

The Lacuna Study Guide

The Lacuna by Barbara Kingsolver

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Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: Kingsolver, Barbara. *The Lacuna*. London: Faber & Faber, 2009. Kindle AZW file.

The Lacuna tells the life story of Harrison Shepherd, a man born in the United States but raised in Mexico. Harry's literary career in the United States during the late 1940s was destroyed because of his past experiences working closely with influential Communists in Mexico including Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, and Leon Trotsky.

Part 1 covers the years 1929 – 1931, during which Harry was a child growing up in Mexico with his mother Salome who had left his father in Washington DC to be with a Mexican businessman named Enrique. An archivist informs the reader that the opening section was written as the first chapter of a memoir by Harrison Shepherd but that he never finished writing it. Instead, the reader learns his life story through a series of diaries and correspondence.

The story continued on Isla Pixol where Harry discovered an underwater cave known as a lacuna. After studying the tides, Harry discovered the ideal time to swim through the cave and discover what was on the other side: ruins from the Aztec empire. Harry's mother decided to leave Enrique and move to Mexico City with Harry, who found work as a plaster mixer for the painter Diego Rivera. At the end of Part 1, Harry's mother sent him back to the United States to live with his father.

Part 2 covered the years 1932 – 1934, which Harry spent in Washington DC. Harry attended a military school called Potomac Academy where he developed a close friendship with another student Billy Boorzai, nicknamed Bull's Eye. Harry became more aware of his homosexuality through his attraction to Bull's Eye. Part 2 ended with a note from the archivist who reveals to the reader that Harry did not want his diaries to be published and had requested that they all be destroyed. Although most of the diaries survived despite Harry's wishes, the next in the series was burned by the archivist under Harry's instructions.

Part 3 covered the years 1935 – 1941 and took place in Mexico. Harry was expelled from Potomac Academy but the events that caused this are not revealed to the reader as they were covered in the diary that was burned. Harry was working once again for Diego Rivera and his wife Frida Kahlo. Harry developed a close friendship with Frida during these years. The Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky was granted political asylum in Mexico and came to live with the Riveras. After the discovery of Harry's ability to type and speak two languages, he became one of Trotsky's secretaries. In his free time, Harry wrote a novel set in ancient Mexico.

This period in Harry's life came to the end after Trotsky was assassinated by agents of Joseph Stalin, the Russian dictator. Harry's diaries and his novel were confiscated by the Mexican police and he believed they were lost forever. Frida sent Harry to the United States to deliver some of her artwork to New York because she was concerned

that his extensive written records would put him under the suspicion of the Mexican authorities in relation to Trotsky's death.

Part 4 took place in Asheville, North Carolina during the years 1941 – 1947. At the start of Part 4, the archivist reveals her identity. She is Violet Brown, friend and former secretary to Harrison Shepherd during his adult years in the United States. After losing all of his writing in Mexico, Harry stopped keeping such detailed records, so Violet takes over his life story at this point. Harry settled in Asheville after leaving Mexico and took up a job teaching Spanish at the local college. During World War Two, as a result of his experience working for Frida Kahlo, he was hired by the government to move valuable artworks to safer locations. After a long delay, Harry opened a crate given to him by Frida when he left Mexico and discovered that it contained all of his diaries and his novel. Harry began keeping diaries again after the old ones were found. Harry published his first novel "Vassals of Majesty" to great acclaim and he became a well-known writer. Unable to cope with the attention brought about by his success, Harry hired Violet Brown to be his secretary. Violet joined Harry on a trip to Mexico to do research for a new novel.

Part 5 continues in Asheville, North Carolina during the years 1948 – 1950. After WW2, the United States government attempted to prevent anyone with a connection to Communism from having influence in the country. As a result of most of Harry's time spent amongst Communists in Mexico, as well as the contents of his novels which were said to be "un-American," Harry was called to testify to the House Un-American Activities Committee. Harry received a lot of hate mail and his next novel was a failure. He was warned that criminal proceedings were likely to follow, so he hatched a plan to return to Isla Pixol where he had lived as a child. Once there, he faked his own death by swimming through the lacuna and convincing the locals that he had drowned. Years later, Violet Brown published his diaries so that the truth about his life and work could finally be known.

Part 1

Summary

The Lacuna tells the life story of fictional protagonist Harrison Shepherd, weaving his life into factual events in Mexico and the United States in the first half of the twentieth century alongside interactions with real historical figures such as Frida Kahlo and Leon Trotsky.

Part 1 covers the years 1929-1931 and takes place in Mexico. It begins with a section titled "Isla Pixol, Mexico, 1929," which is written in the style of narrative fiction, unlike the diary entries that follow for much of the rest of the novel. During this opening section, the name of the narrator is not revealed.

On the island, the narrator and his mother were frightened by the noise made by monkeys in the nearby trees, who they referred to as "howlers" because of the awful shrieking noises they made, which were quickly picked up, imitated, and repeated by the other monkeys around them. The narrator moved to Isla Pixol with his mother after she left his father in Washington DC in order to run away with a Mexican businessman, Enrique, with whom she was having an affair. The mother believed Enrique would marry her, but after many months on the island no marriage had taken place. The mother told the boy to write down everything that happened to them so that when they were gone someone would know their story.

Leandro, the cook, gave the boy some diving goggles and he spent his free time in the ocean observing the fish. The boy went with his mother into town on a Saturday night during Holy Week to hear the music. His mother teased him that by the following year he would have a girlfriend, but he insisted he would not.

The boy became friends with Leandro the cook who let him help out with his tasks in the kitchen and Leandro taught the boy how to cook traditional Mexican food. The narrator did not attend school, instead relying only on the books in Enrique's library. One night, the boy and his mother tried to escape from Enrique but they had no money and no place to go. The boy's mother bought him a notebook to write in and they went back to Enrique's house.

The second section of Part 1 is an "Archivist's Note." This section opens by explaining that the first section is about a man named Harrison Shepherd, a United States citizen who grew up in Mexico. The "archivist," who does not reveal their identity at this stage except for the initials VB, explains that the opening section of the novel is part of a memoir that Harrison Shepherd began writing in 1947, but never finished. The archivist explains that Shepherd kept diaries throughout his life and that he gave up writing his memoir because the next diary in the series was missing. The archivist explains that the missing diary was later found and that if it had not been found, there would be no story to tell.



The next section is called “Private journal Mexico North America” and consists of Harrison Shepherd’s diaries covering the years 1929-1930, which he spent in Mexico. He discovered an underwater cave in the ocean near his house and Leandro explained that it was a lacuna, an opening between one space and another. Leandro warned Harrison not to go into the lacuna in case he drowned. Harrison studied the tides so that he knew when the lacuna would be accessible and practiced holding his breath for as long as he could. One day, at the full moon, Harrison swam through the lacuna and found some ancient Aztec ruins as well as human remains. In order to find out more about what he had seen, Harrison started reading books about Mexican history, the Aztecs, and the arrival of the Spanish explorer Hernan Cortes.

One night Harrison’s mother told him to pack his things in secret because they were both leaving the island and running away from Enrique. Harrison had to leave without saying goodbye to Leandro. He wrote him a letter in his notebook, knowing that Leandro would not have been able to understand because he could not read.

The next section is named “Mexico City, 1930.” Harrison and his mother began living in a small apartment in Mexico City, paid for by his mother’s new lover whom Harrison referred to as Mr. Produce The Cash or Mr. P.T. Cash for short. Harrison continued reading voraciously and learned all about the Spanish invasion of Mexico and the destruction of the Azteca civilization by the invaders.

Harrison failed the exams to go to a school known as the Preparatoria and instead had to begin at a school for “the deaf mutes, cretins, and children of bad character” (60). Harrison found his lessons boring and beneath his level of intelligence so he started truanting. One day at the market he saw a beautiful servant girl following a garishly dressed woman around the market. An acquaintance at the market explained to Harrison that the extravagantly dressed woman was married to a famous painter, who was painting a mural at the National Palace.

Harrison visited the National Palace to look at the mural and ended up getting a job as a plaster mixer for the painter, Diego Rivera. The job came to an end because Diego went to America. One day Harrison offered to help the painter’s wife carry her shopping home from the market and she accepted his help. At her house, he met Diego Rivera again and reminded him that he used to work for him mixing plaster. Diego offered him another job. Soon afterwards, Diego once again left Mexico for the United States.

Analysis

The monkeys that the narrator and his mother encounter on Isla Pixol are a central metaphor for the rest of the novel to follow. The monkeys hear one monkey making the sound and then they all join in, imitating the frightening screams and howls throughout the forest, causing the boy and his mother to refer to them as howlers. Although it is not made apparent until much later in the novel, this is a metaphor for the effect of tabloid journalism and gossip culture. Later in his life the narrator Harrison Shepherd will experience firsthand the destructive tendency of journalists to repeat each other as



reliable sources of information, rather than fact-checking and writing original stories for themselves. Like the howlers on Isla Pixol, the journalists simply imitate the fearful and angry noises of each other, without knowing how, when, or why those noises began.

The boy's mother's instruction that he must keep a written record of their lives so that someone knows what happened to them foreshadows the eventual release of a lifetime's worth of private diaries to public view.

The narrator's mother's behavior in the opening section of Part 1 stands in contrast to the way the narrator himself will behave throughout his life. Whereas his mother constantly plans and schemes in an attempt to find a way to attach herself to the powerful, wealthy, and influential people that she meets, Harrison as a teenager and an adult later in the novel finds himself amongst influential artists and political leaders almost by accident. Whereas his mother seeks out the prestige and attention that comes from having such connections, Harrison goes on to shy away from the attention his connections bring him later in the novel.

The boy's close emotional bond with Leandro is the first hint in the novel that he is homosexual, alongside the discussion with his mother about whether or not he will have a girlfriend within the next year. Leandro shows an interest in the boy which his mother and Enrique do not. As a result of this, the boy learns the skills of a servant while living in this household, despite ostensibly being one of the members of the household who is supposed to be being served. This is a split in the boy's personality that will continue for the rest of his life: whether he is one of the wealthy elite or one of the servant class, and whether or not he is capable of moving from one to the other. The skills the boy learns in the kitchen with Leandro go on to help him gain employment with Diego Rivera later in the novel.

The failed plan to escape from Enrique is reflective of the precarious nature of the narrator's mother's life plans. Although she believed that Enrique would provide a lavish lifestyle for herself and her child, in reality she finds herself completely dependent on him and unable to escape a difficult and unpleasant situation due to having no financial security of her own.

