bebert's aunt, the concierge, wants her tip for showing Bardamu these cases, but in fact, Bardamu is rarely paid himself. Bardamu cannot bring himself to collect the last five francs from the poor and the wicked, for the man who does so "remains a louse to his dying day." Taking payment is the part of his job he hates so much he tries to avoid it and therefore rarely gets his fee. When he sinks into poverty himself, he sells his possessions (the phonograph and bike Molly gave him, his records.) The neighborhood continues to depress him with its squalor, such as the neighbors who indulge in abusing their child as a means of foreplay.

In the heart of these squalid circumstances, Robinson appears in Bardamu's office. Robinson has a terrible cough, caused by his job, which is some sort of menial labor, involving acids. Bardamu is at the end of his patience with his clients. In the middle of an examination of a sick, illegitimate child, Bardamu loses his cool when the child begins to loudly bawl at his touch. "You'll have plenty of time for bellowing...save your strength...there'll be enough misery to melt your eyes and your head if you don't watch out!" he informs the child. The family, appalled, throws him out with no fee and spreads the news of his conduct around town. Bardamu thinks of leaving town, but in the end, he does not bother to do so.

Section 16 Analysis

The mother of the beautiful prostitute chooses to let her daughter die rather than disgrace her family, this is all the more tragic and ironic since they already live in a slum and cannot sink much lower. People's needs to keep up appearances cause them endless suffering, the author repeatedly reminds us. Bardamu's own failure to play the social game by the rules, such as requesting payment like a respectable doctor must do, leads him into dire straights.

Bardamu is at his breaking point with the endless cycle of patients who ruin their own lives. At this point, Robinson comes back on the scene. Because Robinson is a symbol of decadence and depravity, one expects him to lead Bardamu further down the path

toward the unthinkable, whatever that may be this time. The novel's tension mounts each time Robinson reappears.

Section 17

Section 17 Summary

This section begins with the phrase, "In spite of everything it was just as well that I went back..."

Bebert, the concierge's nephew, of whom Bardamu is relatively fond, falls sick with typhoid fever. Several doctors are consulted, but Bardamu is finally given charge of the child. The entire neighborhood takes an interest, visiting, giving advice and cooked Brussels sprouts to the aunt.

Bardamu, genuinely concerned, tries everything and when he cannot cure the child, he goes to the prestigious Bioduret Institute to ask for advice (bioduret means 'long life' and Celine is obviously referring to the Pasteur Institute in Paris). The institute appears to him to be a labyrinth of corridors, empty of people but filled with mice suffocating in jars, cigarette butts, gutted animal corpses, chipped beakers and urine smells.

The men of science arrive. Bardamu describes them as "grey-haired, umbrella-carrying schoolboys, stupefied by the pedantic routine...riveted by starvation wages for their whole adult lives to these little microbe kitchens...warming up mixtures of vegetable scrapings, asphyxiated guinea pigs and other nondescript garbage...trusted to analysis their customer's urine and sputum." The noble enterprise of pursuing scientific truth is rather just the effort to preserve one's niche in the system by proving another man's theory wrong. Bardamu is looking for his old mentor, the famous Dr. Paraprine, who is a typhoid expert. Bardamu finds the renowned scientist in his laboratory, spitting in the corners, unshaven and sprinkled with dandruff. Dr. Paraprine cannot give Bardamu much advice about typhoid, since, in the years of study, he has learned "so many, so diverse and so often contradictory things" that he no longer has a clear opinion. "Just do your best," he advises. Then he embarks on a rant against the "clownish trade of medical research" that he practices. To keep his position, he has to endlessly publish new work, though he claims to publish the same article over and over with innocuous, tangential additions. Dr. Paraprine would prefer to find some insignificant area of research, free of constant competition and rivalry, where he could work undisturbed by enemies and disciples. Dr. Paraprine contemplates a study of hemorrhoids, relative to central heating and diet. Perhaps he would receive a hygiene award for such work, he jokes.

Meanwhile, Dr. Paraprine's assistant continues to tenderly care for the important microbes, closing the door on the incubator "as if it were a tabernacle." Seeing this, Dr. Paraprine compares science to a religion and notes that the priest's assistant continues believing long after the priest himself has stopped.

Bardamu lingers in Paris, watching the sun set over the Seine River, watching life in the city for awhile: men fish without catching anything, booksellers close their stalls, a

butcher torments a pig in front of an eager crowd. When he arrives home, he sees people leaving his house (where Bebert also lives) in tears and correctly assumes that the child has died. Bardamu wonders if he is to blame.

Section 17 Analysis

Celine's scathing criticism of all sectors of society does not forget the scientific community. The author's biting humor conveys the sheer banality of most scientific research: the endless days spent amid microbes, rats and flies, the intense competition over any small discovery likely to promote one's reputation, the low pay, etc. Such a depiction sharply contrasts with the image of science as omniscient, penetrating the secrets of life and the universe and full of fascinating discoveries. This contrast is nicely symbolized in the marble and gold tomb of science's hero, Bioduret, being located in the dank basement. Dr. Paraprine strikes the reader as a healthy mind, who fully understands the contradictions of his position and who continues to work without sacrificing his own beliefs and personality to the flawed system. Dr. Paraprine is similar to Grandma Henrouille in his independence and sureness of mind.

The evening Bardamu spends lingering in Paris starkly portrays the contrast between life in the capital, with all its innocent amusements and life in the suburbs of Rancy, where the death of the child brings more sadness to the wretched neighborhood.

Section 18

Section 18 Summary

This section begins with the phrase, "Why kid ourselves, people have nothing to say to one another..."

People only talk about their own troubles, which they hope to unload by falling in love. Bardamu muses that this works for awhile, but eventually fails and then people recommence with the same trick, "you're pretty Mademoiselle.." As they age, people's faces slowly reveal more of their unhappiness. By a certain age, a man's soul has climbed from his belly to his face, giving him a hideous grimace that takes a lifetime to compose, he reflects.

People start to visit him, among them, Grandmother Henrouille and Robinson. Grandma Henrouille wants to ensure Bardamu will never commit her and also seems to enjoy socializing with his neighbors. Robinson asks for various favors, such as a hospital job and a cure for his cough. Working in the hospital appeals to Robinson, because people are less frightening when they are down, he says and he accuses Bardamu of having the same motives for doing medicine. They spend Sunday afternoon drinking in a café and Robinson gets a fancy idea about becoming a chauffeur, "Sunday ideas" Bardamu calls this line of dreaming. On Sunday evening "after a whole day of alcoholic freedom" everybody lets go, he claims.

On this particular Sunday, two people in the same house become gravely ill. An elderly man lies dying of cancer, while meanwhile, a woman has a miscarriage with some serious complications. Bardamu's arrival on the scene irritates the midwife, who had been running the show. Bardamu tries to cooperate with her, but she resents him taking her starring role and, of course, cutting into her fee. Bardamu locates the woman's husband and advises immediate hospitalization, but the man cannot make any decisions, probably fearing the expense. Finally, Bardamu leaves them all in disgust and again, with no payment.

