

The Joke Study Guide

The Joke by Milan Kundera

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Plot Summary

The Joke is a novel by Milan Kundera that is about a man named Ludvik Jahn and his life until the age of 37. The novel covers the events in his life from various perspectives roughly from the time of his adolescence until the time he is 37, but does not follow a linear pattern. Instead, the novel concentrates on how Jahn's actions influence others and affect those individuals that come in contact with him.

The novel starts with Jahn entering into his hometown of Morava with a specific goal in mind. We will later learn that his goal and intentions are anything but admirable or heroic. When Jahn sees a woman that he once loved dearly, he is taken back to his past and spends the majority of the novel reminiscing on what happened to him as an adolescent.

Jahn had his life fully thought out when he was a teenager — or so he thought. He was dating a girl named Marketa and well immersed in the Socialist Party. He went to University and was considering taking one of many high-level positions upon his graduation. He's smart and intelligent, although he has been chastised in the past for being an "independent thinker," which is not encouraged among Party members.

When his girlfriend goes away to a special training camp sponsored by the Party, she writes him that she is having a wonderful time, embracing all of the Party doctrine. He writes her a postcard and includes a sarcastic remark seemingly against the Party on the card. He does not hear from his girlfriend for the rest of her time at the Camp, save a terse, perfunctory review of what she is doing. Meanwhile, Party members have seen the postcard and decide to eject Jahn from the Party and all of its benefits there within. He is kicked out of university and his entire life destiny is washed away in moments.

To re-educate himself, Jahn is sent to a detention center, where he works in the mines and performs various strenuous exercises under a commander. The idea is that hard labor will reverse his trifling comments about the Party and make him a stauncher member of its political viewpoint. While he is there, he meets a woman named Lucie while on one of his breaks from the camp. He immediately falls in love, although admits that he is as much in love with her in the surroundings as anything else. He does not love Lucie for herself, but instead for the situation in which she was presented to him.

During their time while Jahn is in the detention camps, Lucie brings him a bouquet of flowers and hands them to him through the barbed fence because they cannot see each other often. He is rarely released for free time off the camp and this is their best way to communicate. Her loyalty and love provide hope and light for him during a difficult time in his life, yet he never asks much about her nor learns her own personal story. It is as though she exists for him. Eventually, he tries to meet her to consummate their relationship, but she fights him off at the last minute and he is immediately angered. They never see each other again while either is in Ostrava.



After he leaves the mines, Jahn floats around. He does not make a serious commitment in his life after the trials that have happened to him. Instead, when he meets Helena Zamenek, he decides to seduce her solely because she is the wife of Patel Zamenek, the man who led the charge to condemn him and throw him out of the Socialist Party. However, he learns that even this attempt at revenge is ill-fated because Patel no longer cares for his wife and wants a divorce from her. Her one-night stand with Jahn convinces her that divorce is best and rather than avenge this man, Jahn realizes he has actually helped him.

This news makes Jahn distraught, but Helena tries to commit suicide when she learns what has happened. In the end, Jahn realizes that his entire life has been a joke and utterly fruitless.

Part One: Ludvik

Part One: Ludvik Summary

Ludvik Jahn has returned to Moravia, which is where he grew up as a boy. He feels no emotion, but sees its monuments in an aggressive and negative light. He is a man on a mission and when he checks into the hotel, he realizes that this bed will not work to his advantage. He sets off to the local hospital to find Mr. Kostka, who greets him surprised. When Kostka invites him back to his apartment, he realizes that this setting is much more appropriate and asks to borrow the flat for the afternoon, which Kostka agrees to.

Kostka has to return to work, but Jahn asks him to recommend a barber. When he enters the shop, a woman that he was deeply in love with for many years, although it is unclear whether she recognizes him or not since they haven't seen one another in fifteen years, greets him. She gives him a clean shave and afterwards, Jahn calls Kostka to ask him the name of the barber. It is Lucie Sebetka, a woman that deeply influenced Jahn's life for a period of time.

Part One: Ludvik Analysis

Initially, the reader is confused as to Jahn's intentions and motivations. He holds the answers close to him as he wanders around his hometown, gloomily considering the landscape. His importance on a hotel room seems mysterious, but we will learn that his need for a clean, perfect hotel room is anything but admirable.

Jahn runs into a woman that defined him and was his only real shot at true love in his life. Yet despite his shock and ethereal connection to her body as she shaves him, he does little to acknowledge or interact with her. Instead, he remains floated around her, separated and apart. He doesn't talk to her or try to even speak her name.



Part Two: Helena

Part Two: Helena Summary

Helena is planning to go to bed early tonight since she will be away for the next two days, leaving her daughter Zdena alone. She recalls how she fell in love with her husband, Pavel and their past history together as devout members of the Socialist Party. She remembers all the reasons she fell in love and married him, although now he claims that they did not marry for love, but out of Party discipline.

She wants to find something to wear that will flatter her figure best. She works at a radio station and is well aware that her colleagues aren't very happy with her there. They call her a bitch and oftentimes never speak to her, but she doesn't care. Her biggest loyalty is to the Party and she believes she can tell it all of her most intimate thoughts without it betraying her. It's the only thing she really talks to anymore since she never speaks with Pavel or her daughter Zdena. She is thirty and meets Jahn one day while setting up an interview for her radio broadcast and wanted more information on his institute. When she meets him, she feels her youth coming out from the shadows and starts to fall madly in love with him. She says that she drinks in all the sadness from his face and realizes that he is in love with her, too. She says that she is going to Moravia to see the Ride of the Kings and when he tells her that this is his hometown, they agree to meet although she is a married woman.

Pavel has told Helena that he wants to meet and talk, reconnecting again like they used to in the past. But for Helena, she believes it's too late to save their relationship and that she is mentally breaking from Pavel in order to be with Jahn.