The opening "Archivist's Note" is the first time the reader is made aware that this story will not be told in a straightforward narrative style. Instead, it will consist of an assortment of diary entries, correspondence, newspaper clippings, and official records. The first archivist's note reveals very few details about Harrison Shepherd and even fewer about the archivist herself, although she will go on to be a central character in the story she is communicating to the reader. The main takeaway from this section is the discovery that the boy from the opening chapter went on to become someone sufficiently influential to warrant an archivist being interested in his life and writing.

The next journal is a significant moment in the narrative because it reveals Harrison's knowledge of the lacuna. Without this journal, Violet Brown would have been unable to discover what really happened to him later in the story. Further to its narrative significance at the end of the novel as the missing clue in Harrison Shepherd's death,



the lacuna is also symbolic of Harrison's citizenship. Like the lacuna, Harrison is a passageway between two worlds. The lacuna is a literal passageway, whereas Harrison is a human link between the countries of the United States and Mexico. His dual citizenship, like the underwater cave, makes a link between two worlds.

The move to Mexico City and the escape from Enrique is a significant turning point in Harrison's life because it brings him into contact with the painter Diego Rivera. Having left Enrique's financial support behind them, Harrison and his mother are now in a different position in the world. However, Harrison's friendship with Leandro has provided him with the skills he needs to get by as a worker and servant rather than a wealthy person. It is thanks to Leandro that Harrison is able to secure work with Diego, because his knowledge of cooking makes him able to quickly adapt to the task of mixing plaster for the great painter.

The author contrasts the behavior of Harry and his mother in this chapter. While his mother continues to look for external sources to provide her with the money that she needs – through having an affair with P.T. Cash – Harrison takes it upon himself to do what he needs to, finding a job of his own, and learning to support himself.

This is the moment in the novel when the fictional protagonist first becomes involved with real-life historical figures. It is also the moment when Harrison's intimate involvement with Mexican Communists begins, which will ultimately lead to his downfall in the United States later in his life.

Discussion Question 1

What knowledge does Harry gain during his time on Isla Pixol that helps him later in the novel?

Discussion Question 2

What impression does the author give of the archivist in the first "Archivist's Note"?

Discussion Question 3

What are the differences between Harry and his mother?

Vocabulary

bellowing, territorial, acquire, endeavor, peculiar, acquainted, enterprise, entirety, vouchsafed, resurrection, memoir, herein, penmanship, ample, remainder, toothsome, precarious, dangling, merman

Part 2

Summary

Part 2 covered the years 1932 – 1934 and takes place in Washington, D.C. Harrison was sent by his mother to live with his father in the United States. He took a train across the Mexican border up to Washington D.C. Harrison's father met him at the train station and called him Harry, which became the name most often used for the narrator while he lived in the United States. It quickly transpired that Harry's father did not intend for them to live together. Instead, Harry was enrolled at a military boarding school called Potomac Academy.

At school, Harry befriended another boy named Billy Boorzai, nicknamed Bull's Eye. Bull's Eye was employed by the school in a menial capacity to help pay for his tuition and Harry often joined him on errands into the city to purchase food and other supplies for the school.

After a trip to a museum with his father, Harry found out about the plight of a number of World War One veterans who had been denied their soldier's pension by President Hoover's government as a result of the Great Depression which occurred in the United States in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Many veterans had travelled to D.C. with their families to protest against the government, and they camped together in makeshift accommodation known as the Bonus Army encampment.

Harry's father arranged for him to work for the academy during the summer to cover his board and he continued to stay at the school with Bull's Eye after the other students had gone home to their families. Harry and Bull's Eye were the only two staying in the barracks over the summer. Harry developed a crush on Bull's Eye and wrote admiring diary entries about his body.

Bull's Eye had a friend living in the Bonus Army encampment who he and Harry would visit. During one of these visits, the boys got caught up in a protest when General MacArthur used the military to fire tear gas at the veterans in order to drive the men and their families out of the encampment. The army burned the makeshift homes to the ground and many people were killed, including children. Harry was disturbed by the newspaper reports of the incident that suggested that the veterans and their families were criminals.

Part 2 ends with another "Archivist's Note" during which the archivist explains that the next diary in the series – covering the rest of Harry's time at Potomac Academy – had been destroyed some years beforehand at the request of Harrison Shepherd. The archivist explains that at the beginning of the next diary included in the novel, Harry had left school without graduating, returned to Mexico, and begun to work for the painter Diego Rivera once again.



The archivist states that it was the archivist who destroyed the missing diary by burning it, under Harrison Shepherd's instructions. The archivist reveals that Shepherd did not want the diary to be made public and, in fact, did not wish for any of his diaries to be made public, due to an intense fear of being misunderstood. The archivist describes Shepherd's appearance in great detail, including his height and general features. The archivist says that Shepherd wished "with full voice and sound mind" (110) for all of his diaries to be destroyed and instructs the reader that, as this information had not been revealed earlier, the reader must now make a decision about whether or not to go against Shepherd's wishes by continuing to read something that he wished to keep private.

Analysis

Harrison Shepherd's father's decision to call him "Harry" when he first arrives in the United States is part of a wider trend of characters using nicknames for the protagonist. Throughout the novel, Harry rarely refers to himself in his writing, always focused outward on the people and events that surround him, rather than on himself. This is reflected in the absence of his real name for large stretches of the novel and the extensive use of nicknames by other characters: prior to leaving Mexico, for example, Diego Rivera and the other workers at the mural had taken to calling him "Sweet Buns" (69) due to his knowledge of baking.

His father names him Harry upon arrival in the United States, a name that Harry feels seems American. However, the boys at his new school take to giving him Mexican themed nicknames such as "Pancho Villa" (89) or simply "Mexico" (88), which underscore his status as a foreigner. In contrast to this, the boys on Isla Pixol in Part 1 nicknamed him "rubio" (32) meaning blond boy, focusing on his American identity. Wherever Harry goes, he is always considered a foreigner.

The extensive use of nicknames, alongside variations on his real name, is reflective of Harry's inability or unwillingness to take responsibility for the way other people see him. Harry considers that it is not his responsibility to dictate or control how others see him, preferring to accept their nicknames for him and later in the novel to let his writing speak for itself. However, Harry's diffidence on this front is also his downfall because by refusing to assert his own self-definition, he allows others to do it for him. This is not too serious an issue for Harry during the early stages of the novel, but leads to the destruction of everything he holds dear once he is an adult.

Harry's encounter with the people living in the Bonus Army Encampment influences his opinion about American politics and the way the country is run. From Harry's perspective, these are families with young children and not enough to eat, who deserve to be helped. It pains him to see them represented as criminals in the newspapers because he knows from his own experiences that the reports are not true. These false reports about people that Harry had met foreshadow the false and misleading newspaper reports that will end Harry's career when he is an adult.



It is clear through the diary entries in this section that Harry has developed an intense crush on Bull's Eye and there is some implication that his feelings are reciprocated. However, because this section is told entirely through diary entries, there is no way for the reader to understand events through any character's perspective other than Harry's. It remains a mystery whether or not the two young men developed a relationship during this time.

The second "Archivist's Note" fundamentally alters the nature of the text from the perspective of the reader. The archivist introduced themselves in the first note in a manner that made them sound like an official historian. In the second note, it becomes clear that the archivist actually knew Harrison Shepherd, as revealed through the detailed description of his appearance. The archivist undermines their own credibility by admitting that they have deliberately gone against the wishes of Harrison Shepherd by publishing his diaries. This makes the reader question the motivation of the archivist and why they would go against Harrison Shepherd's wishes when they had been expressed so clearly.

The archivist makes the reader culpable in the invasion of privacy being committed against Harrison Shepherd by withholding this revelation until the narrative is already underway. Although the reader is aware that the novel as a whole is a work of fiction, this narrative device adds dramatic tension by implying that the rest of the diaries will reveal things that the protagonist wished to keep secret.

At this stage it appears as if the missing notebook from Potomac Academy will be a central part of the story, as it contained information so damaging that Harry had it destroyed. However, these years remain a mystery, with their significance to Harry never being explained to any other characters or to the reader.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Harry feel that the treatment of the Bonus Army is unjust?

Discussion Question 2

In what ways is Diego's treatment of his employees inconsistent with his political beliefs?

Discussion Question 3

What impact does the archivist's revelation that Harry did not want his diaries to be published have on the narrative?

Vocabulary

compartment, shelleries, lingered, ballad, immense, gringos, huddled, coshing, mariachi, bewilderment, swindlers, scowled, intrusion, averse, portmanteau, sole, deformities, liaison, seamstress, accumulated



Part 3

Summary

Part 3 takes place in San Angel and Coyoacan, Mexico in the years 1935 – 1941. At the outset of Part 3, Harry was once again working for Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo.

Many of the other servants were frightened of Frida's temper so Harry went to collect her plates after her lunch. Harry revealed to Frida that he returned to Mexico because his school kicked him out over a scandal involving another student, but he did not go into details other than to refer to what happened as "conducta insolita" (122) meaning "irregular conduct." Frida resolved that because she struggled to pronounce Harry's name, she would call him Insolito from then on.

Frida suffered from a myriad health problems throughout this period of time and Harry took food to her while she was in the hospital. Frida told Harry that another servant had told her about his writing: she knew that Harry wrote pages and pages of words in English in his diary at night.

Later, Diego also confronted Harry about his writing. Cesar, with whom Harry shared a room, had told Diego about Harry writing at night and Diego became suspicious that Harry was reporting the household activities to someone. Harry assured him that his writing was purely personal and Diego confided that they needed to start being more careful about security. During the conversation, Harry revealed that he knew how to use a typewriter and he began working for Diego as a typist as well as a cook.

Diego informed Harry that a Russian man named Trotsky would be coming to live with the Riveras. Diego explained to Harry that Trotsky had been a central figure in the Russian Revolution and that he had been due to take over leadership of Russia after the death of Lenin. Instead, Stalin had taken over Russia and Trotsky had been forced to flee the country and go into hiding in order to avoid Stalin's attempts to have him assassinated. Diego convinced the Mexican president to grant Trotsky political asylum in Mexico under Diego's custody. The first section of Part 3 ends with Harry being forbidden from continuing to write his diary entries due to the security risks associated with Trotsky's arrival.

In the second part of Part 3, Harry began to write a weekly report of goings on in the Rivera household which was read and approved each week by Frida. Harry was under instruction to include only facts and no "opinions, confessions, or fictions" (148). In the reports, Harry referred to Trotsky as "Lev" and his wife as "Natalya."