By coincidence, Bardamu runs into Robinson on the same night. Robinson is carrying a load of wood to the Henrouille's house to build a rabbit pen for them. The old woman introduced him to her family and now they have hired him. Robinson hints that Grandma Henrouille will soon have some medical problems. It seems that the rabbit pen is going to be a trap, laden with explosives, apparently used as a sort of burglar alarm. In this case, Robinson and the family plan to keep Grandma Henrouille ignorant of the danger and thereby eliminate her. Since a similar accident (with rabbits and explosives) happened a few months earlier, they think her death will look like an accident. Robinson received a thousand francs for the idea and two hundred and fifty for the execution. Robinson is fed up with trying to make an honest living and besides, the old woman is near death anyway. Bardamu is somewhat surprised at Robinson's new "vocation for

murder," but it strikes him as somewhat of an improvement over the general hypocrisy, "half hateful, half benevolent" seen in so many others.

Section 18 Analysis

The fiasco of Sunday evening shows both the doctors and their patients at their worst. The doctors and the midwife are so busy trying to collect a fee that the humanity of their patients hardly registers with them. The husband of the dying woman was no doubt uncertain if saving his wife was worth the cost of the surgery and simply could not decide. It is this sort of half-caring, half-calculating attitude that Bardamu hates and therefore, when Robinson takes a turn toward pure, unabashed evil, Bardamu sees a certain type of integrity in the man's decision. Robinson may be a vicious, would-be murderer, but at least he is honest about his motivations and does not pretend to be better than he really is.

Section 19

Section 19 Summary

This section begins with the phrase, "And the music came back with the carnival..."

Bardamu is called to a carnival for a patient. Bardamu notes, dryly, that the shooting gallery has all the same figures, plus airplanes now - undeniably, humans are making progress. The children at the carnival, he reflects, still think its "pure generosity that makes the grownups" put on such a show. The children are too young to perceive the profit motive behind the raucous smiles. Bardamu goes to deal with a barmaid's kitchen wound, but he ends up meeting Robinson, who lets him in on more details of the sordid Henrouille murder scheme. Robinson has started blackmailing the family. Bardamu wonders if he should try to dissuade his friend, or report him, but he ends up doing neither. The barmaid goes home with a couple of her customers to whom she provides another service on the side. This helps her support her young child in the country. With all the depravity accumulating around him, Bardamu ends the evening thinking, "the night had come home."

A short while after the carnival, Bardamu receives a request to visit the Henrouille residence to attend to an emergency. Madame Henrouille brusquely shows him inside where he collides with Grandma Henrouille, who has come to gloat over the disaster. "The monsters...they tried to kill me...I was taking too long to die!" she proclaims. "Naturally I don't want to die!" she adds. The elder Henrouille woman launches into a brilliant, comic tirade, describing every detail of the how Robinson exploded the rabbit pen (commissioned by her family) in his own face and now "his murderer's blood will stink for a long time to come" on their own mattress. For the family has hidden the injured, perhaps blinded, Robinson upstairs in their bedroom, fearing scandal and police interference.

Bardamu notes that the murder attempt has actually done the old woman a world of good. The attempt on her life revived her and let her feel morally superior to the rest of them and it gave her something to torment her family with for the rest of her days. Grandma Henrouille now has a role to play besides that of the complaining old woman. "Old age means not having a passionate part to play anymore, seeing your theatre fold up on you," Bardamu notes and sees how happy the old woman is to play her new part, that of "the avenger." Grandma Henrouille is especially amused, because the family will be stuck supporting poor Robinson, since his injury is their own fault and they cannot report his case to the hospital or police without facing prosecution for attempted murder.

Section 19 Analysis

Bardamu is unwittingly drawn into the murder plot, as vice and petty crime have become quite everyday to him. Bardamu finds himself returning to the carnival at crucial points in

the narrative, because it symbolizes the basest human desires let loose, the unending desire for cheap pleasure and cheap amusement, even when and indeed long after, one knows it is all a sham. The need to keep on going, to keep the carnival running and keep finding a little pleasure in life can drive anyone to commit desperate acts like the one Robinson had planned.

Grandma Henrouille shows her soundness of mind and good humor once again. Grandma Henrouille seems to be the only person unfazed by the petty and despicable character of those around her. Rather, finding out what is really in people's hearts seems to strengthen and refresh her spirit. Just like Bardamu was somewhat relieved at Robinson's lack of hypocrisy when he turned to cold, calculating murder, the old woman also prefers any degree of genuine malevolence to the lukewarm hypocritical, insincere affection dished out by her daughter-in-law.

Section 20

Section 20 Summary

This section begins with the phrase, "Everyone knows that such situations are hard to manage..."

The incident of Robinson's accident is hushed up, even though the neighbors gossip about it. Robinson has been blinded in the accident, but he fails to realize this for a while, since his eyes are bandaged. When he finally discovers that he is shut into "his own private darkness," he breaks down in tears. Though he threatens to kill himself, Bardamu can tell he is not serious about it. Everyone wants to die pleasantly, under the right conditions, thinks Bardamu and a despairing suicide probably does not meet Robinson's criteria. Under different conditions, Robinson might be delighted to die, however. Death is somewhat like marriage, Bardamu concludes.

Bardamu takes a new job supervising a government-funded tuberculosis center, which pays well. Bardamu's patients actually come to him with the hopes of having the disease, since this would entitle them to a government pension for life. On the other hand, remaining in good health would require them to go back to work.

One evening, a local priest, the Abbot Protiste, visits him to make a request. Bardamu is distracted by the repulsive state of the man's lips and tongue (he has a gum disease). Bardamu then reflects upon the dual character of speech: the idealistic content of our words contrasted with their actual origin, a slimy organ also used for food consumption.

The Abbot Protiste has been asked by Madame Henrouille to find a cheap religious institution to house both Robinson and the grandmother. Though his nervousness at joining them in their web of deceptions shows in his manner, he does present a fairly good plan. Abbot Protiste knows a small church with a cellar full of mummified corpses that attracts paying tourists and it needs a guide and caretaker. Bardamu's job will be convincing Robinson to go along with the plan and for this, he will receive a thousand francs. Bardamu thoroughly reassures the terrified Robinson and demands a doubled commission. As for his role in the affair, Bardamu, half-joking, claims that everyone would like to betray someone for profit, but the chance is rarely had.

With Robinson and the grandmother out of the way, Bardamu is free to concentrate on his practice, but instead, he falls sick and loses so much income that he decides to close up shop. Bardamu heads out of town in the middle of the night. Passing the prostitutes, the toll clerks, the beggars and the Tarapout (that is, Paramount) movie theatre, Bardamu pauses in a nearby café. Bardamu runs into Dr. Paraprine, his old medical advisor, who has since lost his job at the Institute and fallen onto hard times. Now he has some absurd post, studying the effects of movies on mentally handicapped children, which explains his presence at the theatre. Apparently, the kids love the films and watch them many times, being without memory. Bardamu explains his own flight

from Rancy and discovers there is a post open for a stage extra at the Tarapout. Bardamu takes the post on a whim, to be around the dancing girls, all English and very persistent at "wagging their bottoms."

Section 20 Analysis

Celine revisits the theme of wanting to die but being choosy about the time and place for it. The comparison between death and marriage is striking. Both involve putting an end to the infinite possibilities one pretends to have in life, hence both require facing one's illusions and deciding what is really important. The idea that Robinson would like to choose the circumstances of his death foreshadows the later events in the novel, when Robinson's actual death will be ambiguously situated between accidental and self-inflicted.