Part Two: Helena Analysis

Now, we realize that Jahn is in Moravia to meet a married woman named Helena. His hotel room is not sufficient because he wants to initiate an affair with her and the dismal setting of a used hotel room is not sufficient for his preferred environment. For Helena, however, she believes that Jahn is completely in love with her and that her husband has suddenly turned to her again to reconnect as well. In her mind, she has to choose between two men for her future. Helena is a strong woman who is devoutly committed to the Party since she is separated from her family and in particular from her husband. However, this perspective is completely wrong as she will learn in the upcoming days.



Part Three: Ludvik

Part Three: Ludvik Summary

Jahn goes wandering through his hometown. Everywhere he looks, he sees dejection and chipped, cracked things instead of the beauty of anything. The town resembles Ostrava for him and he cannot bear to think about it, so he turns around and walks in another direction to avoid it. He realizes that he is thinking about Ostrava after his meeting with Lucie and is projecting dismal images onto his landscape because of the memory.

Jahn then recalls the events that lead him to meet Lucie. At the time, he was quite taken with another woman named Marketa. She took everything very seriously and didn't understand jokes. Jahn, at the time, is a young man still trying to determine who he wants to be and has a number of different facades for different people. He doesn't take anything very seriously and is always joking around.

Marketa is sent to a two-week training camp supported by the Socialist Party. Jahn is not happy with her attending the camp partly because of its Party propaganda and party because he had wanted to spend the same two weeks with her while he was on a break from the University. Nevertheless, Jahn isn't in love with Marketa. He is just smitten with her because she is the only woman on his horizon at the time and to be without a woman is intolerable for him. He sends her a postcard while she is at the camp, making sarcastic remarks about the Party and its beliefs. Afterwards, she is curt to him despite his long, lengthy letters to her in camp.

When Jahn returns to the University, Party officials who question him about the postcard summon him. He realizes that he is in big trouble and hurries to see a man named Zamenek, who knows both Jahn and Marketa very well and who Jahn hopes will understand the lightness of the joke that Jahn had made to Marketa. For Jahn, Zamenek becomes his only hope of salvation. However, all hope is lost when Zamenek himself is the one that leads the passionate charge to have Jahn unanimously thrown out of the Party and out of the University as well.

Since he is kicked out of the University, he is also devoid of the right to defer military service and so finds himself in an ugly suburb of Ostrava, reporting for camp. It is a dejected, lonely place and Jahn is utterly alone. Although he tries to convince the unit's political commissar that his being there is a huge mistake, Jahn eventually resolves himself to his fate of being a Party outcast with the others. All of the lines from his past are cut completely and he finds himself living in a "pause without a determined end." He starts to make friends, including a detainee named Honza, who he likes best. Together, they form a friendship and hang out together during their rare nights out. They are paid during their time in camp and they can spend the extra money however they wish, which is often on girls and alcohol.



During one of Jahn's leaves from camp, he is walking around Ostrava and spots Lucie. He is not certain why he was immediately drawn to her, but perhaps it was her melancholy slowness that attracted him to her. Nevertheless, he cannot take his eyes off of her and follows her around the courtyard. He sits next to her through an entire movie and when it is over, strikes up a conversation with her. He walks her to her apartment and agrees to send her a postcard when he will get his next reprieve from camp so they can meet.

After he meets Lucie, Jahn starts to feel human again. He feels like Lucie has silenced his internal tears from crying. Although Lucie is only nineteen at the time, she is a serious woman much older than her years. He starts to bring books and read aloud to Lucie, expanding her world through literature. After one particularly eloquent poetic reading, Lucie holds Jahn and cries and cries. Despite this emotional outburst, Jahn never thinks to ask Lucie more about it. He only wonders.

Jahn explains his reactions and relationships to others a little better. For him, he sees all people as potential candidates for belonging in the room that condemned him from the Party when he was back at the University. He understands that he never gives any of these new people a chance to redeem themselves, but he still cannot get past the idea that any of them will and could condemn him at any time. However, at the time that he was in love with Lucie, he had not yet come to that conclusion.

When Jahn is not with Lucie, he starts to write to her. He cannot get her to write back to him, but instead she starts to greet him with flowers. At the time, Jahn is twenty-two and does not like anything that might question his masculinity, but he can't stop her from doing it. From then on, she continues to give him flowers consistently. Thanks to her flowers, Jahn decides to buy her some new dresses and shoes. Until he sees her in the dressing room, he has not viewed her as a sexual object but from then on, he cannot get the idea of a more physical relationship with her out of his mind. She is reluctant and sad when he suggests this idea, but he feels she is powerless and finally agrees.

After a year in Ostrava, Jahn has settled into something of a routine, thanks in large part to Lucie. One day, a man named Alexej shows up at camp whose father had been arrested, thus kicking him out of the Party as well. He tries to make friends with Jahn once he learns that Jahn used to be prominent in the Party as well, but Jahn rejects him completely. Also, a new "boy commander" has been established in his camp and the new commander is looking hard to find a way to demonstrate his strength and control by abusing his new men, including Jahn.

Jahn starts working extra Sunday and Saturday shifts in the hopes of getting a day off to go and visit Lucie in her apartment. When the day finally arrives, Jahn is terrifically excited. He arrives at her place, but she ultimately fights him and rejects him. He calms her down and assures her that the next time she will not dissuade him and that they will physically consummate their relationship.

The other detainees start to question whether Alexej is telling tales and spying on them. No one trusts him, although he swears he is not spying or betraying them. Meanwhile,



since she has not seen him for a long time, Lucie starts to visit him at the prison gate, watching him. When he goes to talk with her, Lucie apologizes for the other evening and asks that Jahn not be sad or angry with her. He tells her that he is not sure when he can see her again and so from then on, Lucie comes to visit him nearly every day. Her visits make Jahn feel as though he is loved and appreciated.