Lev and Natalya arrived to stay at Frida's childhood home in Coyoacan and were soon followed by their secretary, a man named Van. Harry described Van as handsome. Many meetings took place in the house during the evenings between influential communists and politicians and Harry assisted Van when he struggled with Spanish



translations. Harry continued to admire Van in his weekly reports, dwelling on his physical appearance. At the end of one report, Harry noted that Frida had requested that he keep all of his reports purely objective in the future, especially in regards to Van.

Harry was taken as a translator to a hearing where Trotsky was testifying and Harry was very perturbed when one of his translations was used in a number of newspapers. He began to note in the reports that Lev and Frida were spending a lot of time alone together. Van and Harry stumbled upon a selection of letters revealing an affair between Frida and Lev. Frida, Lev, Harry, and Van all went on a boat trip together during which Frida made reference to Harry's attraction to Van, severely embarrassing Harry.

Diego and Natalya learned of the affair between Lev and Frida, causing many arguments. A man arrived with the intention of writing Lev's biography, so Harry decided that his reports were no longer necessary since someone else would be recording events from then on.

After ceasing to write his reports in November 1937, Harry left no written records for several months. He began writing his diary again in April 1938, when his mother was killed in a car accident on her way to attend a stunt flight by the American aviator Howard Hughes. Frida invited Harry to join her to visit an archeological dig near a volcano. Frida tried to convince Harry that he was meant to be a writer and Harry confessed that he had been trying to write a novel about the history of Mexico. Harry found a small statue lying on the ground which he stole.

The next section of Part 3 was a newspaper article explaining a rift that occurred between Diego Rivera and Leon Trotsky after the latter accidentally read a letter written by the former in which Rivera said angry and critical things about Trotsky.

The following section returned to Harry's diaries in which he revealed that it was his fault that Lev discovered the letter written by Diego, causing them to argue and Lev and Natalya to move out of the Rivera household. Faced with the choice of continuing to work for Diego and Frida as a cook or going to work for Lev as a secretary, Harry decided to follow Lev. In Lev's household Harry worked on his novel about ancient Mexico at night.

One night, the household was attacked by agents of Stalin who stormed the gates and fired guns into Lev and Natalya's bedroom. No one was killed, but their grandson was injured. The newspapers reported that Trotsky had staged the attack himself in order to manipulate the public. Lev explained to Harry the accident of history – a telegram containing untruths – that allowed Stalin to become the leader of Russia instead of him. Another attempt was made on Lev's life, this time by a man named Jacson who had ingratiated himself with Lev's circle of friends. Unlike the earlier attempt, this one was successful and Lev died. As he died, Lev instructed the others not to kill Jacson because if he died no one would ever believe the truth about his assassination.

The final section of Part 3 recounted the events that followed Lev's death, which Harry recalled later while on a train leaving Mexico. The police raided the house and



confiscated the possessions of the staff, including all of Harry's diaries and his novel. Fearful that Harry was under suspicion from the police because of all the written records he had kept, Frida employed him to deliver some of her paintings to the United States so that he could leave the country. Frida gave Harry a gift of one her paintings, already stored in a crate. Harry left Mexico.

Analysis

Due to the missing diary, explained by the archivist at the end of Part 2, the reader is not immediately informed why Harry returned to Mexico or how it came to pass that he ended up working as a cook for Diego Rivera. Instead, the reader is plunged directly into the day to day events at the Rivera household, specifically the challenges of working as a cook in a house with such a tiny kitchen. Harry has now returned completely to his identity as one of the servant class in contrast to his time at Potomac Academy when he continued to sit on the border between those being served and those doing the serving. Although Harry was a student at the academy, he was also someone who served the other students through his friendship with Bull's Eye and later through his father's arrangement for him during the summer.

Harry's discussion with Frida about his "conducta insolita" (122) is the most amount of detail that the reader ever discovers about what happened at Potomac Academy and why Harry did not finish his schooling there. It seems evident to the reader that whatever happened involved Bull's Eye and likely that it involved a homosexual relationship between the two young men which was considered unacceptable by the culture they were living in at the time. Later in Part 3, Frida tells Harry that she has noticed that he takes an interest in the male artists who visit her household who are in relationships with other men, making it clear that being gay is not unacceptable in this circle of acquaintances like it was while he was at the academy.

This conversation with Frida also introduces the nickname "Insolito" (later shortened to "Soli") which Frida will use for Harry throughout the rest of the novel. The nickname – which translates as "unusual" – reflects Harry's permanent status as a foreigner wherever he goes. Not American enough amongst the Americans and not Mexican enough amongst the Mexicans, Harry also straddles the border between the wealthy educated artists of the Rivera household and the servants he works amongst as a cook. Wherever he finds himself, Harry is always an unusual feature of his circle of friends and colleagues.

In Part 3, the question of whether Harry's writing is something positive and beneficial or something subversive and dangerous begins to become a defining question in his life. Prior to Part 3, Harry has kept his diaries entirely for his own satisfaction and enjoyment. In Part 3, however, his writing starts to become of interest and concern to others around him.

Linked to the concerns over Harry's writing is the concern about his dual identity as both American and Mexican. Cesar first becomes suspicious of Harry's writing because he



keeps his diary in English and Cesar is not able to understand what he is writing. The controversial political allegiances of Diego and Frida make them especially cautious about potential outsiders, and Harry's status as foreign makes him more suspicious in their eyes. This foreshadows the suspicion and criticism of Harry's patriotism and political allegiances that will occur in relation to his novels once he returns to the United States later in his life. For the time being however, in Part 3, Diego and Frida are content to take Harry at his word when he claims no harmful intent through his writing.

Despite the Riveras' decision to trust Harry's allegiance to them, they nevertheless impose conditions of censorship upon his writing. Harry is no longer allowed to write freely for his own personal reasons: instead he must follow stylistic guidelines imposed on him by Frida through the instruction to write objectively and include no "opinions, confessions, or fictions" (148). For the first time, Harry is no longer writing for himself. He is writing for a specific audience. This is a critical turning point in Harry's development as a writer. Although his readership at this stage is small, consisting only of Frida, he begins to experience the difficulties and joys of communicating with others through his writing, rather than doing it merely as a self-serving insular act.

The revelation to Frida and Diego that Harry writes changes his life in two major ways. First, it changes Harry's job description in the Rivera house when he begins working as a typist as well as a cook. This change goes on to give him the opportunity to work for Leon Trotsky, which represents a positive development at the time but will go on to have severe consequences for Harry once he is living in the United States during the late 1940s.

The second major change impacts the narrative style of the whole novel: the narrative ceases to be communicated through private diary entries and instead starts to be communicated through weekly reports that Harry submits to Frida. Despite being under instruction to keep the reports factual and objective, however, Harry continues with much the same style of writing as he has used during Part 3 thus far. The major difference is that he is now also using his writing as a way of communicating with another person, specifically Frida. Harry uses the reports to confide in Frida about his feelings for Van, which he would feel too shy to admit to in person, as evidenced by his deep embarrassment when Frida brings it up out loud. He also uses the reports to gently confront Frida about her behavior, in relation to her affair with Lev in particular, once again avoiding direct discussion of sensitive topics by communicating them via writing rather than spoken language.

Harry's eventual downfall in Part 4 is foreshadowed in Part 3 through the moments when his writing causes harm to himself and to those around him. When Harry's translation of Lev's words at the hearings is reprinted in several newspapers, Harry becomes terrified of the possibility of mistranslating something slightly and seeing his words have severe global and political consequences. Harry's fears of his work causing unrest are partially manifested when he leaves a translation of a letter out on a desk without posting it, causing the rift between Diego and Lev. The potential negative personal consequences of Harry's prolific writing habit are shown when Frida goads him over his crush on Van in public, severely embarrassing Harry.



The unsuccessful assassination attempt on Lev and the subsequent inaccurate newspaper coverage echoes Harry's experiences at the Bonus Army Encampment in the United States. Harry's own personal experiences contradict what he reads in the newspapers, showing the extent to which journalists are able to construct their own version of the truth that is detached from reality. This journalistic license will affect Harry in an even more personal way in Part 4.

Discussion Question 1

In what ways is Lev misrepresented by the press?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Harry fear that his writing will be used against him?

Discussion Question 3

What role does Frida play in the novel?

Vocabulary

revolutionary, mahogany, ailments, interrogation, monstrosity, discharge, assassination, compact, entitled, extravagance, dislocated, glimpse, spontaneous, yearning, assets, swaddled, anarchist, functionary, peers, annihilation

Part 4

Summary

Part 4 takes place in Asheville, North Carolina and covers the years 1941 – 1947. Part 4 begins with another “Archivist’s Note” which reveals the identity of the archivist: Violet Brown. She explains that she was married at 15 and widowed shortly afterwards, living the rest of her life unmarried. Through her work for Harrison Shepherd, she claims to have “served greatness” (261) and states that by the time anyone reads these words both she and Shepherd will be dead. She then summarizes everything that happened to Harry after he left Mexico.

Distraught at the loss of his diaries and novel, Harry gave up keeping records of his life for the first few years of his time in the United States. Upon his return to American, Harry inherited a car from his deceased father and, having no living relatives, settled upon living in Asheville, North Carolina after the road he was driving on happened to stop there. He took up residence in a local boarding house which was also occupied at the time by Violet Brown. To help pay his rent at the boarding house, Harry cooked meals for the other lodgers. Violet noted that during this time, Harry never opened the crate given to him as a gift by Frida when he left Mexico.

Before the United States entered World War Two in Europe, Harry taught Spanish at the local community college. After the conflict began he was called up for service helping to oversee the shipment of great works of art away from Washington D.C. to the Biltmore House in North Carolina where the government believed they would be safer from enemy attacks. This job allowed Harry to save up enough money to move into his own house in Asheville, where he lived alone. Soon after moving in, Harry finally opened the crate given to him by Frida. Inside, he found that she had hidden all of his diaries and the manuscript of his novel which she had managed to retrieve from the police. Violet mentions that this novel went on to become “Vassals of Majesty” and that that fact should be common knowledge amongst readers.

The next section of Part 4 is a series of letters from Harry to Frida, but none from Frida to Harry. The first letter was sent upon Harry’s discovery of the lost diaries and novel in the crate. Harry asked Frida for advice about how to find a publisher for his almost completed novel. Harry and Frida discussed the war and Harry kept a copy of a newspaper clipping sent to him by Frida about the internment of Japanese American and German American citizens. Harry told Frida that the news was frightening and not well known in his part of the country.

The correspondence with Frida was followed by a letter from Harry to his editor in New York thanking him for proposed payment for his first novel. Harry then began keeping a diary on a more sporadic basis than he used to, marking such moments as Stalin’s birthday, the death of President Roosevelt, and, eventually, the end of the war.