Regarding Bardamu's reception of the Abbot Protiste and noticing the man's diseased tongue rather than his words, one sees again how Bardamu has a tendency to explain all human behavior by the worst motivations and to reduce people to their most brute, material elements. The dehumanizing experiences he had in the war and its aftermath still influence how he perceives people. Bardamu sees people as hypocritical beasts, seeking to keep their flesh alive and bring it pleasure.

In this section, the priest and the doctor, usually the protectors of society, join forces to benefit themselves. Perhaps they will also be helping Robinson and the grandmother, perhaps not, but their main concern is their commission. The two have "joined forces in the night," says Bardamu and now all of them have crossed over a certain line. By sharing in the knowledge of the attempted murder and by covering it up, they become accomplices. The men have no choice but to trust in each other, like it or not.

Upon fleeing Rancy, Bardamu truly becomes one of the creatures of the night. Bardamu's midnight escape takes place among the beggars, prostitutes and all-night clerks, making up the darker half of city life. With all their hardships, these people universally turn to the luminous movie theatre, which enchants people, both day and night, employed and unemployed, as well as both sane and mentally handicapped children.

Although Dr. Paraprine's occupation of showing movies to the mentally handicapped sounds ridiculous, Celine makes the point that all people take the same simple, escapist pleasure in watching films. Which film it is may be is unimportant, as long as it helps us forget for awhile. Such entertainment for the masses is nothing new, for even Roman historians tell of distracting the people with circuses and battles in order to keep them from taking an interest in politics.

Section 21

Section 21 Summary

This section begins with the sentence, "Why struggle, waiting is good enough, since everything is bound to end up in the street."

While employed at the Tarapout, Bardamu leads a worry-free, decadent life. Bardamu takes up residence in a hotel and finds himself among students who all share the same hope of achieving happiness within twenty years, from hard work. The students already see themselves "at the last square, surrounded by a small but incomparably precious family," which they would, however, seldom notice. These students would not venture into the world's darker corners, but they would only read about them in the morning papers. Still, some of the students are familiar with the various brothels in Paris and so they show Bardamu around these areas. Bardamu meets a pimp named Pomone, who has seen so many perverse desires that he has developed a classification system: lunatics here, masochists and sadists there, those seeking a 'governess' to the side. Dealing in 'amusement' has become a bureaucratic chore for him, his desk piled high with impassioned requests mailed to him.

The girls in the movie house chorus line entertain Bardamu until they introduce a song so sad that it ruins the theatre for him forever. The words are about lost love, but Bardamu sees much more in it that that. Bardamu sees the whole misery of the human condition, bound to work incessantly to survive and always miss getting the pleasures one craves. "When you're young and you don't know, you mistake everything for love trouble," he concludes.

A new Polish girl joins the chorus line and Bardamu befriends her. When her long-distance lover suddenly dies of the flu, Bardamu does his best to help her deal with the tragedy. The two go out drinking and Bardamu gets so intoxicated that he starts hallucinating, seeing all the deceased people he knows in the clouds, like angels. Bardamu and the girl get caught up in the clouds and merge with the fog and mist. Finally, they get trapped over the English Channel somewhere.

Section 21 Analysis

Bardamu appears to be lost in transition. This interlude does little to advance Robinson's subplot. Bardamu is simply returning to yet one more carnival-like atmosphere. Celine is often drawn to carnivals as a metaphor for the life, with its distracting pleasures for sale, its lurid atmosphere and its predictable follies. One should keep in mind that the novel is based on the real-life experiences of Louis-Ferdinand Celine, who did spend time in World War I, Africa, Detroit and practicing medicine in the suburbs of Paris. While many schools of literature do not consider the author's life or intention to be decisive factors in the interpretation of a work, Celine's novel so closely

follows his own life that one cannot help assuming that, sometimes, the contingent facts of Celine's own life influenced the form.

Section 22

Section 22 Summary

This section begins with the phrase, "Tania woke me up in the room..."

One day, when passing through Rancy, Bardamu stops out of curiosity. Bardamu pays the Henrouilles a visit and finds Monsieur Henrouille dying of heart failure. Bardamu advises the wife to remove his dental plate, so he can breathe easier, but her husband had already flushed it down the toilet. The wife is irritated, because the plate was part gold and quite valuable.

The Abbot Protiste unexpectedly returns with the money owed Bardamu for his help in setting Robinson and Grandma Henrouille in the crypt-show business in Toulouse, a city in the south of France. It seems that Grandma Henrouille delights in talking to the tourists, while Robinson has become engaged to one of the local girls. Out of a sense of duty, as well as of morbid curiosity, Bardamu pays them a visit. Robinson "had developed a taste for shady undertakings" and wondered whether he could go "deeper into the night" with Robinson.

Bardamu takes a train to Toulouse and delights for a while in the unfamiliar city. It is a time when one can imagine that all the people there are nice, he thinks. The park is a nice place to linger, but at his age, people might imagine he is a pedophile, so he opts for the pastry shop, as fancy as a brothel and loses himself in thought while listening to the shop girls' conversations. Some delicate, personal dilemma has them very heated, but their "speculative incompetence restricted them to an imprecise sort of hatred" and they never reach a conclusion. Other customers come in and one woman refuses sweets, going into an elaborate and graphic discussion of her digestion and bowels to justify this position. These serious discussions of spite and feces put an abrupt end to Bardamu's idealized vision of the inhabitants of Toulouse.

Bardamu takes a carriage to the church that employs his friends, where he immediately meets Robinson's young fiancé, whose delicate, wiry body and precise features charm him on the spot. Besides this, she is capable and ambitious. The girl immediately leads him into the church's crypt, where she accepts Bardamu's sexual advances with enthusiasm and good humor. Later, he learns her name is Madelon. Madelon assures him of her sincerity in marrying his pal Robinson.

The crypt itself is a shadowy place, where quicklime has caused the bodies to mummify over the last five hundred years or so. The twenty-six corpses were little more than remnants of skin and bones, but recognizable by their clothing and sizes. Bardamu makes out a giant, two women, a hunchback and even a baby with a bib. Grandma Henrouille earns a hundred francs per day from the stiffs, beating them like drums and making them "work like circus performers." Bardamu immediately makes a note of the "steep, rickety stairs, as difficult to negotiate as a ladder."

Section 22 Analysis

Many of Celine's favorite themes surface again in this chapter. The hopeful illusions created by traveling to a new place are quickly put to rest by humanity's vicious stupidity and repulsive concern for their flesh above all. This is made evident by his pastry shop eavesdropping. It is no accident that Bardamu likens the shop to a brothel, because the shop also supplies cheap, yet transient, pleasures for the flesh.

The crypt, with its stiffs serving as circus performers for paying tourists, is one more carnival-like place, like the shooting gallery and the Tarapout Theater. In fact, one could say that Celine's narrator discerns the carnival like elements of life wherever he goes, with his keen eye for the deceptive and exaggerated performances people often adopt just to make a living from their fellows. Now the carnival element has been combined with death, showing how the act we put on continues up until death and even afterward. Bardamu discovers that not even the dead are dignified when he goes deeper into his night.

Bardamu's taking note of the rickety ladder suggests that he suspects a future accident or foul play and foreshadows the accident that will take place before he leaves Toulouse.

Section 23

Section 23 Summary

This section begins with the phrase, "Because of the treacherous narrow stairs, Robinson..."