It is impossible for Jahn to get another day away from the camp, so he manages to escape (at great peril) from the camp to spend an evening with Lucie. However, once she gets there, she again refuses him and starts to violent fight him. They fight again and he tells her to leave the miner's room where he has secured their meeting place. Walking back into camp later, he is nearly caught, but recovers quickly. Yet once he gets back to his bed, he cannot sleep because he is so upset and realizes that he now has a life without love again because he has lost Lucie.

Yet now Jahn has seen Lucie again, after spending fifteen years searching for her. However, he has long stopped looking for her and inquiring after her whereabouts.

Part Three: Ludvik Analysis

Jahn is defined by his landscape. Even if the city or town looks beautiful, Jahn projects his own dismal outlook on life on the situation. However, Ostrava is an integral part of Jahn's life so when the reader learns more about this time in his life, we get a better idea about why Jahn is the way that he is, especially around other people. Lucie is obviously an important time in Jahn's life. However, the reader has to wonder why a person that held such importance for Jahn for such a long period of time. It seems that for Jahn, a person is only as good to him as the situation allows. He is not interested in them other than what they can do for him. He is selfish in this regard and it's not completely clear that he was especially giving and loving before the incident happened with the "joke." Why does Jahn try so hard to find Lucie for all those years and then utterly abandon the search, even when she is literally holding his head in her hands?

Part Four: Jaroslav

Part Four: Jaroslav Summary

Jaroslav is daydreaming about the Ride of the Kings and his time as a King. When he comes back to reality, he is lying on modern furniture of lacquered wood, which he hates. Jaroslav is upset that Jahn has come back into town and not only not come to see Jaroslav, but avoided him when their eyes met across town a few days ago. It distresses Jaroslav that he might be trying to block out his past rather than embracing it like Jaroslav does.

Jaroslav has tried to demonstrate and illustrate the importance of the Ride of the Kings to his son, Vladimir, but it seems that all of it is lost on him. He tries to tell him how important the folk songs and history are, but Vladimir essentially ignores him.

At one time, Jaroslav and Jahn were very close, bonded by folk music and both of their skill with cimbalom instruments. However, after Jahn is kicked out of the Party, he is invited to Jaroslav's wedding the next day and is not in the best mood. Jaroslav is etching out a career in music and thinks that Vlasta is the poor servant girl (though she is far from that in reality) that he fantasizes about in the folk music he sings about. In keeping with traditions and away from Christian traditions (to appease the strong control of the Party at the time), the wedding of Vlasta and Jaroslav follows the ancient wedding rituals rather than be in a Christian church.

After Jahn acts oddly at their wedding, he takes off for the camps and Jaroslav finds himself a successful musician. He is ashamed of his success in the face of Jahn and it separates them further. He reads an obituary that Jahn's mother has passed away, but on the day of the funeral, Jahn never arrives. His mother is buried in his father's family's tomb, a family that Jahn despises and rejected years ago. Since Jahn is in prison, he is unable to control any part of the burial process.

Jaroslav admits that he is always powerless around people because he has never found anyone more physically stronger than he is. He has found out that Vladimir is to be this year's honored King in the Ride of the Kings and is thrilled that his honor has arrived.

Part Four: Jaroslav Analysis

The discrepancy between Jaroslav and his family is obvious here. It is clear that Jaroslav values history, heritage and the imaginative versus the modern world that Vlasta and their son Vladimir prefer. No one in his family appreciates his love of the folk music or band that he plays in, despite his success over the years. Vlasta sees Jaroslav's imagination and dreams as extravagance and she disapproves of his daydreams as extravagant gestures.

Another layer of Jahn's personality and past is added to the story thanks to Jaroslav's perspective. He and Jahn were once good friends, bonding over folk music and traditional instruments. In addition, the reader learns about more tragedies that befell Jahn while he was in the prison. Although he rarely mentions his mother and family life, the impact that Jahn's mother's death and burial must have had on him is implicit.



Part Five: Ludvik

Part Five: Ludvik Summary

Jahn sleeps well that evening and although he has been jarred with the sight of Lucie, he has now retracted her image back to an abstract state. He has told himself that no matter how much he used to love her and how unique he thought she was, she was bound to that time period and the landscape in which he found her. In another time and place, she would not be worth as much to him as she did back then. As he says himself, what he loves most about a woman is what she is just for him, not what she is for herself. However, since he has seen her, Jahn feels utterly indifferent towards the imminent arrival of Helena — and this disturbs him.

He walks around town, looking for a great breakfast but is unable to find one. While wandering around, he stumbles across a new form of political meeting which simulates a baptism, but is fully secular to dissuade the local townspeople from going to religious services, which the Party disapproves of in general. In Jahn's opinion, the National Committee and the Party's requirements are far stricter than anything the Church had come up with so far.

Jahn finally relays the information that Helena is important to him only because of who her husband is — nothing more. In general, Jahn hates journalists and hates the radio, but since her husband is Zamenek, he has ignored his hatred in order to sleep with her and avenge Zamenek. When Helena arrives, Jahn immediately inundates her with "folksy" things that she swears she enjoys. He embarrasses himself consistently by telling her lies, such as the fact that he is wildly attracted to her when the opposite is in fact true. Ironically, throughout all of this, Helena calls Jahn a truly honest man.

He takes her back to Kostka's flat without any problem. While there, she is finally the Helena that he wants — utterly defenseless. He gets her drunk and starts to tell what to do. All the while, he must continue the charade of telling her how much he is attracted to her and how their commitment is real. He goes so far as to call her his "truth." While they are together, Jahn even tells her to describe her husband to highlight his presence during Jahn's supposed revenge. However, as soon as they are finished, Helena cannot leave fast enough for Jahn and he endures many uncomfortable hours until she finally leaves. When she finally leaves, he breathes in fresh air and longs to talk with Kostka and finally bring up the subject he is truly interested in: Lucie Sebetka.