Harry sent Frida a copy of his first novel “Vassals of Majesty” when it was published. His letter was followed by a series of positive reviews for the novel and general gossip about Harrison Shepherd himself, especially his status as a bachelor. A friend of Harry’s from during the war, Tom Cuddy, wrote to Harry to offer him a job creating an art exhibition to promote American culture in Europe.

One newspaper article about a meeting of the Asheville Woman’s Club reported that Violet Brown had spoken eloquently to the group about “Vassals of Majesty” but had claimed to know nothing about its author when asked. In response to reading this, Harry wrote a letter to Violet asking her if she would become his secretary as he was struggling to deal with all the fame and attention brought about by his literary success. This was followed by a response from Violet, accepting Harry’s offer of employment. Harry wrote in his diary how useful and effective Violet was as a secretary. Due to Frida being unwell, Harry ceased his frequent correspondence with her and once again took up regular diary entries.

Harry and Violet got to know each other better and became close friends. Harry wrote a second novel, also about ancient Mexico, in which the characters followed a delusional leader who was heavily criticized by the novel’s protagonist. The art exhibition with Tom Cuddy was a disaster and was criticized by many influential politicians for being “un-American” (333).

Violet urged Harry to write a memoir but he gave up after writing the first chapter. One day, Harry received a letter from the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) who were investigating the political allegiances of anyone who had been employed by the government. Harry hired a lawyer, Artie Gold, to deal with an upcoming deal for his novel to be turned into a Hollywood movie.

Harry consulted Artie about the HUAC investigation and he recommended that he should respond to their enquiries, but not reveal the fact that he used to be employed by Leon Trotsky. Harry explained to Artie that he was disqualified from military service because he was homosexual. After the investigation began, Harry made the decision to burn the diary he kept during his years at the Potomac Academy. An agent from the FBI visited Harry’s house but Violet lied and told him that Harry was not home. Harry began work on his third novel and he went to Mexico with Violet in order to do some research.

Analysis

The “Archivist’s Note” that begins Part 4 reveals a great deal of information while simultaneously deepening the mystery of who the archivist is and what has motivated her to publish Harrison Shepherd’s diaries without his permission. For the first time, the reader discovers the identity of Violet Brown, Harry’s friend and secretary. However Violet does not yet reveal why she is publishing Harry’s words and adds to this mystery by affirming that by the time anyone reads this, both she and Harry will be dead.



Like Harrison, Violet is someone who is stuck between two different worlds. Whereas Harry is stuck in the space between his identity as Mexican and American, as well as his identity as a server and an employer, Violet is stuck between two different eras in history. Growing up in an isolated and old-fashioned rural religious community, Violet longed for a different life for herself where she could be educated and independent. To a large extent, she succeeded in this goal. However, the era in which Violet lived meant that her success was dependent on the success of a man, despite the fact that she remained unmarried for most of her life. In an era that did not yet truly value women's contributions to society, Violet's contribution to the novel comes through her service to Harry and his legacy as a writer.

Violet's clear respect for Harry during the opening sections of Part 4, coupled with her assumption that anyone reading the book will have heard of "Vassals of Majesty" make it clear to the reader that Harry is going to become famous and influential over the course of the rest of the novel.

Harry's arrival in Asheville, North Carolina is a reflection of his attitude to life as a whole. Harry did not make a plan about where he wanted to live in the United States or why, he simply drove until there was literally no more road left to drive on and decided that he would stay where he found himself. Unlike his mother, who was always trying to control her life and making plans to ensure her attachment to wealthy and influential people, Harry floats through life simply allowing events to unfold and responding to circumstances as they arise. Ironically, through his work for Leon Trotsky, this technique brought Harry much closer to real power than his mother ever managed to get.

At the outset of his time in Asheville, Harry's past in Mexico is an asset. His time learning cookery with Leandro and later working as a cook for Diego and Frida, makes him well qualified to take over the kitchen at his new boarding house, allowing him to get a reduction on his rent. Further to this, his bilingual abilities in Spanish and English help him to get work as a teacher at a local college. Finally, his work stewarding a shipment of Frida's painting from Mexico to New York brings him to the attention of the government, allowing him to contribute to the war effort as well as giving him enough money to buy his own house in Asheville. Although Harry's past experiences in Mexico are positive influences when he first arrives in Asheville, they are held against him as signs of potential subversive political activities later in Part 4 and throughout Part 5.

Harry's correspondence with Frida mimics the style of the reports that he used to write while living in Mexico and working alongside Lev. Like the weekly report he authored during those days, the letters are meant as a way for him to communicate with Frida personally.

In Part 3, Harry described himself to Diego as "uncurious about politics" (143) in an effort to convince the painter that his diary writing was not an act of political espionage. In Part 4, by contrast, it is clear that Harry's time spent living with Trotsky has made him more politically aware and engaged. For the first time, in his correspondence with Frida, Harry ponders the nature of different politicians and the meaning of their behavior in relation to WWII. He also starts to pay greater attention to political events in his diary



entries, marking occasions such as Stalin's birthday, the death of President Roosevelt, and the end of the war.

The publication of "Vassals of Majesty" is a major turning point for Harry because it marks the moment when he makes the transition from someone who works alongside famous and influential people to someone who has become well-known in his own right. Harry has learned about the downsides of fame through his involvement with Frida and with Lev, but now experiences them firsthand when he is inundated with fan mail and media requests for interviews. No longer being a quiet figure in the background himself, he seeks out a kindred spirit in the form of Violet Brown: someone who can make his affairs run smoothly the way he used to for Lev in Mexico. Harry's desire to hire Violet is explicitly related to her aversion for gossip. Through a newspaper article, Harry was able to see that Violet resisted the urge to reveal personal information about him despite the number of years they lived together at the boarding house. Harry's belief that Violet is averse to sharing information about him publicly is ironic due to Violet's eventual decision to publish Harry's private diaries and correspondence against his wishes.

As soon as the question of anti-Communist movements enters the narrative, it is clear to the reader that Harry will suffer consequences related to his time spent living with and working for Leon Trotsky. Harry, however, remains oblivious at this stage to the seriousness of his situation. Harry, unlike the anti-Communist crusaders, has a nuanced understanding of the different political factions of Russia having known one of them personally. Because Harry knows that Stalin had Trotsky killed, it does not occur to him that enemies of Stalin would also consider Trotsky to be a dangerous influence.

Discussion Question 1

How does your impression of the archivist change during the course of Part 4?

Discussion Question 2

In what ways does Harry's past help him in the United States? In what ways does it hinder him?

Discussion Question 3

How does Harry's life change after the publication of "Vassals of Majesty"?

Vocabulary

tubercular, embossed, pined, helpmeet, temperament, portent, nought, gumption, scoundrels, idlement, gnawed, exposed, carnivorous, interlaced, reside, avuncular, gabled, langor, peninsula, ramshackle



Part 5 and Afterward

Summary

Part 5 takes place in Asheville, North Carolina in the years 1948-1950. It begins with a newspaper report from “Star Week” that circulated rumors that Harry and Violet were in a romantic relationship and had been to Mexico in order for Violet to be introduced to Harry’s family before they wed. Through a diary entry, Harry reported that Violet was extremely upset about the report, which had since been picked up by several other news outlets.

Harry received a letter from his friend Tom Cuddy telling him that he was disappointed to learn of Harry’s relationship with Violet because he had feelings for Harry. Harry responded that there was no relationship with Violet and invited Tom to visit. Harry began work on his third novel and his publishers sent him a new contract to sign which obliged him to declare that he was not a communist. Harry discussed the contract with his lawyer Artie and decided to sign. Artie warned him that the anti-communist movement was about to become very serious. Tom Cuddy visited Asheville and he and Harry began a romantic relationship.

Harry was visited by an investigator from the FBI who came to question him about his time spent working for the Riveras. The man would not tell Harry what he was being charged with nor who was supplying the evidence against him. Despite newspaper reports that Thomas Dewey had won the presidential election in 1948, it was won by the incumbent president Harry Truman.

Harry received a letter from J. Edgar Hoover, the director of the FBI, telling him that he was no longer employed by the federal government, a confusing oversight as Harry had not held any active government post in several years. Despite this, many newspapers picked up on the story of him being fired due to his communist sympathies with one claiming he “could well have given access to sensitive information” (445).

Harry started to receive hate mail from the public. His publisher suggested writing under a pseudonym in the future but Harry refused. Harry asked Violet to destroy all of his old notebooks because he did not want them to be used against him as evidence.

A newspaper report quoted the words of a character from one of Harry’s novels criticizing the leader in the novel and attributed it to Harry himself, claiming that Harry was talking about President Truman. Many other news outlets picked up on the story and reprinted the quote, attributing it each time to Harry rather than a character in his novel. Harry received a great deal of hate mail including a letter from Tom Cuddy cutting all ties with him.

Harry appeared at a HUAC hearing, the events of which were communicated to the reader through official government documents. Harry was asked a series of questions



about whether he knew the Riveras and about whether the quote that had appeared in the newspapers was his own words. Harry had to admit that both things were true.

Part 5 was followed by *The Afterward*, written by Violet Brown in 1959. It began with Harrison Shepherd's obituary, which revealed that he drowned while swimming in Mexico in 1951.

Violet recounted the events leading up to their second trip to Mexico. She described how Harry fell into a deep depression after the hearings and gave up writing. Artie warned him that criminal proceedings were likely to follow in the wake of his appearance before HUAC. In a desperate attempt to raise his spirits, Violet suggested they take another trip to Mexico. In preparation for the trip, Harry took up swimming.

In Mexico, Harry visited Isla Pixol where he lived as a boy and managed to find Leandro the cook. Harry insisted on staying longer than they had planned, to Violet's annoyance. One day, he paid a group of local boys to watch him dive in the ocean. After he remained underwater for too long, Violet panicked and alerted the locals and the police but no one could find him. Violet returned to their hotel and saw that Harry had left the little figurine he found near the volcano sitting on the table.

Violet returned to the United States and discovered that Harry had left her his house in his will. Frida died in 1954 and a crate of Harry's belongings were sent to Violet afterwards. Inside, she found the notebook which Harry kept while he was in Isla Pixol, which explained about the underwater lacuna that Harry swam into as a child. Having found this missing piece of the story, Violet realized that Harry had not drowned that day, but was still alive and had begun a new life in Mexico.

Violet concluded that Harry's story should be told and that she would do it. She put the book together and organized for it to be released in 50 years time.