Old Grandma Henrouille gives a lively show in the crypt, despite the fact that she is forbidden to raise the prices. Grandma Henrouille points out the missing eyes, full sets of teeth and leathery tongues. The old woman looking death in the eye and laughing at it was a sight worth seeing, Bardamu notes and the tourists flowed in to see her.

Robinson has so little to do that his main hobby is complaining about life in general and about Grandmother Henrouille in particular. Grandma Henrouille's energetic tours bring a lot of money and Robinson, who rarely even enters the crypt, wants a bigger share. Robinson thinks he has been taken for a sucker. Bardamu is disappointed in his friend's new, middle-class, bourgeois attitudes, because Robinson now thinks only of money, comfort and family life, having let go of his former curiosity and lust for adventure.

Bardamu warns Madelon that Robinson can be difficult at times and while he is teaching her a thing or two, tries to instruct her in how to recognize and avoid venereal diseases, a danger with her level of sexual curiosity, he thinks. Madelon takes great offense at his assuming she is a libertine just because she slept with him. Madelon declares herself respectable and him a beast.

Bardamu stays on and takes a trip to the countryside with Robinson and Madelon. Boat rides and overpriced restaurants fill their time, until they overhear music from a festive houseboat docked nearby. The three of them sit, envying the boat and wildly speculating on its price, like people do when their minds cannot even imagine the sort of money needed for it. After a confrontation with the houseboat's dog, the owner good-naturedly invites them all aboard to help celebrate his birthday.

The owner is a young painter, an artist and thus certain eccentricities, such as spontaneously socializing with the locals, are tolerated and are even expected of him. For a few hours, rich and not so rich can be reconciled in the spirit of the festivity and under the benevolent grace of the young artist. The three feel compelled to improve their speech and manners amid these aristocratic hosts. Robinson, among the colonial settlers, invents "phony memories" of Africa, while Bardamu lets them know he is a distinguished Parisian physician. All the party is united in a false show of camaraderie, in which all become "fuddled" by an effort to suffuse the moment with more charms and marvels than ever before experienced. When the drinks and cheer wear off, Bardamu and his companions slip away from the party.

On the way home, Bardamu overhears the banal, intimate dialogue between his friends. Madelon hopes Robinson will regain his eyesight, but pretends to worry he will then

chase other women. Madelon worries about the influence of Robinson's friend, Bardamu, whom she calls a libertine and skirt-chaser. Bardamu is likened to a dog, "ready to jump every last one of them," she adds vengefully. Robinson agrees with her and they amuse themselves by speculating on the details of Bardamu's sexual habits, before deciding to exclude him from their lives for good.

A couple of days later, Bardamu is packing to leave Toulouse when he receives news that Grandmother Henrouille has fallen down the crypt stairs and broken her collarbone and skull. Bardamu will not even to go take a look and explains, "I knew all I wanted to know." Bardamu boards the first train out of the city, without saying good-bye to Robinson or Madelon.

Section 23 Analysis

Celine depicts the everyday lives and hopes of the characters, once they have settled into a stable life. Only Grandmother Henrouille is content and makes the best of things. Robinson, on the other hand, harbors a deep discontent that haunts him no matter what the situation in which he lands.

The houseboat revives the carnival theme. This time, the rich put on the show, creating an elegant atmosphere that is all the more intoxicating. Afterward, however, little remains of their shared bliss. Madelon's accusations about Bardamu stem both from her fear of Bardamu's revealing their indiscretions and her anger at his presumption that she slept around. The couple wastes no time in cutting Bardamu out of their own private happiness, despite the good times they had shared up to this point.

Bardamu realizes he is not wanted around anymore and it seems he is not the only person the couple wants out of the picture. When Bardamu hears of Grandmother Henrouille's 'accident,' he deduces that the couple has finally taken advantage of the crypt's rickety staircase to eliminate Grandmother Henrouille. Bardamu knows that Robinson has wanted the crypt business to himself. There is some horror in the way she is killed. Rather than wait for the old to die naturally, it seems that the young literally push them into the grave instead.

Section 24

Section 24 Summary

This section begins with the phrase, "The first thing Paraprine said..."

Bardamu returns to Paris, where his resourceful colleague, Dr. Paraprine, finds him a post working with magnetic wave therapy in an asylum (or 'rest-home') for the depressed and insane. The two ways humans express their innermost being, Bardamu concludes, are war and madness. The decades-long effort to avoid reverting to our true natures is what exhausts us so much.

Bardamu's new boss, Baryton, does his best to keep their asylum up-to-date, because the families are always demanding more up-to-date modes of treatment. At discount sales and second-hand shops, he acquires a variety of electric, pneumatic and hydraulic equipment, to stay ahead of rival asylums. The routine work of running the asylum bores him after so many years and he likes nothing more than to hear stories of Bardamu's travels. Bardamu is paid badly, but he is content enough, in spite of his nightmares (of Robinson) and the constant need to make sure the mental patients do not try to kill him when he passes by them. "Madmen are more prone to murder than ordinary people," he notes.

Months pass amid these eccentric lunatics and equally bizarre colleagues. Baryton decides Bardamu can also be put to work as an English teacher for his daughter and the three of them sit down to regular lessons, but since the little French girl is incapable of learning a word, her father learns it for her and soon English becomes his obsession. After months of devotion, Baryton has "refashioned himself almost completely along Anglo-Saxon lines" and yet, his mind also begins to wander. During their reading of English history one day, he loses all interest in the world around him and merely repeats the history text in a daze. That night, he announces his departure and his decision to put Bardamu in charge of their little institute. Baryton's soul has been drained by forty years of prudent, stultifying work. Baryton wants to have adventures while he still can and is headed to England.

Section 24 Analysis

Bardamu finally achieves some stability in his life, working at the asylum and he seems to feel at home there among the lunatics. The patients may be dangerous, but at least they are not concealing their emotions or their intentions. The abrupt and whimsical departure of Bardamu's supervisor, exhausted from his daily routine, could point to the general lack of authority and certainty in this period of history. The period after World War I was marked by a loss of faith in reason and a turn toward the irrational and the unconscious.

Section 25

Section 25 Summary

This section begins with the phrase, "In a way we weren't sorry to see him go..."

Many quiet months pass for Bardamu while running the Institute, interrupted only once by news of Robinson, brought by Abbott Protiste, who suspects Robinson of murdering Grandma Henrouille and also complains of the man's sudden departure from Toulouse. Not long after, Bardamu is dismayed to receive a visit from Robinson. Robinson has regained his sight and claims to have come to Paris to find a job, preferably at the Institute Bardamu now oversees. In fact, Robinson would like to be admitted and pass himself off as a lunatic, because he is fleeing some urgent trouble. Robinson admits to sending Grandmother Henrouille to her death on the stairs, since she annoyed him and also because he and Madelon were to inherit the business upon Grandma Henrouille's death. No one suspects him, since he concealed the return of his eyesight from all except Madelon. Despite the success of the murder and his pending marriage, Robinson still is not satisfied with the arrangements in Toulouse. In fact, he quickly grows disenchanted with Madelon and wants only for her and her mother to leave him alone.

Bardamu explodes with frustration at Robinson, reminding him that everyone had combined forces to give him an easy job, welcomed him into their homes and trusted him, in spite of his poverty and criminal record. In return, Robinson simply puts on airs and starts complaining again, in short, Robinson makes himself unbearable. Robinson deserves jail, no less, says Bardamu.