Part Five: Ludvik Analysis

For most lovers about to meet with their partner, they would worry that they felt indifference towards the relationship in general. However, for Jahn, he doesn't want his indifference to potentially compromise his ability to consummate the physical relationship with Helena so that he can achieve his revenge against Zamenek. He even



goes so far as to ask Helena to describe Zamenek during their lovemaking in order to have his presence more concrete in the room during his supposed revenge. While they are together, Jahn only pictures Zamenek and relives the time when he was thrown out of the Party and all of the horrible things that happened to him then.

After the revenge is completed for Jahn, he only wants one thing: to speak with Kostka about Lucie. However, the news and story he is about to learn is not one that he wants to hear.



Part Six: Kostka

Part Six: Kostka Summary

Kostka comes out and calls Jahn his adversary. He met Jahn in 1947 during Party meetings. For Kostka, he was in trouble due to his devout Christian beliefs although true Party is godless and doesn't like a strong attention to religious movements. When he was asked to give up his Christian devotion during certain times of political power, his wife was thinking about their future and the future of their five-year-old child, but Kostka stayed by his thoughts instead. He believes that his place is where Jesus is and since Jesus is everywhere among men, he is welcome anywhere.

In order to escape more of the political persecutions, Kostka volunteers to go to a state farm, which is applauded by the Party. He feels reborn here and truly happy, earning his bread in a legitimate way. After he is there for a while, he starts to hear stories with the country children that a fairy is living among them. The children start to feel protective of her and leave her food to help her. They call her Vagabondella and take her under their care.

However, after a time, two men find the woman in the barn. It is Lucie and she is taken into the police station immediately. She is allowed to stay in the town and permitted to work so long as she works hard and honestly. The town learns more about Lucie and her past, learning that she was caught stealing flowers from a cemetery. The town of Ostrava condemns her, saying that there is nothing more abominable than stealing from the dead. However, Kostka agrees to take her under his wing and he starts to talk to her about Christianity and his beliefs. He doesn't push her, but eventually she tells him her story. She tells him all about a soldier who came to her and wanted to be physically intimate with her. She also tells him about a gang that she once belonged to (and the only girl). For the initiation, these boys rape her again and again, night after night, making physical love repellent to her. One evening, the police come and when they arrest some of the boys for theft, Lucie's position in the gang is well-known throughout the neighborhood and in her shame, she runs away to Ostrava.

Kostka is surprised that Jahn knows Lucie, but Jahn does not tell Kostka how intimately he once knew Kostka, nor that he was the "soldier" that she referred to. Instead, he mentally berates Jahn for not being able to forgive those people who have betrayed him in the past. He feels that Jahn is living in hell and for this reason, he pities him. However, it is now clear that Kostka broke Lucie's fear of physical love by taking her for himself, despite the fact that he was married with a wife and child. Because the relationship troubles him, he voluntarily moves and becomes a construction worker instead.

Lucie weeps desperately when Kostka says that he is going to leave, but after a few years, she finds a husband and settles down in the same town as him, saying that she has forgiven him.



Part Six: Kostka Analysis

Right from the start, the reader realizes that how Jahn perceives his friend Kostka is not at all how Kostka perceives him. He says that he doesn't not like Jahn, but he loves him as you love an adversary and someone who challenges you. Also, it is clear how devout Kostka is with his religious beliefs, despite the changing political tides that have affected him over the years.

Despite the fact that Jahn feels that he is higher than Kostka, he learns through Kostka's story that he achieved with Lucie in areas that Jahn could not. In addition, Jahn was once a miner and Kostka worked on a state farm and then became a bricklayer after his relationship with Lucie changed. Also, it's interesting to note that Kostka feels sorry for Jahn and pities him. When someone pities another person — especially when the other person is not aware of it — it wholly changes the relationship and perception of the relationship for the reader. However, Kostka is not the calm, religious man that he tries desperately to convince himself that he is. He cheats on his wife and no longer loves his wife, nor can he stand to be with her. However, he won't divorce her only because she has done no wrong to him so instead he leaves her alone and lives by himself instead.



Part Seven: Ludvik, Jaroslav, Helena

Part Seven: Ludvik, Jaroslav, Helena Summary

Now that Jahn has heard the full story of Lucie, he wants to leave for Prague first thing in the morning. However, he wakes up repeatedly throughout the night and when he finally falls asleep, he sleeps through the first train to Prague. The next train is not until two in the afternoon so now he is stuck in Moravia for the afternoon. He walks downstairs timidly, fearing that he runs into Helena, but she is already out of the town, getting more information for her radio show about the Ride of the Kings, which is today. He walks around, remembering the Lucie that he once knew. He is angry with himself that he did not try to find out more about Lucie, to better explain her reaction to physical love with their relationship. Jahn also admits that he never took Kostka seriously and now realizes that he succeeded where Jahn ultimately failed. Jahn knows that the only place he will be able to find food is at the festival, which he has studiously avoided for years.

Jaroslav wakes up and is incredibly tired. He feels sort of odd since his son will now be the King and he realizes his time has passed. Yet as the initiations and traditional calls begin, he accepts the changes and feels the honor that his own son was chosen to be the King of the festival, replacing the father.

Helena, meanwhile, is walking around the festival, floating on air. She feels that Jahn has saved her when she needed it most. She talks with her husband and finally agrees to give him a divorce, saying that she is love with another man — Ludvik Jahn. She and Zamenek agree to stay good friends instead of remain married.

Jahn is walking down the street at the Ride of the Kings and sees the king and immediately recognizes Lucie. However, just after seeing her, he is greeted by Zamenek.

Jaroslav is still suffering from fatigue. However, when he mentions to another townsman that Vladimir is the King in the festival today, which the townsman rejects. Vladimir, he tells him, is with Milos at the motorcycle races and cannot possibly be in the festival.

Jahn is stuck with Zamenek and his new girlfriend, Miss Broz. Jahn recognizes the arrogance that he knew in Zamenek in the past, but also learns that Zamenek is one of the most popular teachers at the university. Jahn feels significant emotions while he is talking with Zamenek because he realizes that his attempt at revenge will not be successful since Zamenek doesn't want his wife anymore anyways.