Analysis

Although small untruths about Harry have surfaced in the press earlier in the novel – for example the inaccurate suggestion that he was relieved from military service during the war “due to a perforated eardrum” (344) – the opening section of Part 5 is the moment when press coverage first causes Harry any real harm. He is disheartened by the potential effect on Violet's happiness and reputation, knowing that the inaccurate newspaper reports about their relationship will lead to rumors and gossip in their town of Asheville. This is an upsetting incident for Harry and Violet and the misrepresentation of Harry in the press becomes more and more severe as Part 5 progresses.

The visit from the FBI agent underscores the hypocrisy at the center of the anti-Communism movement during this era. Although claiming that Harry is under investigation because of potential “un-American” activities, Harry's rights under the law as an American citizen to be told what he is being charged with and who is accusing him are ignored. Despite their profession to be upholding the government of the United



States, the individuals involved pursued their goal by denying people the hard won rights that American citizens had under the laws of their country.

The inaccurate details, confusions, and misrepresentations of the government and the press start to spiral out of control at this point in the novel. Harry is under investigation due to his work for the government which occurred years prior to the investigation. His punishment for being “un-American” is the termination of a form of employment that did not even exist at this point, but the press picks up on the story as if Harry really has been fired from a real job. The author underscores the irony of these initial reports by including comments from the journalists that Harry’s precise role in the State Department from which he was fired “remains unclear” (445). The reader, with inside knowledge of what really happened, knows that his role remained unclear because it did not exist. This places the reader in a similar position to Harry when he used to work for Trotsky and when he observed events at the Bonus Army Encampment. Just as Harry had privileged knowledge during those times that meant he knew that the newspaper reports were inaccurate, the reader is able to see through the lies of these reports and understand the way they manipulate the truth for their own purposes.

The author injects humor into what would otherwise be dry government documents by playing on the gap between the reader’s understanding of Harry’s past and the committee’s ignorance. During a section of the hearing in which Harry has been instructed only to answer with the words “yes” or “no,” in response to the question “Are you still in contact with Comrade Trotsky?” (483) the secretary records: “(Very long pause.) MR. SHEPHERD: No” (483).

Harry has feared that his words will be used against him throughout the novel, for example when he is embarrassed by Frida revealing his crush on Van and when he panics over seeing one of his translations in the newspapers and fears that a slight error on his part could cause a major international incident. Harry’s fears become a reality when a quotation from a fictional character in one of his novels is attributed to him and widely circulated as being his opinion on President Truman: “Our leader is an empty sack. You could just as well knock him over, put a head with horns on a stick, and follow that. Most of us never choose to believe in the nation, we just come up short on better ideas” (466). Just as the nuance between working for Trotsky and supporting Stalin was lost on the anti-Communists, so was the nuance between writing words for a fictional character in a novel and an author expressing his own opinions.

Harry was forced to leave Mexico after the death of Trotsky because the extensive written records that he kept during his time there placed him under the suspicion of the Mexican authorities forcing him to leave for the United States. Likewise, in the United States, Harry’s words in his novels were used against him, placing him under suspicion of the American authorities, motivating him to return to Mexico.

In Part 3, after explaining to Harry that she dresses garishly in order to distract attention from her disfigured leg, Frida said: “Soli, let me tell you. The most important thing about a person is always the thing you don’t know” (216). This becomes a kind of prophecy for



Violet Brown during the closing stages of the novel, when all of the evidence that is available to her leads her to believe that Harry drowned in Mexico.

However, from the perspective of the reader who had the chance to read the diary explaining Harry's early experiments with holding his breath and swimming through the lacuna, it is perfectly clear what he is planning to do, almost from the moment he begins to take up swimming again while still in the United States. But from Violet's perspective, the essential knowledge about the lacuna is missing, meaning that she is initially unable to understand what has happened to Harry. The discovery of the missing diary – the thing about Harry that Violet did not know - explains the mystery and motivates Violet to share Harry's story.

Discussion Question 1

In what ways is Harry misrepresented by the press?

Discussion Question 2

In what ways is the treatment of Harry inconsistent with American values?

Discussion Question 3

What role does Violet Brown play in the novel?

Vocabulary

squelch, comely, condolences, prevarication, embellished, slothful, verify, reputable, obligated, naive, defiant, ransacked, cowering, persuasive, crooners, perished, inkling, despicable, defrauded, affidavit

Characters

Harrison Shepherd

Harrison Shepherd is the main character/protagonist. The plot tells the story of his life from his childhood until his supposed death by drowning. The majority of the narrative is told from his perspective with occasional sections being told from the perspective of the archivist Violet Brown and other sections told from the perspective of journalists and official government record keepers. The central issue for Harry's character is his dual identity as both Mexican and American as well as another significant split between his dual identity as a server/employee and a writer/man of influence.

For Harry, wherever he goes he is always a foreigner, with Mexicans and Americans alike commenting on his unusual accent in whichever language he speaks. Harry's experience in each of his countries helps him in the other. In Mexico, he is able to get work as a typist and translator for Diego Rivera and Leon Trotsky because of his fluent English and ability to type that he gained while living in the United States. In America, Harry is first able to get employment teaching the Spanish language before his experience working for Frida Kahlo helps him get a job for the government protecting important works of art during the war. Later, Harry uses his knowledge of ancient Mexico to write novels that make him very successful and well-known. However Harry's permanent status as a foreigner also works against him in both countries. He falls under suspicion for his use of English in his writing while working for the Riveras and his history of working amongst influential Communists in Mexico eventually destroys the life that Harry had built for himself in the United States.

Harry has an intense fear of his words being used against him, a fear which is proven to be accurate when the United States government investigates him for "un-American" activity as a result of the content of his novels. Foreshadowing of Harry's words being used against him happens throughout the narrative for example when Harry is terrified of what the consequences of making a mistake in one of his translations might be and when Frida embarrasses him by discussing his crush on Van after reading about it in Harry's weekly reports.

Throughout the novel, multiple characters repeat the suggestion that the missing piece of a story is the most significant part. The missing piece of Harry's story is what happened between him and Billy "Bull's Eye" Boorzai that caused Harry to be expelled from Potomac Academy. Harry is homosexual and the prejudice against gay people in this era made his life harder and forming lasting relationships very difficult. There is some suggestion that Harry's inability to form a close romantic bond with another man (as opposed to the superficial relationship he shared with Tom Cuddy) relates to this missing piece of the puzzle about what happened with Bull's Eye. True to its status as the missing piece however, the truth of how this time in Harry's life affected him as an adult is never explained to the reader.



Violet Brown

Violet Brown is Harrison Shepherds' secretary and close friend. For the first parts of the novel, however, she is known only to the reader as the archivist. Despite the reputation of archival and historical research as a factual and objective form, the archivist is depicted as somewhat misleading and untrustworthy in the opening sections, rather than reliable or accurate. This occurs from the very first "Archivist's Note" which is included after the first chapter of Harry's uncompleted memoir despite, as the archivist notes, it being traditional to begin with a comment from the editorial/archival voice rather than insert it after the story has already begun. Because the first chapter appears as if it is a straightforward piece of literary narrative, the introduction of the authoritative archival voice is a disruption that changes the reader's perspective on what they have just read and forces them to question the motivation of the archivist in not revealing their influence on the story earlier. The sense of the archivist as not trustworthy is deepened by the revelation in the second "Archivist's Note" that Harrison Shepherd wanted his diaries to be destroyed and the archivist is publishing them expressly against his wishes.

The suspicions around the archivist and what has motivated her to go against Harry's wishes slowly dissolve after the revelation of her identity as Violet Brown. Like Harry, Violet is a character who sits in a gap between two different worlds. Whereas for Harry this gap is geographical, for Violet the gap is historical. She grew up in a time when women had no options open to them for education or career success but died before women in education and the workplace became a commonplace occurrence. Because of this, she lived her whole life in the space between these two eras, like the lacuna on Isla Pixol which took Harry back from present day Mexico to the days of the Aztec empire. Although Violet was able to educate herself and make a living as a secretary to an extent that her mother's generation would not have been able to, she is not able to be truly independent in the way she pursued her education and career because of the restrictions that were still placed on women at the time.

Violet Brown is the only reason that the legacy of Harrison Shepherd and the knowledge that he gained through all of his experiences survives. In this way, she plays a similar role to Harry himself. Harry's novels helped to educate and enlighten people about the lost civilization of the Aztecs, and Violet's resurrection of the diaries and correspondence helped to educate and enlighten people about the lost life of Harrison Shepherd.

Frida Kahlo

Frida Kahlo is a real historical figure and an influential painter. In the novel, she is Harry's employer when he first returns to Mexico after being expelled from the Potomac Academy and later she goes on to be one of his closest friends and confidantes.

In the novel Frida is depicted as having an unpredictable temper and boisterous temperament that make her an entertaining but sometimes hurtful friend for Harry.



Despite her tendency to tease and criticize Harry, it is Frida who encourages him to take his talents as a writer seriously. Later, Frida uses her persistent and belligerent personality to convince the Mexican authorities to give her Harry's diaries and manuscript which she then ships in a crate with one of her paintings when she helps Harry leave the country after Trotsky's death. Frida continues her friendship with Harry via a series of letters while he lives in the United States and, by implication, the reader is led to believe that she assisted Harry in his successful attempt to fake his own death at the end of the novel. Although Frida has a largely positive impact on Harry's life, his association with her, her husband Diego Rivera, and other Mexican Communists, is used against him by anti-Communists in the United States.

Diego Rivera

Diego Rivera is a real historical figure and famous artist. In the novel, he gives Harry his first ever job, working as a plaster mixer and hires him over and over again throughout the novel in various roles including cook, typist, and translator.

In the novel, Diego is depicted as a somewhat hypocritical character due to the way he treats his employees. Diego is an influential Communist thinker and Communism is founded on the idea of the power of workers. However, Diego treats his own employees in a careless manner (requiring them to work in a kitchen that is too small for their needs, for example). He expects his own lavish lifestyle to be provided for him by a servant class of workers, something that the Communists in general were not supposed to approve of. Harry understands that his chances to advance in the world will be limited if he continues to work for Diego, where he will only ever be a cook. Instead, Harry decides to follow Lev and pursue opportunities to do greater things with his life.

Leon Trotsky

Leon Trotsky is a real historical figure and one of the leaders of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. After, Lenin's death, Joseph Stalin took control of Russia and Trotsky was forced to flee, constantly alert for Stalin's attempts to have him assassinated. In the novel, Trotsky is most often referred to simply as "Lev." He is a kindly father figure who takes Harry under his wing, employing him as a translator and encouraging him in his burgeoning ambition to be a novelist.