The real problem is Madelon, whose obsessive love put a suffocating hold on him. Madelon is in love, hence she is crazy and now anything crazy is right up her alley, he fretfully explains. Robinson wanted to travel and she insists on following everywhere. "Listening to that flapdoodle made me miserable," he adds. They argued for weeks but still stayed together, "mostly out of fear," he mentions, since she and he were accomplices in the murder. Madelon's fury at having her love rebuffed has no limits, though Robinson insisted he had never truly hurt her, that is, never got her pregnant or gave her any diseases. Madelon is willing to do anything except let him go. "...she was in love all right, a real pest," Robinson concludes. Robinson tried to get rid of her love by pretending to have fits of dementia. For awhile, this calmed her passion, but only temporarily. Now, he has come to hide in Bardamu's asylum, to escape Madelon and to hide from the police in case she reports the murder out of sheer spite. Madelon would get great satisfaction from seeing him in prison, even if it meant she also had to go along.

Bardamu initially has a hard time mustering much sympathy or interest for his friend's situation. Bardamu lets Robinson stay for awhile, on the condition that he looks for work

outside and a routine of "furtive monotony" ensues, which lasts for several months. Robinson cheers up when spring arrives.

The trouble starts up again when Bardamu spies Madelon lurking around the Institute. Bardamu says nothing about this to Robinson, but his uneasiness leads him to visit Rancy again, as though a visit to the past would clear his thoughts, but he realizes that the people there have nothing more to teach him about the dark regions of the human soul. They lack the education and the strength. Whatever mysterious quest Bardamu is on, this little village holds no answers to it.

Section 25 Analysis

Whereas Bardamu has become a respectable physician, his old war buddy has become a murderer. Perhaps because of their similar pasts and their shared curiosity for a certain authenticity found only in the seedier aspects of life, Bardamu shelters Robinson again.

Robinson has finally met a force he cannot reckon with, the fury of a woman rejected. Madelon cannot understand why he would refuse some of life's most advertised joys, love and togetherness, but Robinson is not interested in something just because it is said to be worthwhile. Robinson's refusal to follow the expected norms is similar to his earlier reluctance to be the courageous soldier everyone expected of him. Bardamu now considers their love a paltry and inauthentic emotion, but even if this is true, it is an emotion that she clings to with an unshakable force of will.

Section 26

Section 26 Summary

This section begins with the phrase, "About meals at Vigny..."

At the institute, Bardamu receives several sinister letters concerning his relations with Robinson. Bardamu suspects Madelon and begins fearing a visit from her, or worse, from the police. Bardamu and his colleagues habitually play cards with a local policeman, Gustave Mandamour. One Sunday, Gustave mentions having seen a woman stalking the institute who fits Madelon's description.

Robinson panics at learning Madelon's whereabouts and yet he refuses to take any action about it. Neither going back with her nor running away to a new place appeals to him and even the fear that she will report him to the police means little. Finally, one Saturday night, Madelon pays Bardamu a visit. Filled with his authority as head of an institute, Bardamu brusquely tells her to get lost and to leave the sick Robinson alone. When she angrily resists, he slaps her, since he has always imagined that a slap would remove a person's mask and let their real emotions show. Madelon, however, hides her face and leaves.

Inexplicably, as time passes, Robinson begins to see Madelon again on his own. Bardamu himself takes a new girlfriend, too, a beautiful young nurse named Sophie. At Sophie's suggestion, Bardamu tries to restore friendly relations with Madelon and Robinson. They all agree to spend the evening together at the carnival.

The bumper cars, photography booths and shooting gallery fail to restore harmony between them and all the "violence and joy" of the carnival merely irritates Madelon. Once all the thrills are exhausted and all the snacks consumed, they merely quarrel and Bardamu decides to end the evening and head home in a taxi.

Robinson and Madelon continue to quarrel in the taxi. A livid Madelon insists that such dirty, rotten men as they cannot understand a decent, clean girl like herself and that they have ruined her. Madelon's no tart and only loves once. Madelon threatens to reveal the murder to the police so that both Robinson and Madelon will be sent to jail. At this, Robinson resignedly says he just does not care anymore. "It's not just you," he tells Madelon, "I don't care about anyone else either...I don't want to be loved anymore...It disgusts me." Madelon fails to understand, so he puts his thoughts more harshly, adding that she is the rotten one who foolishly repeats what everyone else says and believes with everyone else that love is the cure for all life's misery and makes the sordid horrors of life easier. The world he has seen prevents him from ever believing such nonsense again. "You want to eat rotten meat? with love sauce?...Does that help it go down?" he snaps at her.

Enraged now, Madelon pulls out a revolver and shoots her lover three times before jumping from the cab and escaping into the dark. They have no choice but to take the mortally injured friend home and watch him die, with Bardamu ineffectually trying to help him go more easily. Once dead, Robinson seems a stranger to them, "someone who had come from a horrible country and you wouldn't have dared to speak to."

The body is taken to the police station and the incident labeled a crime of passion. Bardamu and the others head to a bar when the end of the night approaches, just before dawn. As the novel draws to a close, Bardamu's final thoughts are of all the people preparing to wake up for the morning workday. "They too will all have to die someday. How will they go about it?" he wonders.

At the bar, Gustave, the policeman, accidentally overturns the stove and spills the coals on the floor. Gustave wants to show them his fire dance ritual but the scientist, Dr. Paraprine, will not let him.

Section 26 Analysis

Again the carnival is the site of human folly and desperation. This chapter plays upon the contrast between the playful violence of the carnival (the shooting gallery, the bumper cars) and the real violence of the shooting. While the results are quite different, the motives are much the same. For Madelon, the symbolic violence of the carnival is not enough, because she is out for blood. Ironically, Robinson survived the war only to be killed by love.

Robinson's death and its aftermath last almost till dawn, thus taking the party literally and symbolically all the way "to the end of the night" as the title suggests. What did they discover? Bardamu muses on the fact that death waits for all of us, no matter how much we distract ourselves with amusements and carnivals. However, he speculates that Robinson arranged his own death by angering Madelon so much she would kill him. This idea echoes Robinson's original idea that to leave the war, one can simply surrender. It is not an honorable exit but at least one controls one's destiny.

Did Robinson decide to take death, this last and most fearful unknown, into his own hands? Was his rejection of love a metaphorical death? These questions are raised but left to the reader to interpret. What is clear is that death itself is the thing that waits for all people at the end of the night and perhaps this is what irresistibly draws Bardamu toward Robinson, even though he will not follow him there.

The novel closes with a symbolic picture of the policeman wishing to do a fire dance and being held back by the scientist. One could read this as the author's view that the mystery and ritual needed for a full life are in danger of being suppressed by the positivistic mindset, which allows only scientific explanations and nothing else. When it comes to death, however, one feels that a ritual is needed, no matter how ineffective or absurd it may seem.

Characters

Ferdinand Bardamu

Bardamu is humorous, curious and intelligent. Bardamu as a young man is impetuous and adventurous. Yet, in spite of his open and gregarious nature and his wicked sense of humor, Bardamu generally remains an outsider, because of his refusal to identify with any group or nation. From this perspective on the outside, he sees all too clearly the flaws of every institution and ideology that he questions. Bardamu quickly spots people's weak or deceitful points, but even more quickly acknowledges when a person is truly good or honest. Bardamu most respects those who know their own mind and show no pretenses or hypocrisy in public. Bardamu's hopes and dreams are unrealistic and plentiful and he is often disappointed.

