

Memoirs of Hadrian Study Guide

Memoirs of Hadrian by Marguerite Yourcenar

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Plot Summary

Memoirs of Hadrian by Marguerite Yourcenar is a classic historical novel detailing the life and reign of the Roman emperor Hadrian, as told from the first-person point-of-view of Hadrian himself. The narrative is told in a letter written by the protagonist to his successor, Marcus Aurelius. It details the struggles and triumphs of a leader who made peace his central objective.

When Hadrian begins his letter to Marcus Aurelius, he is an old man dying from heart disease. He intends to give his adopted grandson a true history of his life and reign. Hadrian is born in Italica to a Spanish family. He studies rhetoric, Greek, philosophy and medicine in Spain and Greece, and trains as an army officer. During the waning days of Domitian's reign, he goes to Rome and works several years as a judge. There he lives a life of debauchery, until he returns to active duty in the Pyrenees.

While serving in Spain, Domitian dies and is succeeded by the elderly Nerva, who takes Hadrian's cousin Trajan as his adopted son. Nerva dies, and Hadrian is the first to tell his cousin of his accession. Trajan is uncertain of Hadrian's value and skills, but Hadrian proves himself in the Dacian Wars with acts of valor. Trajan tentatively chooses him as a successor. Hadrian marries into the family and is assisted by the empress, Plotina. Trajan begins a campaign of conquest in Parthia that dominates his reign. Hadrian believes his role as emperor should be to ensure peace and prosperity throughout the Roman world. Trajan dies and Hadrian takes the throne.

Hadrian does not care for Rome and spends most of his reign traveling the provinces. He makes peace with the Parthians, begins rebuilding Athens and Jerusalem, and builds centers of trade throughout the provinces. He also pushes reforms increasing imperial transparency and rights to slaves. While in Bithynia, he meets a beautiful Greek named Antinous and falls in love. The young man becomes his constant companion.

At about this time, Hadrian realizes he is divine. He begins to take his young lover for granted, and Antinous - knowing Hadrian's interest in cults and strange rites - sacrifices himself for the emperor. Hadrian is devastated, and he has Antinous interred in Alexandria. He builds hundreds of statues and sets about creating a cult to his dead lover.

Not long after, Jewish zealots in Jerusalem massacre Roman troops and send the city into revolt. Hadrian sends his best commander, but the battle continues for three years. Jerusalem is reduced to rubble, and the Jewish people become uniformly opposed to Roman rule. Hadrian wonders whether the Roman people are still worthy leaders of the world.

Upon returning to Rome after the Judea battle, Hadrian goes about choosing his successor. He settles on his friend Lucius Ceionius. Unfortunately, Lucius falls suddenly ill and dies. Hadrian then chooses a popular and able Senator, Antoninus, and a prodigious child of a renowned family, Marcus Aurelius, to succeed him. As Hadrian lies

on his deathbed, he thinks back on his life and work. He has achieved prosperity and peace in the Roman world and his lover is an established god, now. He dies contented.



Animula Vagula Blandula

Animula Vagula Blandula Summary

Memoirs of Hadrian by Marguerite Yourcenar is a classic historical novel detailing the life and reign of the Roman emperor Hadrian, as told from the first-person point-of-view of Hadrian himself. The narrative is told in a letter the protagonist writes to his successor, Marcus Aurelius, and it details the struggles and triumphs of a leader who made peace his central objective.

In the preamble of the letter - Animula Vagula Blandula - Hadrian informs Marcus that his physician Hermogenes has recently inspected him and found his heart disease worsening. Hermogenes attempted to sugar-coat the prognosis, but Hadrian knows the inclination to pander to his better graces. Hadrian does not fear death, however, thinking it merely a part of life. He recalls his days hunting game as a youth. For him, hunting has always been a preferred release of savage desires. Now, he is unable to walk under his own strength.

Hadrian proceeds to comment on his distaste for the Roman habit of over-eating and culinary extravagances. He has always preferred the food of a soldier to the overdone meals of the Roman gentry. Hadrian does not recommend fasting, vegetarianism, or outward abstention from food, however. He points out to Marcus that an emperor must appear to be felicitous with his citizens in as many respects as possible.