Harry's fear of journalistic distortions is strengthened during his time working for Lev because he sees how different the newspaper reports of Lev's action are in comparison to his own experience of the events. As he dies, Lev tells everyone present that his murderer must survive otherwise no one will know the truth of what happened to him. This foreshadows Violet Brown's eventual decision to publish Harry's diaries against his wishes: she decides to publish Harry's words so that people in the future will know the truth about what happened to him, instead of believing the lies that were written in the newspapers.



Leandro

Leandro is a cook who works at Enrique's house on Isla Pixol. In the absence of any interest in Harry from his mother or from his surrogate father figure Enrique, Harry turns to Leandro as a source of knowledge, warmth, and compassion. Leandro teaches Harry how to cook traditional Mexican food, a skill that allows Harry to find employment after he and his mother run away from Enrique. Leandro also gives Harry diving goggles which indirectly lead to Harry's discovery of the lacuna and his eventual decision to fake his own death and begin a new life in Mexico. Harry and Leandro are reunited during Harry's adulthood when Harry and Violet Brown return to visit Isla Pixol.

Billy "Bull's Eye" Boorzai

Billy Boorzai, nicknamed "Bull's Eye" is Harry's close friend and, by implication, his love interest while the two young men were students together at the Potomac Academy in Washington DC. Similarly to Leandro, Bull's Eye is a bridge for Harry between the world of servers and those being served. Bull's Eye is employed by the academy and Harry bonds with him while helping him carry out his work getting supplies and maintaining the school. It is implied throughout that Bull's Eye and Harry had a romantic relationship during this time, which prompted Harry to burn the diary he kept of this era when he was under investigation by the U.S. government. His relationship with Bull's Eye is truly the missing piece of Harry's story which is never fully explained to the reader.

Salomé

Salomé is Harry's mother. Unlike Harry, who feared attention and making himself known, Salomé consistently strives for the attention of influential men throughout her life in the hope that they will provide financial security for herself and her son. She never succeeds in finding security or stability through these tactics before her early death.

Salomé's death is symbolic of her life as a whole: she dies on her way to see a stunt flight by the American aviator Howard Hughes, attempting to be involved in a spectacle just as she has always attempted to be involved with influential men throughout her life. The newspaper report of the accident in which she dies describes her as a "female acquaintance" (185) of the foreign correspondent she was travelling with, leaving no legacy other than her attempt to attach herself to various men.

Artie Gold

Artie Gold is Harry's lawyer and friend. Although Harry initially hires Artie in order to help him deal with the contracts for a Hollywood adaptation of one of his novels, most of Artie's work for Harry consists of helping him deal with the charges made against him by the House Un-American Activities Committee.



Artie is Jewish and faces much discrimination in Asheville, North Carolina where one boarding house refused to allow Jews to rent a room. The discrimination Artie faces gives him a clear-eyed, if sometimes cynical, perspective on the political scene in the United States that allows him to advise Harry about how best to deal with the accusation that he is a Communist.

Tom Cuddy

Tom Cuddy is the closest thing Harry has to a love interest in the novel. Harry helps Tom put together an exhibition of American art that is denounced by politicians as being “un-American,” much to Tom’s dismay. Despite these experiences, Tom hypocritically cuts off all contact with Harry after the newspaper campaign to brand Harry as unpatriotic.



Symbols and Symbolism

The Lacuna

The lacuna – the underwater gap on Isla Pixol through which Harry swims – is the central symbol of the novel, symbolizing the space separating different worlds and the passageway between them. For a young Harry, the lacuna is a passageway from the present day to the ancient Mexico of the Aztecs. More widely, it symbolizes Harry's status as a symbolic bridge between the cultures of Mexico and the United States. The lacuna also symbolizes Violet Brown's position on the borderline of two different historical eras: one that limited the freedom and independence of women and one that allowed them to freely seek education and employment.

Diving Goggles

The diving goggles given to Harry by Leandro are symbolic of the ability to look into another world and learn lessons from it that can help in your own world. Originally, Harry uses the diving goggles to observe shoals of fish moving in unison, reflecting on how their patterns of behavior reflect his own experiences of feeling like an outcast on Isla Pixol who cannot bond with the native-born Mexican boys who surround the house where he lives with his mother and Enrique. Later, Harry uses this skill of seeing parallels in one world that are relevant to people in another world in his novels, in which he makes the events of ancient Aztec Mexico relevant to the political landscape of 20th Century America.

Aztec Figurine

The Aztec figurine that Harry finds at the volcano he visits with Frida is symbolic of a desire for fresh starts and new experiences. When he first finds the statue, Harry justifies stealing the figure because when he looks at it he feels like it is telling him: "I am looking for the door to another world. I've waited thousands of years. Take me" (200). When Harry himself is looking for a way into another life and another world, a way to escape the charges being made against him in the United States, he leaves the figure behind in his hotel room as a way of communicating to Violet that he has not died, he has begun a new life.

The Howlers

The howlers – monkeys on Isla Pixol who frighten Harry and his mother by imitating screaming sounds – are symbolic of journalistic misrepresentation. Harry observes that the monkeys hear one thing and endlessly repeat it without seeking to find out why the noises have begun and he argues that the newspapers do the same thing: they pick up on one detail such as Harry's supposedly perforated eardrum, his romance with Violet,



or his Communist sympathies, and repeat them endlessly and more and more loudly without ever trying to verify facts or seek out the truth of the situation.

Violet Brown's Name

Violet Brown's name is symbolic of the extent to which women during this era were unable to define the terms of their own lives. Violet's Christian name was chosen by her mother and her surname and the title of "Mrs." were provided to her by her husband, despite the fact that she remained unmarried for the vast majority of her life after her husband's death. Harry reflects that Violet's name is not her own, telling her that she "had been embossed with names like an address on a package, by people who didn't know the contents but still got to decide how it would be sent" (261).

Cooking

Harry's skill at cooking is symbolic of his Mexican heritage. He first learned to cook on Isla Pixol when assisting Leandro and developed his skills while working as a cook for Diego River and Frida Kahlo. He was able to use his cooking skills to lower his rent at the boarding house in Asheville, North Carolina but always returned to cooking Mexican food for himself when he lived alone.

Small Kitchen

The small kitchen at the Rivera house is symbolic of Diego's hypocrisy in relation to his Communist beliefs. The house was built without servant quarters or a kitchen large enough to accommodate a large kitchen staff because the Communists did not believe in having a servant class of people who served the wealthy in order to survive. Despite believing this in theory, in practice Diego still wanted to be waited on and therefore hired servants to work in an environment that was not suitable for their needs.

Hand Made Gloves

The gloves made by Violet for Harry are symbolic of the importance of their friendship to each other. Although neither character is prone to emotional outbursts, both held a quiet respect and fondness for the other that was communicated through things like Violet's Christmas gift of the gloves, which fit Harry perfectly because she had taken his measurements from a handprint he had left on a letter.

Frida's Pyramid Sketch

Frida's sketch of a pyramid with an eye looking out at the top that she sends to Violet is symbolic of Harry's new life which he begins in Mexico after the HUAC hearings and the impending risk of criminal charges in the United States. It is titled "Soli" which Violet



mistakenly believes is a reference to Spanish word for the sun. Violet does not understand the significance of the sketch. However the reader knows that the word “Soli” is Frida’s nickname for Harry and that the sketch is meant to communicate to Violet that he has not died and has begun a new life in Mexico.

Blue Slip

In the novel, the blue slip is symbolic of the way society at the time oppressed gay people and refused to acknowledge the value they contributed to society. Harry is deemed unfit for military service during WW2 because he is homosexual. At the time, this was referred to as being given a “blue slip” in reference to the paperwork used.

Throughout his life, Harry has to pursue romantic relationships in secret because of social disapproval of homosexuality and almost misses out on the opportunity to serve his country during the war, simply because he is gay.



Settings

Isla Pixol

Isla Pixol is an island in Mexico where Harry moved with his mother when she first left her father to be with Enrique, a Mexican businessman. Although relatively little of the action takes place on Isla Pixol it is a significant location in the novel because of the presence of the lacuna. Harry's discovery of the underwater passageway as a boy allows him to begin a new life in Mexico as an adult after he is hounded out of the United States by anti-Communists. Isla Pixol is also the location where Harry's interest in ancient Aztec culture first begins, which goes on to inspire his novels as an adult.

Mexico City

Harry and his mother move to Mexico City after Salome decides to leave Enrique for the man whom Harry refers to as Mr. PT Cash. Harry had relatively unhappy experiences in the city, especially while attending a school that does not provide lessons at an appropriate level for his intellect. Harry enjoys his life in Mexico City more after making contact with Diego Rivera and becoming a plaster mixer.

Washington DC / Potomac Academy

Washington DC is a location of great contrasts for Harry as so much of American culture is different from what he has experienced while growing up in Mexico. For example, Harry is shocked at the racial segregation in the city and the fact that African Americans could not use the same facilities as white people. Harry is also shocked by the harsh treatment of the Bonus Army Encampment by the United States Government. Someone happened to Harry while he was at Potomac Academy that is never revealed to the reader because it was detailed in the diary that Violet Brown burned. The reader can infer, however, that Harry forged some form of romantic relationship with Billy Boorzai that did not end well.

San Angel / Casa Rivera

The Rivera house in San Angel is a frustrating location for Harry as he is forced to work in a kitchen that is much too small for the needs of the household staff. He also comes under suspicion while living in the house because of the lack of privacy afforded to the staff. Harry shares a bedroom with Cesar who reports to Diego and Frida that Harry writes reports in English at night. Although limited in options during his time here, the location has a positive influence on Harry as it helps him to bond with Frida who goes on to become a lifelong friend.



Coyoacan / Casa Trotsky

Harry's time spent living in Coyoacan and Casa Trotsky contain some of the most formative experiences of his life. It is during this time that Harry's interest in politics is first awakened and his desire to become a writer starts to become a reality. However the trauma of witnessing Lev's assassination continues to haunt Harry for the rest of his life making him reclusive and easily upset throughout the rest of his adult life. It is the time spent at this location, working for Leon Trotsky, that is used against Harry during the HUAC hearings.

Asheville, North Carolina

Asheville, North Carolina becomes Harry's hometown by accident after he follows a road that just happens to stop here. Asheville is the location where Harry connects with Violet Brown who becomes a close friend and eventually rescues Harry's reputation and life story by saving and publishing his diaries. Although Harry is initially liked and respected in Asheville, the community quickly turns on him after the government and the newspapers brand him as a Communist and traitor.



Themes and Motifs

The Power of Words

Through the novel's central theme of the power of words, the author shows how the misuse of words can lead to short-term destruction and misrepresentation, but that ultimately sincere words correctly directed hold the power to communicate truth.