Jaroslav races down the street to view the king to determine whether or not it is Vladimir and cannot tell. He cannot determine if it is his son.

As Jahn, Zamenek and Miss Broz are walking down the street, they run into Helena and Jindra, a man that works with Helena at the radio station. Helena is surprised to see that



Jahn and Zamenek know each other and have known each other for years. Zamenek and Miss Broz leave together after greeting Helena, leaving Jahn, Helena and Jindra alone. Asking for time alone with Helena, Jahn tells her that he will never see her again and that their relationship is utterly over, that he does not love her at all.

Helena gets very, very upset. She feels that of all her years with Pavel, he did not betray her and hurt her as much as Jahn did in their one meeting. She curses him and begins to contemplate suicide. She finds Jindra's coat and takes all of the lethal drugs she can find in a bottle. As she believes she is dying, she allows Jindra to kiss her and feels finally, utterly free for the first time in her life.

Now that Jahn realizes how unsuccessful he has been, he wants to revoke his entire life. Everything has failed for him and he has failed in everything he attempted, including revenge on Zamenek. His entire life has been destroyed because of a joke and now he realizes that his life itself became a joke with his reaction to it. As he is sitting there, Jindra comes to him and hands him a letter from Helena. Jahn is reluctant to open it up to read the melodramatic emotions he is sure it contains. He takes his time, eating with Jindra and taking a vodka shot with him. When he finally opens the letter, he realizes it's a suicide note from Helena and he and Jindra race to save her. They race back to the place they last saw her and cannot find her anywhere. Finally, Jahn spots a country outhouse and there, he sees Helena fighting with her skirt.

Jahn believes that she is about to die, but Jindra stops him when he sees the bottle that Helena has chosen to take. Jindra uses the bottle to hide his laxatives, so rather than take a lethal dose of prescription drugs, Helena has instead taken a high amount of laxatives, which while uncomfortable, is not fatal.

Jaroslav comes home and confronts Vlasta about Vladimir's betrayal since he knows that she was in on the trick. She never turns around to face him and dismisses him, admitting everything and calling his love of the traditional music and heritage foolish. Jaroslav becomes so upset that he takes pieces of china from their cabinet and starts to smash them on the floor. These pieces of china become symbols of the modern world that Vlasta and Vladimir prefer to Jaroslav's world. She still never turns around. He leaves the house, realizing that something has snapped between him and Vlasta. He goes to lie down in a field and that's where Jahn finds him, asking if he could sit in with his band that afternoon.

The two of them go into town and play at a restaurant garden. They continue to play together just like old times. When the audience changes to a younger crowd that is uninterested in the folk music they are playing, Jaroslav wants to leave, but they stay to finish their set. Jaroslav still wants to leave and suddenly he has a heart attack in the room. Jahn holds his friend in his arms until finally after ten minutes, he lifts him and helps him to his feet, leading him to the ambulance waiting outside the restaurant for him.



Part Seven: Ludvik, Jaroslav, Helena Analysis

All of the characters are brought together in rotating stories in the final section. Together, their stories intertwine and it becomes more apparent why Jahn had to come back to Moravia to meet with Helena. Of course, he came into town to revenge a man by using his wife against him and instead ends his time with his old friend Jaroslav lying in his arms.

Helena is finally freed from her regimented, restricted life, although the pain that she feels does not appear like her path to redemption. The Ride of the Kings ultimately becomes the important folk setting that allows the major changes in each of these character's lives to occur. Jaroslav breaks from his family and stays in his imaginative, traditional world, while Jahn realizes his entire life to date has been a joke while the King of the festival he believes to be Lucie, riding high above all of them.



Characters

Ludvik Jahn

The main character of the novel, Jahn's life is significantly altered after sending a sarcastic postcard to his then-girlfriend about the Socialist Party. The chain of events that follow the outrage the postcard causes change Jahn and his personality forever, as well as adversely affecting the individuals he comes in contact with throughout his life. However, the flaws and negative aspects of Jahn's life are as much his own fault as the fault of the people he blames his problems on. His bitterness and inability to forgive compound his problems. He loses the ability (if he ever had it) to listen to other people and relate to them. For this reason, he uses for his own personal use and alienates people rather than try to establish beneficial relationships with them. His relationships with others are perfectly typified in his relationship with Helena. He uses her for his own vengeful means, wholly ignoring her true feelings of love for him. He uses her in order to gain revenge on a man named Janvik, her husband, and nearly destroys her due to his cold, removed bitter state. In this end, Jahn realizes that his bitterness has caused him to live a life that is completely unfulfilling and unsatisfactory.

Lucie Sebetka

Jahn's only true love interest in the novel, Lucie is a poor girl with a shattered past. Jahn does not find out the true and full story of Lucie until many years later from Kostka. Succeeding where Jahn ultimately fails, Kostka finds out the true story of Lucie, which better explains her reaction to any physical love Jahn proposes. Because Kostka truly loves Lucie for who she is and learns all about her and her story, he finds out her past. Ludvik, on the other hand, loves Lucie as much for the situation that he was in (she is his single loyal ray of hope and light while he is in the prison mines) as for her person. Jahn's inability to truly love Lucie for herself is the reason for their failed relationship and his failed shot at love.

At the end of the novel, Jahn believes that he sees Lucie's figure as the veiled King in the Ride of the Kings. This thought is never confirmed or denied, but it is evident that despite the fact that Jahn says he has left Lucie in his memory as an abstract thing, he is still looking for and seeing her when he travels in his hometown. It is interesting that Lucie moves to Jahn and Kostka's hometown, although since we do not have her perspective or dialogue in the novel, the reader is not sure whether this is a coincidence, a move orchestrated by her new husband or motivated by either Jahn or Kostka's memory. Having more information from Lucie would have added a much-needed perspective in the novel, although it might have also detracted from keeping Jahn as the central character in the novel.