After becoming a doctor and thus obtaining a more respectable social position, Bardamu shows more patience with his fellow man. Bardamu combines an analytical perspective with real empathy for people's sufferings. Bardamu's refusal to accept pay from the poor shows his strong moral convictions and so does his refusal to live by profiting off the misery of others.

Bardamu is based on the author, Louis-Ferdinand Celine, whose real life had many parallels with his hero's life in the novel.

Leon Robinson

Robinson always appears when a situation has reached its lowest point and people start revealing their worst aspects. Robinson always illustrates, for Bardamu, the path that is even more sinister or unthinkable than his own. The novel's tension mounts each time Robinson reappears and we learn to expect Bardamu to follow him.

For all his sinister connotations, Robinson, as a person, is surprisingly ordinary. Robinson speaks little and in a fairly conventional style, revealing little about himself.

Robinson's only unique trait, among the novel's other characters, is that he does not hide his pure self-interest. Robinson is indifferent to all social norms of behavior and is free from ordinary standards of decency and morality. For instance, he is not susceptible to feelings of honor, morality, or love, evidenced by his paid murder attempts and his abrupt dismissal of his fiancée. However, he does have a virtuous side, since he is free from all hypocrisy and has a form of admirable, unique honesty about revealing his motives.

Lola

The first of Bardamu's girlfriends, Lola is a sexy American girl who has come to "help France" win the war in any way she can, Lola proves too lazy and uninformed to be of any use whatsoever. Lola's main duty is supervising the hospital's donut supply and her main interests are fashion and her own whimsical desires. Lola's wish is for a courageous, heroic boyfriend, therefore Bardamu appeals to her because he had earned a medal. However, when he ends up in a hospital for men unwilling to fight, she leaves him.

Lola is young, healthy and optimistic, because she has little to fear with her beauty and money and she wants nothing but whimsical pleasures around her. Because of this, she remains a superficial character, who proves to have no interest in anyone else and who must eventually rely on her sexual charms to survive.

Musyne

Bardamu's second girlfriend is a lovely, young violinist who is ambitious to promote her career and her art. A 'shrewd little angel', she easily seduces the soldiers stationed in Paris with her improvised performances of music and verse. Rather than rely on her talent alone, she sleeps around to make a reputation for herself. After becoming a well-known performer for the troops, Musyne slips away from Bardamu during a bomb raid and never returns.

Princhard

Formerly a schoolteacher, Princhard is a patient in the Paris Military hospital where Bardamu spends time after his injury. Princhard delivers a memorable speech about how nations learned to teach people patriotism in order to get cheaper and more loyal armed forces. Princhard is described as a thoughtful, but useless, intellectual.

Dr. Bestombes

Dr. Bestombes is proud of his new method for curing the less-patriotic men. Dr. Bestombes combines patience and understanding with electroshock therapy. The doctor's goal is to make some great, scientific contribution to the war that will make him famous and admired.

Lieutenant Grappa

Stationed in an army post in Africa where everything is falling apart, Lt. Grappa supervises the post, where he goes through the repetitive and futile motions of keeping up appearances and following regulations. Despite being impatient and frustrated with

his job of governing the natives and, careful to preserve his authority, he presents a helpful and good-natured face to his visitors.

Sergeant Alcide

Grappa's second-in-command, Alcide assists with the work of keeping an army base functioning despite total isolation in the jungle. Alcide's obliging and generous nature is evident to the natives, to whom he sells tobacco. Alcide appears to be wasting away his best years in the jungle, for no reason, until he confides to Bardamu that he sends all of his pay to support a young, orphan girl. Alcide's unselfishness and dedication to another person marks him as one of the very few good characters in the novel.

Molly

Bardamu's third girlfriend, Molly, is a strong and generous woman who supports him with her earnings as a prostitute. Molly believes people need to find the right vocation to be happy and generously gives to those who are searching their way. Heartbroken when Bardamu leaves her, she shows her keen understanding of his nature, yet lets him go peacefully, with little reproach. Molly's wisdom about human nature and her kindness make her capable of influencing those around her. Molly gives Bardamu his dreams and confidence back again, so that he ceases his pointless wanderings and finishes medical school.

Bebert

This young orphan who lives with his aunt in Rancy often acts as a messenger between Bardamu and his patients. Bebert dies of typhoid, in spite of all Bardamu's best efforts to save him.

The Henrouille Family

Monsieur and Madame Henrouille are middle-aged parents who think only of their money and security. The two want to get rid of Grandma Henrouille, Monsieur Henrouille's mother, in order to rent out her home for cash, but they pretend it is for her own good. Hypocritical and conniving, they hide their true characters under perfectly polite and friendly manners

Grandma Henrouille is a lively, clever old woman who lives in total solitude, due to her mistrust of the world. When defending herself against her perceived enemies (her family), she plays the role of a screaming old witch. In reality, however, she is a merry and feisty soul who "fears nothing from within" being absolutely sure of her mind. Grandma Henrouille sees through everyone, discerning their true motives, which she loudly announces to the world, laughing all the while.

Madelon

Madelon's attractiveness is evident to both Robinson and Bardamu, who meet her in Toulouse when Robinson is sent there to look after the church crypt. Madelon has a firm, petite figure and the 'hands of an ambitious working girl'. Madelon's black eyes are attentive and calculating.

Once engaged to Robinson, she enjoys looking after for him by reading him the newspaper, cooking and so on. Even though she remains convinced of the value of marriage and places a high value on love, she cannot give up flirting with other men and even sleeps with Bardamu. Madelon sees herself as a decent, honorable girl, perhaps a little better than the rest of them and she is quite concerned with defending her reputation. Madelon tenaciously holds onto Robinson and will do anything to keep him from abandoning her. In the end, she kills him to prevent him from leaving her.

Dr. Paraprine

A prominent scientist and researcher devoted to research, Dr. Paraprine becomes Bardamu's colleague. Unshaven, poorly dressed and eclectically groomed, he retains the habits of a student late into his life. Dr. Paraprine believes that science and math will provide the answers to all problems, social and otherwise. The doctor seldom speaks, except to erupt in rants, criticizing the mediocre practitioners and insignificant discoveries found in the "clownish trade of medical research."

Dr. Baryton

Dr. Baryton is the supervisor at the Psychiatric Institute where Bardamu and Paraprine end up working. Self-assured and optimistic, he makes an efficient administrator and a cheerful boss. A sudden enthusiasm for learning English, his native language being French, leads him to "refashion himself entirely on Anglo-Saxon lines," after which, he abruptly leaves the Institute and departs on a voyage of self-discovery.

Objects/Places

Carnivals

Celine often writes Bardamu as being drawn to carnivals as a metaphor for life, with its distracting pleasures for sale, its lurid atmosphere and its predictable follies.

During the war, Bardamu goes insane in an abandoned carnival's shooting gallery when he sees all the holes in the tin soldiers. Bardamu imagines that people shot the toy soldiers with as little thoughtfulness and as much glee as the enemy had shot at him.