For Harry, the fear that his own words may have the power to destroy his life or inflict harm on others haunts him throughout the novel. Frequently, this fear leads Harry to overestimate the potential for his words to have negative consequences and, as a result, makes him overly reclusive and secretive about his writing. Harry's first real scare over the power of his words comes in Part 3 when one of his translations from a hearing where Lev is testifying is picked up and used in the *Washington Post*. Despite the fact that Harry did not make any mistakes in his translation, the thought of the potential for such an occurrence puts him in as much of a state of emotional distress as if he really had made an error. Upon noticing his own words printed in a newspaper Harry describes it as "a shock, and a terror" (162), claims he feels like he has been hanged, and suggests that the consequence of making a mistake is that "History could hang on it" (162). Once again, Harry reacts in an overly dramatic way to the misuse of his words during Frida's attempts to embarrass him in front of Van. Harry announces that the "confidences of this report have been used against their author" (171) leading the reader to assume that Harry faces some form of severe consequence as a result of his writing. In reality, all that has occurred is that Harry felt embarrassed on a boat.

Harry's terror of the power of his words to be used against him does prove to have some foundation later in the novel when the House Un-American Activities Committee uses out-of-context quotes from his fiction writing to brand him as a traitor to the United States. Harry's belief that written words do more harm than good is shown through his decision to destroy all of his diaries and correspondence. Riffing on the slogan "better dead than Red," which implied that death was preferable to living under Communism, Harry said of his life's work: "better dead than read" (461).

Violet Brown represents the counterpoint to Harry's belief that the power of words lies in their potential for destruction and misuse. Although Harry's fears that his diaries and correspondence could be used against him in the moment are rational, Violet takes a longer view of the situation and accurately concludes that the long-term power of Harry's words to communicate truth is more important than their short-term power to cause harm. By going against Harry's wishes first by not destroying the diaries as requested and then publishing them after his death, Violet gives Harry's words the opportunity to be read in a future society which views this era through a different lens. Just as Lev demanded that his murderer must be kept alive in order that the people may know the truth about his death, Violet keeps Harry's words alive so that the people may know the truth about his life.



Dual Identities

The exploration of characters with dual identities within the novel shows the ways that these personality splits can be tools for greater understanding and knowledge as well as the cause of isolation and misunderstanding.

The central dual identity in the novel is Harry's identity as both Mexican and American. Never truly at home in either country, Harry nevertheless carries parts of each identity into the other country, allowing him to have a positive influence on those around him. For example, Harry's bilingualism and the typing skills he learns at Potomac Academy help him further his career in Mexico allowing him to become a typist and translator for Leon Trotsky rather than staying trapped as a cook for Diego Rivera. Likewise, once Harry leaves Mexico and begins living in Asheville, North Carolina, his time spent working as a cook in Mexico allows him to reduce his rent and ingratiate himself at his boarding house by cooking for his landlady and the other lodgers. Later, Harry develops his career in the United States through other skills he first picked up in Mexico: he teaches Spanish, helps to transport valuable works of art, and writes successful novels about ancient Mexican history, contributing to his American culture through his special knowledge of Mexico.

However, Harry's dual identity is also a burden for him. Harry is treated as an outcast in both countries, with the boys on Isla Pixol making fun of him for his Caucasian appearance while the boys at Potomac Academy make fun of him for his Mexican heritage. More seriously, in adulthood, Harry's dual nationality places him under suspicion when the Riveras first discover his writing habit and his use of English in his notes and, most dramatically, when the U.S. government uses his past activities in Mexico in an attempt to brand him as a traitor to their country.

Harry is not the only character with dual identities in the novel. Both Frida Kahlo and Violet Brown have split aspects to their personalities that influence the way they behave and are received in the world. The split in Frida's personality is her desire not to be defined the illnesses that have left her with a deformed leg. Rather than allow other people to define her as someone with a disability, Frida developed a confrontational personality that counteracted any impression of her as a victim and way of dressing that prevented people from noticing her lame leg.

Violet's dual identity comes through the historical era in which she lives. She grew up in a community where women were not allowed or encouraged to pursue education or careers. Despite these limitations, Violet did manage to educate herself to a better standard than her mother's generation and provided for herself financially despite being unmarried for most of her life. However, similarly to Harry's dual identity, Violet is left isolated by her unusual position in life. Her family disapproves of her insistence on education and financial independence but mainstream society continued to deny educated women the same opportunities it afforded to educated men, leaving Violet isolated from her agricultural roots and isolated from the ranks of educated professional elites as well.



Journalistic Misrepresentation

Journalistic misrepresentation is depicted in the novel as a dangerous trend that leads to unfair accusations and a misinformed public, but also as something that can ultimately be counteracted by the persistence of individuals who refuse to allow journalistic misrepresentations to become accepted as fact.

Harry's first encounter with the frightening levels of misrepresentation occurring in newspapers happens after he is present when the United States government attacks families at the Bonus Army Encampment in Washington DC with tear gas. The next day, Harry reads newspaper reports that brand the people who were harmed as criminals despite this being in direct opposition to what he knows about the encampment from his own experiences. Later, while living with Lev, he sees the assassination attempt on Lev's life reported as a propaganda event staged by Lev himself in order to gain public sympathy. Harry learns a valuable lesson about how to make sure that truth can endure in the face of journalistic misrepresentation when Lev is dying. Lev's final instruction is to make sure that the man who murdered him survives, otherwise no one will ever know the truth of his death.

Harry experiences a different perspective on journalistic misrepresentation during WWII when living in North Carolina. Despite being common knowledge in California, Harry is completely unaware of the internment of Japanese American and German American citizens being carried out by the American government. Only by receiving firsthand reports from Frida and newspaper coverage from a different state does Harry discover the truth. Unlike previous occasions, when Harry was able to see that reports were false because they counteracted his own experience, he is now reliant on other's to tell him whether the news he has access to is accurate.

From a personal perspective, the most damaging piece of journalistic misrepresentation is the use of a quote from a character in one of Harry's novels being used as a direct quotation from Harry himself. Harry's response to this misrepresentation is hopelessness and despair, coupled with a desire to destroy all of his life's writing and begin his life afresh under an assumed name in Mexico. Violet Brown, on the other hand, takes an approach to journalistic misrepresentation that is more similar to Lev's. Rather than allowing the mistruths to stand, both Lev and Violet are careful to preserve the evidence that proves the truth: in Lev's case the life of the assassin Jackson and in Violet's case the diaries and correspondence of Harrison Shepherd. In both cases, this tactic is proven to be successful. Although the ability to quieten or correct the "howlers" eludes Harry at the time, Violet's persistence in preserving and publishing his words after both of their deaths means that the truth outlasts the inaccurate reports.

The fact that truth will eventually prevail over journalistic misrepresentation is symbolized by the election of President Harry Truman despite newspaper reports that his opponent Thomas Dewey had won. Upon hearing the news, an emotional Violet says to Harry: "Oh Mr. Shepherd, it's a day to remember. Those news men could not make a thing true just by saying so. It's living makes life" (443).



Missing Pieces

The central motif of missing pieces, symbolized by the lacuna of the novel's title, makes the argument that the missing piece of information about someone's life is often the most important detail.

On a structural level, this is proven to be the case by the diary featured in Part 1 titled "Private Journal Mexico North America" that Harry uses when still a boy living on Isla Pixol. The diary goes missing when Harry leaves Mexico after Lev's death and it is not returned to him in alongside the others that Frida stashes in the crate containing one of her artworks. When Violet presses Harry to continue writing his memoir – the first chapter of which serves as the first chapter of the novel – he protests that he cannot finish because the next notebook in the series of diaries is missing. The diary is rediscovered only after the death of Frida when a crate of things belonging to Harry is delivered to Violet in North Carolina. At this point, Violet still believes that Harry drowned on their trip to Mexico, but the newly discovered diary – the missing piece – contains information that helps Violet understand the truth about Harry's life and his apparent death. The way the novel is organized means that the reader is aware of the missing information before Violet is, adding pathos and dramatic irony to the sections of the novel describing events that would clearly make Violet believe that Harry had died.

However, although the reader has access to the missing piece the absence of which left Violet Brown in the dark, there is another missing piece in Harry's narrative that eludes even the reader. Although Violet reneged on her promise to destroy most of Harry's diaries, she had earlier followed through on his instruction to destroy one notebook. The truly missing diary is the one that Harry kept during his years at Potomac Academy that details the circumstances that led to his expulsion and, the reader infers, his relationship with Billy "Bull's Eye" Boorzai. If it is indeed the case, as Frida tells Harry, that the "most important thing about a person is always the thing you don't know" (216) then the reader, despite having access to a vast amount of information about Harry's life and internal world, is still left with the feeling that the truth of his character remains a mystery.

Frida herself embodies the idea that the missing piece of information about someone is the most important, through her extravagant appearance. Although on the surface this may seem vain or superficial, the missing piece of information from Harry's perspective is the fact of her disfigured leg. Knowing this missing piece of information about Frida re-contextualizes her behavior in the novel, painting her as someone bravely insisting on creating her own image and reputation rather than allowing others to do it for her. As Frida tells Harry: "If I don't choose, they choose for me" (214) concluding that the "gossips will say a million things, but they never ask 'That Mexican-Indian-Azteca girl, why does she always wear long dresses?'" (215).



Ordinary Lives of Influential People

Both the novel *The Lacuna* itself and the novel-within-a-novel, *Vassals of Majesty* by Harrison Shepherd, make the argument that influential and well-known historical figures lived lives that were markedly similar to ordinary people and that, by understanding this, cultures can better understand their own histories.

As a character, Harry makes this argument through his novels about ancient Mexico that seek to show modern day readers how the behavior of ancient civilizations is not so different from their own. Harry begins to see these similarities at a young age while still a student at Potomac Academy in Washington DC. Having witnessed the military using tear gas against civilians at the Bonus Army Encampment, Harry compares their behavior to the behavior of Hernán Cortés and the Spanish colonizers who ultimately destroyed the Aztec empire. Harry wrote in his diary that the military “weren’t even ashamed, scads of people saw them do it, the whole crowd was screaming: like Cortés and the Aztecs: one side always better armed” (102). Harry compares General MacArthur’s actions to those of Cortés as his men “set flaming torches to the canvas and pasteboard homes. Exactly as Cortés said it: Much grieved to burn up the people, but since it was still more grievous to them, he determined to do it” (106).