Hadrian goes on to discuss the concept of love, which he believes to be separate from all other joys in life. Other joys involve merely oneself and the experience; love involves another. Moreover, it lingers far beyond its actual experience, leaving joy and pain that does not diminish. He had thought for a while to view the world entirely in terms of the quantity of contact he had with each person, thus determining the level of love toward each. He reasons that he could never be a great seducer because he cares too much for his loves. He has suffered from it.

Hadrian is now losing all pleasures from his life, it seems. One that he values more than ever, though, is sleeping and dreams. He loves the idea of surrendering to a world of images and ideas that he cannot control, knowing that he will return from it. He recalls a busy day in Rome - a city he visits as rarely as possible - when he was exhausted he collapsed in his tent at the end of the day. One hour's sleep, however, rejuvenated him utterly.

Hadrian announces that this letter to Marcus, intended initially as a mere update on his condition, has grown long and rambling. He decides to use the letter as an opportunity to tell the true story of his life. He tells Marcus that it shall be more truthful than his official summary. He intends it to shock and edify the young prince.



Hadrian tells him that there are only three means for understanding the world: oneself, one's fellow men, and books. He warns that books - even the best - contain lies. Observation of fellow men, too, is colored by bias, since these observations are themselves made by men. Hadrian enjoys reading police reports regarding his associates, but he takes them with a grain of salt. Hadrian is fixated with the idea of understanding himself. He hates that his life feels too formless, and he approaches each day with a dogged attempt to frame it into categories. Still, he cannot account for much. Having traveled so far and frequently, he confuses much. Hadrian has endeavored to find meaning in his grand existence, even experimenting with the magical.

Animula Vagula Blandula Analysis

The first chapter of *Memoirs of Hadrian* is an introduction in a letter from Hadrian to his adopted grandson Marcus Aurelius. Hadrian is dying. He is aware of this, even if his faithful physician Hermogenes attempts to cover it up as much as possible. The elderly Hadrian is a weary and introspective man with an intense desire to set the record straight about his life. This letter is not initially intended as an autobiography, but after twenty-five pages of beating around the bush, the aged emperor determines it will become one.

Animula Vagula Blandula is something of a sketch of Hadrian's personality. He is pragmatic but analytical. Near the end of the letter, he indicates that the study of books and one's fellow man can only illuminate so much of life; the study of oneself is the pathway to enlightenment. Hadrian spends a lot of time analyzing himself. He enjoys hunting, and credits it with his refraining from human bloodshed. He does not care for large and extravagant meals, considering them a weakness of the Roman people.

Most importantly, he is haunted by love, which he considers singular among life's joys. The marks of love, both joyous and painful, remain with a person for the rest of one's life. Moreover, an aficionado of love's pleasures begins to notice them in every aspect of life. This inkling toward love is a hallmark of Hadrian both as a man and as a ruler. He longs for a kingdom of mutual happiness rather than one of fear and subjugation.

Moreover, Hadrian's propensity for love will be the central joy and pain in his life. His affection and fixation for Antinous will inform every aspect of his life from the time the two meet onward. His principle contribution to the culture of Rome will be the religious cult dedicated to his lover. Hadrian is a ruler of tremendous heart and tremendous intelligence, and his memoirs will be an analysis of the philosophy that guides his personal and political life.



Varius Multiplex Multiformis, 29-49

Varius Multiplex Multiformis, 29-49 Summary

In Varius Multiplex Multiformis, Hadrian begins his life's story. Hadrian is born in Italica, the child of a Spanish senator. He recalls his grandfather, Marullinis, a superstitious but educated old man. Marullinis is something of a local fixture, famous for assistance to a past emperor, but often seen walking with no shoes or cover for his head. One night, he casts young Hadrian's horoscope and determines that he will one day rule the world.

Hadrian's father is Aelius Hadrianus Afer, a man who against all odds makes no fortune as a politician. He dies when Hadrian is twelve. His mother settles into quiet widowhood for the rest of her life. Hadrian comments that his family historically had been on the wrong side of history, dissenting against every eventual victor.

Educated in Spain, Hadrian says he was prepared for life but ill-instructed on philosophy. He becomes enamored of historical rulers and poetry. He begins his study of Greek and finds that it transforms his worldview. Greece, he says, is the mother of Rome, and he has always been in awe of its structures, philosophy, history, and art. Hadrian has strove in life to Hellenize himself completely.