Helena Zamenek

The other central love figure in the novel, Helena is ultimately Lucie's exact counterfigure in the story. While Jahn believes he truly loves Lucie despite not knowing her or her true story, he is fully aware that he is only simulating love for Helena because of who Helena is. In the end, Jahn learns yet again the fatal flaw of not really listening and learning the full story about a person. His perfect revenge is wasted because the man he is trying to avenge - Janvik - does not care for his wife anymore and longs to divorce her. When Jahn realizes he has not only not gained revenge, but assisted his mortal enemy by sleeping with his wife, he feels utterly dejected. To top it off, Helena becomes so distraught that Jahn does not love her that she attempts suicide.

Jaroslav

Another character in Ludvik's life, Jaroslav provides a unique window into how Jahn was as a younger person. Meanwhile, Jaroslav represents simplicity and the charm of an imaginative man who remains in their hometown of Moravia. He loves his folk band and music, setting low goals for his life overall. Although his life is at odds with the rest of his family and is not idyllic by any means, his simple straightforward desires represent other options that Jahn could have had with his life. Both Jaroslav and Jahn share the same powerlessness over their life. They are both pawns to events and people they think they cannot control, but are actually inherent flaws in their personality. Although Jahn has the power to forgive, he is blind to see it and Jaroslav is physically and emotionally powerful, yet never takes advantage of his appearance and allows himself to be dictated by others.

Kostka

Ultimately, Kostka represents everything that Jahn could have had (especially with Lucie) if he were a different person. While Kostka believes in Christianity (and suffers for his beliefs politically), forgiveness, love and truly getting to understand a person and their story are important tenants in his life. Jahn does not understand this. In the beginning of the novel, Jahn believes that Kostka is a small, weak individual who is indebted to Jahn for helping him find a job when he was at odds with the Party. However, as the novel progresses, we learn that Jahn has much to learn from Kostka and his happiness and attempt at true love could have been more successful if he had done what Kostka did. If Lucie was Jahn's hope and symbol of light while he was in detention, Kostka becomes Lucie's light and the person that helps her to recover after a shattered physical past.

Alexej

A man who worked in the prison mines with Jahn, he is also kicked out of the Socialist Party because his father was thought to be a spy. He tries to stay true to the party, but



no one trusts him in the camp and he consequently alienates himself from everyone. Since his identity is so largely defined by the Party and he is so thoroughly hated and distrusted by the other miners (who could potentially be his new comrades) he commits suicide in a dejected, pathetic state.

Jindra

Helena's admirer and colleague at the radio station, she attempts to kill herself using some of the prescription pills that he always carries in his coat. In the end, he has replaced a lethal drug with the innocuous laxatives he is required to take and thus ends up inadvertently saving her.

Vladimir

Jaroslav's son, Vladimir is supposed to follow in his father's footsteps and become the chosen male King during the Ride of the Kings. A great honor for Jaroslav, Vladimir rejects the idea and resents being put in the situation. Instead, he fools his father and the town and goes off to the motorcycle races in the next town with a friend. He resents his father's imagination and preference to live in the antiquated world (versus the modern one where he resides) and resents that he has been given an ideal life of ease.

Patel Zamenek

The husband of Helena, Patel is now a university teacher and is a favorite among his students. His political views are utterly different from Jahn's now, but he is still the same man who passionately led the charge against Jahn to throw him out of the Party. Jahn has lived only because of his extreme hatred for Patel and is consequently Jahn's source for all his revengeful passions.

Miss Broz

Representing youth, beauty and the modern world of possibilities, Miss Broz is a university student who has fallen in love with Patel and is having an open affair with him. She is attractive, desirable and the symbol of why Zamenek wants a divorce — and what Jahn cannot seem to attain.



Objects/Places

Ostrava

The mining town where Lucie and Jahn meet, Ostrava is where Jahn is sent after being ejected from the university and from the Party in general.

Morava

Ludvik's hometown and where he returns after many years in a hopeful attempt to gain revenge on Zamenek, which fails miserably

University

Where Jahn attends school before being thrown out of the Party. He has had to work hard to gain entrance to the University and used family ties to his advantage to get in there. When he is thrown out, all is lost and his planned life destiny is destroyed.

Radio station

Where Helena works and where she meets Ludvik, it is Helena's only arena of power and control in her dejected life.

Prison Mines

After Jahn is ejected from the University and Party, he is sent to the prison mines with other individuals who have been rejected by the Party. He works here for 8 years.

Ride of the Kings

An important cultural festival that transpires every year and provides the backdrop for the final chapters of the novel; the Ride is critically important to Jaroslav and his family.

Costume of the king

On the morning of the Ride of the King, Jaroslav's son Vladimir fools his father and rejects the honor, putting an imposter in the costume and allowing his father to talk to him/her instead. The costume itself becomes a symbol for Jaroslav of how disconnected he truly is from his family and how his appreciation of the antiquated world of folklore is utterly lost on them.



Jindra's Prescription Pills

When Helena considers suicide, she remembers that Jindra also has a number of prescription pills in his coat. She choose a bottle filled with what she believes are lethal drugs and takes them all. Fortunately for her, however, he has replaced the dangerous drugs with laxatives instead, thus saving her life.

Bouquet of Flowers

When Jahn is with Lucie, she brings him a fresh bouquet of flowers picked from a cemetary to give to him since he buys her expensive gifts and this is all she can afford. She will stand at the prison gate and hand him a bouquet each day.

Lucie's Apartment

Jahn escapes from the detention camp for the evening to have a night alone with Lucie in an attempt to consummate their relationship physically. They meet at her apartment and Jahn is taken by the decorations and environment as much as he is by Lucie herself. However, the scene continues to be more and more dismal until finally they do not succeed thanks to Lucie's past relationships (which Jahn doesn't find out about until much later).