Carnivals symbolize the need for distraction and cheap pleasures that never leave us and which never satisfies us. For Bardamu, it stands for all the sham promises, all the glittering yet empty dreams that disappoint us. Bardamu notes the sadness of the children who cannot afford the games and the naivety of those who think the adults presenting the games are just kind, fun-loving people, failing to see that they are either cynics or tricksters.

The carnival exists, because of the unending human need for pleasure and amusements, even cheap ones and even when one knows it is all a sham. The hope of finding pleasure in life drives us all to keep returning to its bright lights and noisy games. Significantly, Robinson's death comes just after the carnival, as though to escape the carnival is also to escape life itself.

Crypt

The basement of the church, called a "crypt," where Robinson and Grandma Henrouille display the mummified corpses to tourists, is found in a small town in southern France. Grandma Henrouille puts on a wonderful show in this crypt, proving how untroubled she is in the presence of cadavers and death. Ironically, however, the place proves to be her own grave, when Robinson pushes her down the rickety ladder.

Movie Theatre

Like the carnival, the movies are a place of warm, comforting dreams, where the harsh realities of the world are momentarily suspended - for a small fee.

Themes

Nationalism

Nationalism, a modern idea, holds that the nation is a fundamental unit of social life. The system of nations took shape largely in the 19th century and contributed to the World Wars of the 20th century. Dying gloriously for one's country or returning home a hero motivated many men to join the military service. Without a feeling of national patriotism, the strength of a country is weakened. However, this sense of patriotism can also be exploited by unjust wars or incompetent leadership.

In Celine's day, nationalism was used to justify sending millions of young men to slaughter for miniscule gains in territory. Some of the toughest French troops made a famous protest when, unable to mutiny, they made sounds like sheep as they marched to their deaths. Using citizens as soldiers, instead of hired mercenaries, was first suggested by the 16th century political writer Machiavelli, who argued that people dedicated to their home country would be more motivated to defend it to the death.

Nationalism was also a force behind colonialism, a movement in the 19th and 20th centuries by which European nations acquired overseas territories in Africa and the Americas. Though colonization brought some benefits to the settlements, it was largely a way to enrich the European countries by exploiting the native people and their resources. Bardamu's visit to Africa gives a first-hand account of the race to profit from Africa and describes the social and economic impact upon the indigenous population.

The Rich and the Poor

The novel often claims that the rich people loyally support the war, because they stand to make a huge profit from it. Through patriotic rhetoric, they convince the poorer boys that doing the dirty work is heroic and courageous. Having friends in high places can keep you out of the war, but for a poor man, it is quite different. Bardamu ironically jokes that he hopes someday to get free meals in Paris for his heroism, by paying his bill with little French flags.

The narrator often comments that there are two types of people, the rich and poor. These groups led radically different lives in Celine's era. The rich are optimistic, healthy, beautifully dressed, witty and carefree, while the poor are invisible and disposable.

Being rich or poor also influences social relations to a great extent in the novel. It seems that all his girlfriends leave Bardamu as soon as they find rich men, a fact he deeply resents. Becoming rich, however, seems to require a mentality that Bardamu cannot adopt while still keeping his core values intact. Bardamu refuses to charge his needy patients and cannot imagine devoting all his time to business concerns and increasing profits.

The episode on the houseboat shows one moment when the barrier between the two groups is lifted. In the presence of money, everyone pretends to be something and someone other than who they really are and afterward, they are somewhat ashamed of themselves.

Even in the jungle, the white men in lower positions in the army are portrayed as getting along better with the poorer natives, while the more calculating natives quickly learn the habits of their wealthy bosses.

Hypocrisy

Bardamu dwells on the theme of hypocrisy at every level of human existence. People's real natures are radically different from their social masks they wear and their ideals have little to do with their actions, which are nearly always in their own interests. Everyone takes advantage of others, while pretending to do them a favor.

Citizens in wartime demand stories of heroism, which the soldiers obligingly invent. Everyone tries to profit from the terrible circumstances, even Bardamu and his buddies, who visit mothers of deceased comrades for cash 'donations'. In the African colonies, everyone is corrupt and out to swindle the company for which they work. The natives who rescue a feverish Bardamu from his African post sell him to a sea captain. Natives cheat other natives who do not know the system, pretending to help them.

In the Henrouille family, we see different variations on hypocrisy, such as the aging against the more aged and family against family. The Henrouille family claims they want to care for Grandmother Henrouille's health, but are actually planning to have her murdered, a fact of which she is well aware.

Bardamu tries to understand real human nature throughout the book and at one point, he concludes that the real nature of people can be seen in only two situations: war and madness. This is the only time people fail to put on their hypocritical masks and show their real motives. The rest of the time, people's needs to keep up appearances causes them endless, pointless troubles, the narrator implies over and over. People are endlessly trapped between caring and calculating.

Escapism

People try many means to divert themselves from their unsatisfying lives, says the narrator. Some of our favorite ways are movies, carnivals, travel and love affairs.

The warm illusions of the movies give us ready-made dreams, while carnivals offer so many chances at excitement for pennies.

When traveling, people always expect to find a more beautiful city, kinder and more perceptive people, but in the end, one is more often disappointed. Bardamu's great

hopes for African colonies and for New York proved to be completely unrealistic illusions.

Love is the most essential and ultimate distraction, Bardamu often notes. When one is about to die in war, one seeks sexual gratification. Love is the ideal way of forgetting one's troubles and nothing makes young people happier than when a conversation turns toward sex, he notes. Yet, in many ways, love fails also. In Bardamu's case, his girlfriends often left him. Robinson grew tired of Madelon and Madelon cheated on Robinson. Many of the female characters in the novel had serious medical complications, due to their sex lives, especially from lack of birth control, which led to severe health problems. In the end, love did not provide the escape for any of them.

Style

Point of View

By speaking in first person, as though telling the story from memory, the main character directly and vividly conveys his thoughts to the reader. Bardamu's narrative voice is full of black humor, cynicism, colorful exaggerations and fantastic embellishments. Bardamu's witty yet perceptive tone helps us to enjoy his otherwise pessimistic and misanthropic outlook.

Bardamu exaggerates for the sake of telling a good story and therefore is not factually reliable. Instead, he seems to be aiming at some deeper truth by his selective emphasis and hyperbole. This is easily seen in the chapter where all the hospitalized soldiers compete to make up heroic lies, the best of which are performed in the theatre, *La Comedie Francaise.*

Language and Meaning

Rich and unusual description, penetrating lyricism and harsh observations give Celine's prose both range and depth. Known for his coarse slang, Celine's language resembles colorful street talk. At the same time, it keeps all the complexity and nuance of good literature.

Because the writing follows the loose associations between the narrator's ideas, the reader has a strong sense of being inside the narrator's head during all his experiences. Through bursts of prose and ellipses, starts and stops, the prose echoes the narrator's thought processes.

The same is true of character development. Characters do not have lengthy dialogues, nor do they report their own feelings. Instead, we learn about them from the probing descriptions given by the narrator's voice.

Setting

Most of the places Celine mentions in the novel are real, but often he alters the names slightly, or simply mixes them up, perhaps to emphasis that he is exaggerating and embellishing a story based in fact. The novel follows Bardamu while he restlessly moves from place to place and therefore no one setting predominates for long.

As a youth in wartime France, Bardamu is confronted with heroically losing his life for his country or turning against social mores. Once he and Robinson have taken this first step towards saving their lives, they go further and further from the secure, ordinary routes. The horrors of the war mark him for good, while he spends the next several years in flight from it.