At sixteen, Hadrian begins military training in Rome. He is then sent to the Pyrenees to be stationed as a soldier. He comes under the care of Attianus who, concerned for the continuation of his education, sends him to Athens. There he studies rhetoric, mathematics, and medicine. Hadrian confides to Marcus that he cares little for youth and that by twenty he was largely the man he is today.

After a time in Athens, Hadrian grows restless and longs to return to the center of the world, Rome. Domitian, a weak-willed and violent emperor, has lost control of the citizenry. Hadrian's cousin Trajan seems poised to take the throne, and Hadrian longs for power and influence. He is named judge dealing in inheritance litigation. As judge, he develops a reputation around the city of his carnal activities, and litigants begin sending their wives and servants to him. He remains fair and judicious, however, but remains unpopular throughout Rome due to his studious and artistic disposition.

Life in Rome, particularly that of a judge, begins to embitter Hadrian, but he is granted a reprieve by returning to active duty in the army. He first goes to the Upper Danube, then to cold, harsh Lower Moesia. En route to this post, Hadrian hears of the assassination of Domitian and the accession of the elder statesman Nerva to the throne. Nerva, ill of health, immediately adopts Trajan. On duty, Hadrian is impressed by the efficiency of the regiment but horrified by its harsh treatment of the native population. For his part, Hadrian likes dealing with the tribes. He is astonished by the beauty of the wild land.



Varius Multiplex Multiformis, 29-49 Analysis

In this section, we learn about Hadrian's formative years: his youth in Spain, his military training and his studies in Greece. The resulting politician is a man with a deep love of the ideal of Ancient Greece, a desire to understand world culture, and comfort both in studious and military settings.

The young Hadrian is greedy for power and influence. He sees the decline of a weak emperor, Domitian, and the ascendancy of a relative, his cousin Trajan, and he desires to become a fixture in Roman society. What he finds is a mixture of disappointment and disdain. His attitude regarding the world - that it is a place from which to learn and find beauty - is at odds with the cynical world of Roman society. Moreover, Hadrian's position as an inheritance judge teaches him to despise humanity. His only pleasure in the city is debauchery, which he pursues with abandon. These early wild years will haunt him as he pursues a career in politics under Trajan.

When he leaves Rome to rejoin the army, he is shocked by the military's subjugation of native tribes in the provinces. For Hadrian, the path to a successful empire is paved with mutual respect. He fears this harsh treatment only encourages frontier revolt. These early experiences on the outskirts of the Roman world will inform his policies as emperor.



Varius Multiplex Multiformis, 49-69

Varius Multiplex Multiformis, 49-69 Summary

Hadrian travels to Lower Germany to congratulate Trajan on his being named heir to the throne. On the way, he receives word of Nerva's death. Hadrian realizes that another imperial hopeful, Servianus, intends to send a separate messenger to Trajan, so that he can be first to tell him of his accession. Hadrian plows ahead without rest and arrives at Trajan's camp just ahead of Servianus's man.

Trajan is still uncertain about Hadrian, having heard at length about his debts and affairs from jealous politicians. This is exacerbated by an incident in which both Trajan and Hadrian are enamored of the same young man, and Hadrian succeeds in having him. Hadrian's guardian, Attianus, repairs relations between them.

Trajan begins a campaign against the Dacians, placing Hadrian in a middling officer's rank. Hadrian understands Trajan's distrust, and he uses his position to become familiar with his men. He also becomes enamored of the strange cult of Mithra, going so far as to undergo a blood rite with his commander Marcius Turbo. He is showered in cow's blood in a secret ceremony. Of late, Hadrian says, he has restricted rituals of this sort as dissenting to the state. During the battles with the Dacians, he undertakes a series of foolhardy and successful exercises on the field. He recalls how death during these adventures then seemed an impossibility. His exploits win him the command of the finest legion in the army, which he takes through the last of the Dacians' strongholds to the castle of their king, who has committed suicide. That night, Trajan gives Hadrian a ring passed to him by Nerva, an implicit indication of royal succession.

Back in Rome, Hadrian receives favors from Trajan, and Plotina, Trajan's Wife, insists that he write the emperor's speeches for him. Trajan despises public speaking, however, and after a time he entrusts Hadrian with the duty. Plotina goes on to marry him to Trajan's grandniece, Sabina, a girl of much younger age. Hadrian is clearly being groomed for the throne, a fact that makes others in the city jealous. He cannot stand the inner circle of the emperor, but he tolerates it.