Themes

Powerlessness

One of the things that Jahn and Jaroslav have in common is a sense of powerlessness, although Jahn does not openly admit or acknowledge his lack of power over his own life. He attempts to excuse it by looking at the things that have happened to him as a potential key in the mystery of deciphering why he exists at all. However, both men handle their powerlessness differently.

Despite his enormous size, Jaroslav is essentially a weak person. He says that he will only be aggressive around people bigger than him, but since no one is ever larger than Jaroslav, he is never aggressive or proactive. Instead, he is easily manipulated and mocked by those around him, especially his wife Vlasta, and resented by his son Vladimir. He is also powerless against the rising tide of the modern world that threatens his imaginative world that he loves and the adored traditional folklore music that he plays. He resents modern things and its inevitable victory over the imaginative, antiquated world that he enjoys.

Jahn, meanwhile, is powerless throughout his life. His planned destiny and life course are thrown awry thanks to a single sarcastic comment and from then on is powerless to change his life or his overall outlook. Kostka argues that Jahn could save himself by forgiving those around him, but Jahn cannot even fathom this possibility and thus remains chained to the ill-fated repercussions of living a life solely based on revenge and bitterness.

Influence of the Landscape

Jahn is heavily influenced by his landscape and the situation that surrounds him. When he enters Morava after being away for such a long time, he wanders around wasting time until another appointment and is struck by the desolation and grimness of the landscape. He projects his own feelings onto his environment and only sees the negative and ugly aspects of the things that surround him. His moods are most accurately described when he is also describing his own surroundings.

When Jahn falls in love with Lucie, he remarks that he is less in love with her as a person than with the situation in which he has found Lucie. After all, he is dejected, rejected and lonely, having been kicked out of the Party and with little chance for a successful future without its blessing. Lucie does not have any entanglements with the Party and her physical dejection seems to mirror his own problems. He is suffering a hopeless life on his own until he meets Lucie, whom he feels at the time to be the ideal mate for his current situation. She becomes a part of his landscape as much as the prison mines and hardship are for him at the time, and Jahn defines her only in these



terms. To the reader, it seems that everywhere Jahn travels, he is defined by his landscape and finds the negative aspects of his environment.

Redemption

For many of the characters in the novel, their lives change significantly at some point. Each is given a kind of hardship that they must recover from and their reaction to the event spins their life in a new direction. In the case of Lucie, for example, she was attacked and raped repeatedly by men that she had previously considered her friends and protectors. Although she languishes for years, she finds freedom after her long talks with Kostka and restores her belief in physical love after finding a man that appreciates her as a person (rather than Jahn who appreciates only the benefits she can provide him within the environment he is currently suffering in). After her talks with Kostka, she learns about Christianity and is able to use its benefits in her life to forgive.

For Helena, redemption only comes through desperation. She is stuck in a loveless marriage where she is underappreciated and leading a dismal existence. When Jahn rejects and deceives her, she finds her freedom and redemption by taking control of her own life and attempting suicide. In the final moments she believes that she will be alive, she finally feels a release from the years of negativity and rejection from those around her.

Jahn, finally, never finds his redemption. He instead lives in a permanent dismal state when one bad situation after another presents themselves. If he could forgive the past and excuse what he had gone through (just as Lucie and Helena have), he might be able to restore his life and find some satisfaction in it. If he forgives Zamenek and the Party's rejection of him, he could have also moved on with his life and chosen a different, less vengeful direction.

Style

Point of View

The point of view throughout the novel is mostly from the perspective of Jahn, Jaroslav, Helena and Kostka. Interestingly, although Lucie is an integral character, she is never given her own point of view during the novel. It would have been wonderful to hear Lucie's perspective in the novel, especially to know whether or not she recognizes Jahn when he walks back into Moravia. Also, to hear her current lifestyle now with her husband would enlighten the reader as to whether or not she would be interested in hearing or talking to Jahn again.

Since Jahn is not very open with the readers during his time in the novel, other friends, such as Jaroslav and Kostka, better describe much of his history and past events. These characters and their dialogues are integral to the success of the novel and for flushing out more information about the important characters. The most obvious character whose voice is missing is Lucie's for the reader. However, since Jahn was never able to understand or hear her own story, it is fitting that the novel keeps her silent as well, forcing the reader to assume her current situation and thoughts only through the perceptions and comments of other characters like Kostka.

Setting

The setting of the novel mainly occurs in two places. The first place is Moravia, where the current events take place. It's important that the meeting with Helena takes place in Jahn's hometown as it brings together all of the main characters in the one location that they all share in common. Also, Moravia is the only place where the Ride of the Kings occurs. In addition to the Moravian setting, this important cultural festival highlights the heritage and music that both Jahn and Jaroslav share, while bringing Helena to the festival for her work. Against this melodramatic backdrop, the final dramas of the novel occur.

It is very important that Jahn returns to Moravia to orchestrate his actions. After all, it was in Moravia where he suffered the events that changed his life, so it is only fitting that he would return there to exact revenge on Zamenek. In any other town, it might not seem as appropriate or fulfilling to Jahn. On the other hand, since Lucie now lives in Moravia, it adds another interesting element to the story that Jahn is here to right a wrong done to him so long ago that thrust him into Lucie's path to begin with. Of course, learning her full story from Kostka answers questions and provides closure to Jahn that he could not have received had he been in any other town.



Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is very casual. When Helena is given the stage, for example, her parts do not have accurate punctuation. She does not have periods to stop her sentences, but instead commas separate the thoughts as if she is talking constantly to the reader. Since Helena is a strong, independent person, this kind of punctuation and language accurately reflects her character as a whole.

Conversely, if Helena is up front with her statements and the reader can easily see her motivations and emotions, Jahn opens up slowly to the reader, even though he is technically the main character of the novel. It is quite a bit into the book before we understand Jahn's motivations and even the true motivations behind his desire to meet up with Helena. At first, a dirty hotel room might not seem appealing to a lover meeting his partner, but then we finally learn that Jahn is there to attempt revenge on another man, but it takes quite a bit of time before this information is revealed. This is also indicative of Jahn since he is reluctant to open up to people or allow them to be closer to him.