Discharged by the army, he tries to start anew in Africa and then in the United States. Africa proves yet another disappointment to him, another place where people are all either taking advantage of one another or decaying under the hot sun, or both. In each of the places he goes, he meets up again with Robinson, as though he is inadvertently following his sinister acquaintance. Both Robinson and Bardamu return to France when they come to realize the United States has little to offer its immigrants besides the struggle for survival. The loneliness in New York City and the drudgery of factory work in Detroit drives Bardamu to head back home to Paris.

Bardamu and Robinson cross paths again in Garenne-Rancy, the lackluster little town whose name means "rancid rabbit pen." In this desperate little suburb, Robinson does indeed try to blow up one of Bardamu's patients, Grandmother Henrouille, with an exploding rabbit pen. To cover up the plot, in which many have been involved, both Grandmother Henrouille and Robinson are sent to Toulouse, a pleasant tourist destination in southern France.

Bardamu visits them in Toulouse, where the romantic countryside setting of southern France tempts him to stay there longer. The pleasant setting also inspires Robinson to thoughts of marriage and settling down to a normal life as proprietor of a small restaurant, a dream which has less appeal, however, than his other plan, pushing Grandmother Henrouille down the stairs and taking over the crypt business.

Finally, all major characters gather at the Psychiatric Institute, where Bardamu has become the acting director. It seems to be a fitting gathering place for the dysfunctional group of social misfits and criminals. The person who thrives best at the Institute is Bardamu, who has always felt happy and safe in hospitals, but it can give no refuge to Robinson. Madelon continues to pursue him, but he is not safe. Madelon finally takes her revenge after one last, botched attempt at reconciliation at the carnival.

Structure

Divided into many short chapters, the novel follows the narrator's stream of consciousness while he vividly recalls the story of his life. All the events flow chronologically, even inexorably and with increasing tension, to the end. There is no single climax, merely a shifting of situations and new problems in each change of location.

Other character's thoughts and actions are transmitted through the narrator's main voice, often using direct quotations for lively exchanges.

The plot is driven by Bardamu's need to progress further into the night, which alternately seems to signify human depravity, rejection of social customs, the dark, unknowable side of life and finally death. Therefore, Bardamu seems to be always in transit, always on the way out to a different destination. Bardamu exits one situation after another, always going somewhere that seems to be better but turns out not to be any better at

all. Bardamu's progress towards the 'end of the night' creates an underlying tension that is not resolved until the final pages.

Finally, after witnessing Robinson's death, Bardamu is left alone, with none of those who began his journey with him.

The recurring theme of the carnival sometimes leads to major changes in the characters or their situations. After the first carnival visit, for example, Bardamu, as a soldier, goes mad from fear. When Bardamu leaves his practice in Rancy, he takes on a new job in a dance hall, which is similar to a carnival. Madelon shoots Robinson after they spend the night at a carnival.

Quotes

"In my dream...strapping good fellows marching behind the general...they'd shower us with decorations and flowers, we'd march through the *Arc de Triomphe*. We'd go to a restaurant, they'd serve us free of charge, we'd never pay for anything anymore, never as long as we lived. We're heroes! We'd say when they brought the bill. Defenders of the Patrie! That would do it!...We'd pay with little French flags!" (p. 13).

"The only argument we could have pitted against all; those wielders of power was our contemptible little with not to die and not to be burned alive." (p.37).

"I lacked the indispensable connections. The people I knew were all poor, people whose death is of no interest to anybody." (p. 40).

Soon there wasn't a bit of truth in the city. The little that had been left in 1914, people were ashamed of now. Everything you touched was phone, the sugar, the airplanes, the shoes, the jam, the photographs...everything you read, swallowed, sucked, admired, proclaimed, refuted, defended was made up of hat-ridden myths and grinning masquerades, phony to the hilt." (p. 45).

It was obvious that my darling was going to leave me, flat and soon. I hadn't found out yet that mankind consists of two very different races, the rich and the moor. It took me...twenty years and the war to learn to stick to my class and ask the price of things before touching them, let alone setting my heart on them. (p. 67).

"Suddenly he fell asleep in the candlelight. After a while I got up to look at his face. He slept like everybody else. He looked quite ordinary. There ought to be some mark by which to distinguish good people from bad." (p. 138).

"In spite of the condition I was in, I decided to head straight into the bush in the direction taken by that infernal Robinson." (p. 152).

"But later on, when life shows us how much cunning, cruelty and malice are required just to keep the body at ninety-eight point six, we catch on, we know the score, we begin to understand how much swinishness it takes to make up a past. If you've lived this long it's because you've squashed any poetry you had in you. Life is keeping body and soul together." (p. 181).

"When you live in Rancy you don't even realize how sad you've become. You simply stop feeling like doing anything much. What with scrimping and going without this ant that, you stop wanting anything." (p. 208).

"The Henrouilles had thought about buying a house even before they were married. First separately, then together." (p 211).

"There were plenty of patients, but not many who were willing and able to pay. Medicine is a thankless profession. When you get paid by the rich, you feel like a flunky, by the poor like a thief." (p 227).

"The vocation for murder that had suddenly come over Robinson struck me in a way as an improvement over what I'd observed until then in others, always half hateful, half benevolent, always boring with their vagueness, their indirection. I had definitely learned a thing or two by following Robinson into the night." (p. 266).

"Robinson was not prepared to die under the conditions offered. Under different conditions he might have been delighted. All in all, death is something like marriage." (p. 284).

"The rich don't have to kill to eat. They "employ" people, as they call it. The rich don't do evil themselves. They pay. People do all they can to please them and everybody's happy. They have beautiful women, the poor have ugly ones." (p. 287).

"When you have no money to offer the poor, you'd better keep your trap shut. If you talk to them about anything but money, you'll almost always be deceiving them, lying. It's easy to amuse the rich, all you need, for instance, is mirrors for them to see themselves in..."(p. 289).

"In this world we spent our time killing or adoring, or both together. 'I hate you! I adore you!' We keep going, we fuel and refuel, we pass on our life to a biped of the next century, with frenzy, or any cost, as if it were the greatest of pleasures to perpetuate ourselves, as if, when all's said and done, it would make us immortal. One way or another, kissing is as indispensable as scratching. (p. 363).

"When I think now of all the lunatics I knew at Baryton's, I can't help suspecting that the only true manifestations of our innermost being are war and insanity, those two absolute nightmares." (p. 359).

Topics for Discussion

When does Robinson usually appear in the novel? What effect does he often have on Bardamu?

How does this novel challenge our conventional ideas of the 'good' characters and the 'bad' ones, with respect to Robinson and Bardamu?

Discuss the character and symbolism of carnivals in the novel. What role does the carnival play, structurally, to mark transitions of setting or changes in people's behavior?

Is Bardamu's low evaluation of human nature justified? Do people behave differently under some conditions than others?

What attracts Bardamu to the New World and why does he leave disappointed? What is his attitude, in general, toward new places?

Describe Bardamu's experience in Africa and compare it to his voyage to the United States.

What convinces Bardamu to finish his medical degree and how does his new profession change his life?

Why does Madelon shoot Robinson and why does Robinson not try to stop her?

Was Bardamu justified at all in his cowardice and his reluctance to fight for his country?

Keeping Princhard's speech in mind, is unlimited patriotism always a good thing?