Hadrian's marriage to Sabina is one of mutually agreed chastity, and as such he takes to bed with many patrician women. As he recalls, the actually women were bores; only the danger and intrigue was enticing.

The Samaritans make incursions into Roman territory during Trajan's triumph in Rome. Hadrian leads men to put down the insurrection, a campaign that ends up lasting nearly a year. Hadrian describes it as horrifically brutal. He also sees how Roman misuse of the outlying territories has weakened the Empire. Again, Hadrian finds the chief of his enemies a suicide. He returns to Rome a hero, but disillusioned.



Varius Multiplex Multiformis, 49-69 Analysis

Hadrian recognizes his path to the imperial throne in this section. Nerva, an old and decrepit man, has adopted Trajan as his successor, and Hadrian intends to become a central figure in his cousin's government. When Nerva dies, Hadrian is the first to tell Trajan that he is emperor, beating out a political rival, Servianus. Servianus will remain an annoyance and danger to Hadrian for the rest of both of their lives.

Trajan is a pragmatic military man, disinterested in politics and philosophy but deeply committed to men of courage. Hadrian recognizes that courageous acts are the path to his cousin's favor. Trajan is ambivalent about Hadrian, whom he regards as saturnine and irresponsible. His valor in the campaign against the Dacian changes this. Hadrian leads his troops to the door of the Dacian king, and Trajan rewards him with the imperial ring.

We are introduced to the two most important women in Hadrian's life. The most important is Plotina, Trajan's wife. She recognizes in him the strongest successor to her husband, and she begins to groom him as such. She has him married to Sabina, a relation and the other important woman in his life. Sabina proves to be headstrong and ultimately antagonistic to Hadrian. Theirs is a marriage of convenience, intended for connections and the public.

Lastly, Hadrian's battle against the Samaritans shows him the true brutality of the Roman Empire against those it wishes to conquer. He cannot reconcile the supposed threat of these people with the brutality they suffer at imperial hands. This experience is central to Hadrian's plans for liberal reform.



Varius Multiplex Multiformis, 69-92

Varius Multiplex Multiformis, 69-92 Summary

Hadrian is made a consul of Rome, and he decides to use his influence to press for peace with the adjacent native populations. He is developing his philosophy of world affairs: that wars should be defensive acts intended to stabilize the Empire. Still, Hadrian cannot press the emperor to enact this type of policy, since Trajan - seeing the end of his reign approaching - wants one more large campaign. Trajan's most trusted and liberal counselor, Lucinius Sura, is dying and he uses his last days to press the emperor for peace.

Hadrian's primary enemy is a Roman of Arab origin named Lusius Quietus. Hadrian is safe, however, being protected by both Attianus and Plotina. He is given governorship of Syria and is military legate in charge of organizing bases. Trajan prepares for an expedition against Armenia and Parthia.

Trajan takes Armenia easily and intends to move against Parthia when an earthquake destroys Antioch. The local population begins to revolt. Trajan is injured and his health begins to decline, but he remains steadfast in his desire to expand in. He descends into regular debaucheries. Hadrian fears Trajan's simple plan of exterminating the population of Parthia will not work. He is unaware of the complexity of the population he is invading, including several violent Jewish sects. Advisers like Quietus, meanwhile, are encouraging the strident rhetoric.

During this time, Plotina continually aids Hadrian. She warns him of plotting and evaluates his so-called supporters. Attianus joins in their discussions, and Plotina tells Hadrian that Trajan distrusts him and will keep him in Antioch. Lusius Quietus will lead the troops in Parthia. Most of the local lords immediately declare their fidelity to Rome. The Parthian victory appears assured.

As Trajan prepares to return to Rome for his triumph, revolt flames throughout the Eastern frontier. Hadrian succeeds in holding order in Syria, but the military is entangled in a siege at Hatra which lasts through the winter. Hadrian is terrified as the emperor ceases communication with him. He believes he has fallen out of favor, and Lusius Quietus is insinuating himself as a new heir. Hadrian is now forty, and all but certain that his decline has begun. Desperate to know the future, he consults seers and even kills a prisoner to see if the man's soul can tell him his fate.