Once Harry is an adult, he starts to use these early experiences as he develops his distinctive views on the world and tries to turn them into fiction. When visiting the volcano together, Harry and Frida contemplate the significance of the lack of written documents left behind by the Aztecs. The pair agree that the ancient culture has managed to continue its appearance of greatness because they did not write anything down, with Frida pointing out this means “we can’t read their diaries... or the angry letters they sent their unfaithful lovers. They died without telling us their complaints” (196). In order to rectify this, Harry writes *Vassals of Majesty* about the lives of everyday Aztec soldiers during the days of Cortés. Proving the success of Harry’s attempt to make the ancient culture relevant to modern times, one reviewer notes that “These soldiers might as well be singing the song every GI knows by heart” (303) comparing the characters in the novel to American soldiers in WW2.

On a wider scale, the process that Harry wants to achieve with *Vassals of Majesty* is what is achieved by the author in *The Lacuna* itself. By inventing the fictional Harrison Shepherd to carry out the everyday tasks of cooking, typing, and translating, the author gives a new perspective on this era in Mexico, specifically the lives and loves of figures of great historical importance like Leon Trotsky, Frida Kahlo, and Diego Rivera. Communism was vilified during the Cold War in the United States but, through the focus on the details of the ordinary lives of influential people, *The Lacuna* as a whole seeks to put forward the suggestion that influential people with apparently alien political beliefs are not monsters but are, in fact, just like everyone else. As Harry says to Artie Gold: “I spent years around Communists, cleaning their dishes ... You know something, Artie? They eat what people eat. They paint the dining room yellow, and love their children” (421).

Styles

Point of View

The novel is told through the point of view of both Harrison Shepherd and Violet Brown. The parts of the narrative told from Harry's point of view include a chapter deliberately written as a memoir, several diaries covering different periods of his life, as well as correspondence with others, most often Frida Kahlo. The sections told from Violet's perspective are written in retrospect after the apparent "death" of Harrison Shepherd. Violet's character plays a role similar to that of an omniscient narrator because, unlike the reader or Harry himself, she knows how the story will end from the moment she begins writing. Harry, by contrast, writes the sections from his perspective at the time that the events are actually happening and therefore has no sense of what is to come later in his life.

The use of point of view in the novel serves to heighten the sense of mystery through withholding certain bits of information. For example, because Harry kept a diary at Potomac Academy there was no motivation for him to write about the events that occurred there anywhere else. Further to this, as the events were clearly something that made Harry uncomfortable, he never shares the details with other characters such as Violet Brown or Frida Kahlo. As a result of this, the reader does not have a full understanding of these events and how they impacted Harry, as they would do in a narrative told in the third person with an omniscient narrator.

The use of Violet Brown's perspective is used to create mystery in the early chapters when the reader only knows her as the archivist and must guess at her motivations before she reveals her identity. Later, her perspective is used to add dramatic irony to Harry's "death" when the reader has access to information about the lacuna that Violet did not have access to at the time.

Language and Meaning

The author uses language to demonstrate the changing life stages and emotional state of Harrison Shepherd. The opening chapter, although covering Harry's childhood years, was written in retrospect by an adult Harry reflecting on his own youth and therefore uses the poetic language of a professional writer and the vocabulary level of an adult: "The boy and his mother believed it was saucer-eyed devils screaming in those trees, fighting over the territorial right to consume human flesh" (1). Once the narrative is told through Harry's diaries, however, the language becomes more child-like to reflect the age that he was when the diaries were created: "Leandro, wife, and dead people are having their party at the graveyard behind the rock beach on the other side" (30).

When Harry returns to Mexico with Violet Brown as an adult, he begins to adopt some of the style and phrases he used to use as a child, symbolizing a return to his roots. For



example, throughout his childhood years Harry frequently uses variations on the phrase “your name is mud” (12) and returns to this idiom on his trip with Violet when she dislikes the first location they visit: “But for now, the name of this place is mud. Or so Mrs. Brown must think” (389).

Violet Brown’s use of language reflects her position as being torn between the past and the future. As Harry notes, she uses old fashioned language and phrases: “She says ‘nought’ and ‘nary a one,’ and the garden greens she brought me were ‘sallets,’ the word Shakespeare used. She says ‘queasy’ to mean worried, as did King Lear” (317).

Structure

The novel is structured in a way that creates mystery and dramatic tension by manipulating the information that is available to the reader and to different characters at any given point. Although the story is ostensibly told in chronological order, beginning with Harry’s childhood and carrying on in a linear fashion up until his “death,” the author withholds certain bits of information in order to deepen the mystery of what became of Harrison Shepherd.

In the early stages of the novel, this is largely accomplished through the use of the archivist (who the reader will later come to know as Violet Brown). The archivist introduces details into the chronological narrative that make the reader question what they are reading and why Harrison Shepherd’s life is considered important enough to warrant the publication of this material. Tension is created by the revelation that Harry wished for his diaries to be destroyed as well as through the withholding of Violet’s motivation for going against his wishes until much later in the novel. There are also moments when Harry’s version of events contradicts what the reader already knows, such as the announcement that all of his diaries and his novel have been lost forever in Mexico after Trotsky’s death. Although Harry believes this to be true at the time, the reader knows that it cannot be true having just read the supposedly lost diaries.

Towards the end of the novel, the way the narrative is structured puts the reader in the position of knowing more about the significance of events than Violet Brown. As Violet did not receive the missing diary until several years after Harry’s apparent “death,” when she first narrates the incident the reader is immediately aware of what she will later discover, creating empathy for her grief as well as a satisfying and uplifting conclusion to the mystery of Harry’s death.



Quotes

Luckily the Spaniards wrote buckets about the Azteca civilization before they blew it to buttons and used its stones for their churches.

-- Harry (Part 1, "Mexico City, 1930")

Importance: A young Harry reflects on the fallen Azteca empire and the fact that Spanish written documents allow people like him to learn about what happened. This reflects what Harry himself does for the likes of Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, and Leon Trotsky: he records for history the events he witnesses so that people in the future can have greater insight into what happened.

Harry. Harry Shepherd looked out the window. Whoever pays the bill, names the boy.

-- Harry (Part 2)

Importance: When he first arrives in the United States, his father refers to him as "Harry" when they meet, and this becomes one of the names Harry is referred to as. This quotation reflects Harry's lack of ability or desire to define himself, always allowing others to dictate to him who he is. This attitude harms Harry later in life when he does not fight back against journalistic misrepresentation of his life and views.

But as to the journal, his express wish was to see it removed from this earth. In time, with full voice and sound mind, he expressed the same wish for the other journals too: all these now collected in a volume.

-- The Archivist (Part 2, "Archivist's Note")

Importance: The archivist informs the reader for the first time that the author of the diaries they have been reading did not want anyone to read them. This creates a mystery at the heart of the novel about why Harry would wish for his diaries to be destroyed and why the archivist would go against his wishes by publishing them.

According to her authorized instruction it is to harbor no opinions, confessions, or fictions."

-- Harry (Part 3, "Report from Coyoacan")

Importance: Harry records the instructions given to him by Frida when he begins the notebook he kept while working alongside Lev. Despite these instructions, Harry's writing style does not become dry or objective and instead he uses the record to engage in lively correspondence with Frida including many opinions on the secretary Van.

History could hang on it. Lives could be lost, for the sake of writing the wrong word. No wonder writers are pessimistic. Better to be a cook, where a mistake will only send someone away hungry, or at worst, to the WC.

-- Harry (Part 3, "Report from Coyoacan")

Importance: Harry panics after seeing one of his translations reprinted in the



Washington Post. This first instance of publication causes Harry to question his dreams of becoming a writer and wonder whether he would be better off spending the rest of his days as a cook. Although Harry faces no negative consequences over this translation, later in life his words are used against him in a serious and damaging way.

The confidences of this report have been used against their author. Fact, not opinion.
-- Harry (Part 3, "Report from Coyoacan")

Importance: Harry chastises Frida for using his revelations about his crush on Van in order to tease him during their boat trip. The relatively minor nature of this incident underscores how severe Harry's dread of his words being used against him has become.

Soli, let me tell you. The most important thing about a person is always the thing you don't know"
-- Frida Kahlo (Part 3, "Report from Coyoacan")

Importance: Frida explains a theory to Harry that resonates throughout the novel. It highlights the significance of the Isla Pixol diary for Violet Brown, the missing piece of information without which she did not realize that Harry was still alive. For the reader the thing about Harry that remains unknown are the details of his relationship with Billy "Bull's Eye" Boorzai.

God speaks for the man who keeps quiet.
-- Harry (Part 4)

Importance: A belief repeated by Harry on numerous occasions and recalled by Violet Brown. Violet eventually concludes that God does intend to speak for Harry, defending him against the allegations made against him by the anti-Communists. Violet concludes that God intended to speak for Harry through Violet herself, motivating her to publish Harry's diaries against his wishes.

I'm going to give you a piece of advice. Don't mention that you were once employed by the leader of the Bolshevik Revolution.
-- Artie Gold (Part 4)

Importance: Harry's lawyer Artie Gold wryly underscores how Harry's employment history might be used against him in an atmosphere of intense anti-Communism. The quotation underscores how naïve Harry is in relation to his past and how unprepared he will be when his history is used against him.

It always begins somewhere, one howler waking up the others. They pass it on, embellished, not through any creative drive but only a pure slothful failure to verify a fact.
-- Harry (Part 5)

Importance: Harry recalls the noisy monkeys on Isla Pixol and uses them as a



metaphor for the behavior of the press after he is accused of being a traitor and a Communist. Harry bemoans the fact that the journalists repeat each other without checking the facts of the matter, allowing journalistic misrepresentations to spread at an alarming rate.

Oh, Mr. Shepherd, it's a day to remember. Those newsmen could not make a thing true just by saying so. It's only living makes life.

-- Violet Brown (Part 5)

Importance: Violet Brown is overjoyed after hearing the news that President Truman has won the election despite newspaper reports announcing the victory of his opponent. This incident offers hope to the characters, and to the world, that journalistic misrepresentation will always be overcome by the truth, even if that process ends up taking 50 years as it does with the case of Harrison Shepherd.

Our leader is an empty sack. You could just as well knock him over, put a head with horns on a stick, and follow that. Most of us never choose to believe in the nation, we just come up short on better ideas.

-- Harrison Shepherd (Part 5)

Importance: A quotation from one of the characters in the Harrison Shepherd novel *Vassals of Majesty* that is misattributed in the newspapers as a quote from Harry himself speaking about President Truman. Throughout the novel, Harry suffers from an intense fear that his words will be used against him although in many cases his fears are unfounded. These are the words that are ultimately used against Harry in the way that he has always feared.