Structure

The structure of the novel flips around from present-day to events that have happened in the past. For the most part, a landscape or image will trigger Jahn to recollect things that have happened in the past, whereas other characters like Jaroslav or Kostka will describe events that have happened in the past with little prompting. For this reason, it can be disconcerting for readers in the first few sentences before they can determine whether they are in the present-day environment with the character or somewhere in the past.

However, despite these deviations to the past that give the reader a better understanding of current events, the overall plot of the novel remains linear, focusing around the revenge that Jahn is attempting to exact on Zamenek through his wife. The other characters are mentioned in relation to Jahn and his events of the past. For this reason, the main plot line and structure of the novel is what Jahn does and sees during his visit back to Moravia after decades away from his hometown.



Quotes

"And because my body had dissolved in space and all I could feel was the touch of her fingers on my face, I imagined that the gentle hands holding (turning, stroking) my head did so as if it were unattached to my body, as if it existed independently and the sharp razor waiting on the nearby table were there merely to consummate that beautiful independence." p. 9 Part I - Ludvik

"...I've always believed that man is one and indivisible and that only the petty bourgeois divides him hypocritically into public self and private self, such is my credo, I've always lived by it, and that time was no exception." p. 21 Part Two - Helena

"...but he was so nice to me, and we understood each other, he wasn't one of those intellectual types I dislike, he had a rich life behind him, he'd even worked in the mines, that's the kind of person I really liked, I told him, but the thing that excited me most was he was from Moravia, he'd even played in a cimbalom band, I couldn't believe my ears, it was like hearing the leitmotiv of my life again, seeing my youth return from the shadows, my heart and soul went out to him." p.23 Part Two - Helena

"Towns have a propensity to produce mirror images of each other, and this view (I had known it from childhood, and it had no significance for me at all) suddenly reminded me of Ostrava, that temporary dormitory of a mining town, full of deserted buildings and dirty streets leading into the void." p.29 Part Three - Ludvik

"No. They were all real: I was not a hypocrite, with one real face and several false ones. I had several faces because I was young and didn't know who I was or wanted to be. (I was frightened by the differences between one face and the next; none of them seemed to fit me properly, and I groped my way clumsily among them.)" p.33 Part Three - Ludvik

"I stood in a courtyard with the other conscripts of my unit, strangers all; in the gloom of initial mutual unfamiliarity, the harshness and the strangeness of others comes sharply to the fore; that is how it was to us; the only human bond we had was our uncertain future, and conjecture was rampant." p.48 Part Three - Ludvik

"I came to realize that there was no power capable of changing the image of my person lodged somewhere in the supreme court of human destinies; that this image (even though it bore no resemblance to me) was much more real than my actual self; that I was its shadow and not it mine; that I had no right to accuse it of bearing no resemblance to me, but rather that it was I who was guilty of the non-resemblance; and that the non-resemblance was my cross, which I could not unload on anyone else, which was mine alone to bear." p.50 Part Three - Ludvik

"That was what made our position so unusual: all we knew was drudgery and fatigue, we had our heads shaved clean every two weeks to rid them of all thoughts of self-esteem, we were the disinherited with nothing more to look forward to in life, but we had money." p.57 Part Three - Ludvik



"Yes, it must have been Lucie's singular slowness that fascinated me, a slowness radiating a resigned consciousness that there was nowhere to hurry to and that it was useless to reach impatiently toward anything. Yes, maybe it really was that melancholy slowness that made me follow her..." p.65 Part Three - Ludvik

"You must admit; it's hard to live with people willing to send you to exile or death, it's hard to become intimate with them, it's hard to love them." p.76 Part Three - Ludvik

"Youth is terrible: it is a stage trod by children in buskins and a variety of costumes mouthing speeches they've memorized and fanatically believe but only half understand. And history is terrible because it so often ends up a playground for the immature; a playground for the young Nero, a playground for the young Bonaparte, a playground for the easily roused mobs of children whose simulated passions and simplistic poses suddenly metamorphose into a catastrophically real reality." p.87 Part Three - Ludvik

"I am obedient. I can never say no to those weaker than myself. And because I am six feet two and can lift a two-hundred pound sack with one hand, in all my life I have yet to find anyone I can resist." p.153 Part Four - Jaroslav

"And I was horrified at the thought that things conceived in error are just as real as things conceived with good reason and of necessity." p.288 Part Seven - Ludvik, Jaroslav, Helena

"And then I realized how powerless I was to revoke my own joke when throughout my life as a whole I was involved in a joke much more vast (all-embracing for me) and utterly irrevocable." p.289 Part Seven - Ludvik, Jaroslav, Helena



Topics for Discussion

If Jahn had simply asked Lucie more about her background and experience with physical love in the past, how would things have changed for both of them?

What role does Kostka play in the novel? Why is his character crucial despite his limited interaction with the other characters and even with Jahn himself?

Why is Lucie caught picking flowers in a cemetery? Why does she pick them?

Explain why Jahn is thrown out of the Socialist Party and why his proclivity towards independent thinking has contributed to his dismissal.

Explain why Jahn's mother is buried somewhere that he despises and why these family ties are so upsetting to Jahn.

Explain how old Moravian folk tunes play a role in the lives of Jaroslav and Jahn.

Why does Jahn choose to return to Morava to meet with Helena versus a larger city like Prague?

After not seeing Lucie for so many years, why does Jahn not speak to her or visit her again when he spots her and she gives him a haircut?

Why does Vladimir refuse the Ride of the Kings and elaborately plot to fool his father instead?

Is there a future for the characters in the novel if they do not belong to the Socialist Party? Which characters best represent a destiny with the Party's blessing — and which ones show how to live without it?