Trajan raises the siege on Hatra and decides to return west of the Euphrates. However, he takes ill while traveling. Hadrian visits him in repose, and the old man is making new military plans. Everyone is on edge since Trajan has yet to announce an heir. Hadrian secretly meets with Osroes, the Parthian King, to negotiate for peace. As he does so, Trajan dies, and Plotina announces that his will declares Hadrian emperor.



Varius Multiplex Multiformis, 69-92 Analysis

This section is largely a portrait of Trajan in his later years. He suffers, Hadrian says, from an affliction common to emperors. Uncertain of how to ensure his legacy, he has allowed his worse nature overtake him and begun a massive conflict for the sake of a triumph. In Trajan's case, it is an invasion and subduing of Parthia. The campaign - initially simply, but eventually a quagmire - ends up dominating his final days and driving him to madness and perversion.

All this is occurring as Hadrian has settled on his philosophy of governance. He sees the Parthians - like the Greeks, Jews, Samaritans, and others - as willing subjects content with peace. He believes war should not be a policy but a tool to be used when dialogue fails. He attempts to impart this notion to Trajan with the emperor's aged adviser Sura and Plotina. The emperor is listening to the council of ambitious firebrands like Lusius Quietus now.

As the campaign drags on and Trajan's health fails, Hadrian grows desperate to know if he will be the successor to the throne. If he is not, his political - and, likely, his natural - life is over. In these scenes of anxious terror, the reader experiences one of Hadrian's great weaknesses: he believes he can control the future. He consults soothsayers and even kills a man to find out his fate. Such fixation of supernatural powers will ultimately drive cost him his the person he loves most.

In the end Hadrian is given the imperial throne, though many speculate Plotina might have forged the will for him. This is one of the few controversies surrounding Hadrian's reign, and it will be exacerbated by his immediate actions to consolidate power.



Tellus Stabilita, 95-122

Tellus Stabilita, 95-122 Summary

Before returning to Rome, Hadrian negotiates peace with Osroes, who is eager to see the bloodshed end so that trade can continue with India. Hadrian oversees the rebuilding of cities destroyed by rebellions. He also meets with representatives from the Jews and Greeks in the area, attempting unsuccessfully to improve relations. All told, he seeks peace on the outer rim of the empire.

Hadrian and Lusius Quietus go hunting together, and Quietus makes an unsuccessful attempt on his life. Quietus then proceeds toward Rome, evidently to try to usurp the throne. Hadrian enlists Attianus to deal with Quietus, and the old man goes beyond his duties, killing three of Quietus's allies along with him. Hadrian is infuriated, believing the acts will sully his accession. Attianus agrees to disappear from public life. Hadrian considers Attianus one of his victims.

The citizenry seemingly forgives Hadrian's early murders, and he becomes famous for his clemency and patience with petitioners. Moreover, he refuses the title Father of the Country until he feels he has earned it. Additionally, he refuses a triumph for the peace with Parthia. The citizens dislike his aversion to the city of Rome however. Hadrian makes an effort to be a man of the people: going to the public baths, holding games, etc. He struggles to create greater transparency in government, refusing legacies from deceased patricians among other reforms. He tries to improve the city by restricting congestion of carriages and segregating the sexes in bath houses. He spends his nights with the friends of his youth and some family. He becomes particularly fond of Lucius Ceionius, a bon vivant and son of an old friend. Hadrian grows tired of the city, however, and decides to travel abroad to enact his plans for peace. Before leaving, he holds a triumph in Trajan's honor.

Hadrian speaks of the ideal that is Rome, a land of plenty, peace, and fairness. He longs to impart that luxury and hope to the whole world. The flip side of this, though, is that the Roman way of life must adapt to the cultures it wishes to annex. He feels that the worst way to unify a people is through laws, which are faulty at best and tyrannical at worst. He recalls a time when a maddened mine slave attacked him in Spain. Rather than having the man executed, he made him his servant, seeing that the man had been ill-used by the Empire. He pushes liberty as a prime export of Rome.

Part of this pledge is the greater regulation of slavery. While not abolishing it, Hadrian creates tougher regulations regarding the human treatment of slaves. He also creates laws forcing landowners to use their land effectively or else sell it to farmers. Hadrian has a deep respect for the earth and fears that the Empire has been profligate in its use of it. He regularly visits army outposts to ensure that the troops have not grown rowdy or indolent. All told, Hadrian views an emperor as a civil servant tasked with maintaining order, and he rarely delegates to subordinates.



Tellus Stabilita, 95-122 Analysis

Tellus Stabilita begins the reign of Hadrian, whose intention is to be liberal in his reforms and moderate in his person. He is challenged from the beginning with this moderation. Traditionally, the transition of power between emperors in Rome has been a bloody affair, with new emperors killing rivals even within their own family. Hadrian would like a peaceful transition, but Lusius Quietus is making that impossible. Hadrian needs to kill this man before Quietus kills him, but Attianus - Hadrian's trusted aide - kills four men. Hadrian fears that he will be viewed as another paranoid tyrant like Nero or Domitian.

Hadrian is able to temper people's fears about him by his actions. He does not view his position as that of a ruler. He prefers to think of himself as a manager. He is concerned with improvements to the city and empire and equity for his people. His legacy - an issue with which he is preoccupied - will not be measured in land that he has conquered but prosperity that he has engendered.

In this section Hadrian speaks of Rome in the idealistic terms we use to describe America. To him, Rome is a shining beacon on a hill, the pinnacle of civilization, and the culture to bring about a better world.

Additionally, we meet the character of Lucius Ceionius in this section. He is a witty, hard-living public figure, and he quickly becomes Hadrian's best friend in Rome. Throughout much of the novel, Lucius will serve primarily as a companion and sounding board, but his function in the latter chapters will be pivotal.



Tellus Stabilita, 122-149

Tellus Stabilita, 122-149 Summary

Hadrian travels throughout the Empire, spending twelve of his twenty reigning years abroad. He builds a ship with all the amenities he needs for to reign effectively. He longs for speed in travel and variety of experience, and compares himself to Pythagoras and Plato, who saw the entire world before they died. With him he takes the priggish Phlegon, his trusted secretary. He also grants Suetonius access to Rome's confidential libraries for his biography of the Caesars.

Hadrian travels from provincial town to provincial town developing centers of industry and trade. He loves the layout of a well-designed town and considers it a commune with the earth, refining what is already there. He speaks to Marcus about his work on these cities, how it connects him at once to the past and to the future. More than that, these structures contain Hadrian and those he loves in them. He dedicates them to himself, Plotina, and his lover Antinous. As such, each of these cities has a history inextricably linked to his own.

Hadrian goes on to discuss the thousands of statues that have been erected in his honor throughout the Roman world. He compares the naturalistic portraits of Rome to the idealized form of Greece. More than his own image, Hadrian has commissioned another person's, presumably his lover Antinous's. Hadrian discusses the many manifestations of this face, some perfect, some flawed. He sums up his desire that Rome should be a bastion of peace amid the flames for the undeveloped wilderness.

Hadrian oversees the renovation of the military camps in Germany and proceeds to the British Isles, where he settles in Londinium. He sets about pacifying the island for the first time since Claudius. He brings additional troops in to train a local army, and he builds a gigantic wall to bisect the island, keeping the enemy troops out. While in England, Hadrian is enchanted by the wild natives who worship nymphs. Asking a sorceress to speak his future, he learns of burning cities and disaster ahead. He sees the failure of his peace.

Hadrian goes to Spain and Africa to deal with small revolts. He would like to go back to Rome for a bit, but violent incidents near Parthia draw him east. Hadrian takes with him Osroes's daughter - long a captive in Rome - to their meeting as a sign of good will. They make a peace together that has holds for 15 years. While in Parthia, Hadrian meets a Brahma from India who has achieved transcendence. Hadrian likens this man's state to one expressed by Plato, but he is surprised when he sees the man throw himself into a burning pyre, escaping his earthly form.

Around this time, Hadrian feels for the first time that he is divine. He does not question this realization, rationalizing that humanity needs a human manifestation of heaven. He takes his role as a god seriously. He proceeds to Athens to renovate much of the city.



He intends to unite Greece and Rome once and for all. While in Greece, Hadrian becomes obsessed with the movement of the stars and builds an observatory. He confides to Marcus that he believes the earth is not static but moves with the stars.

Tellus Stabilita, 122-149 Analysis

Hadrian is not an emperor who loves the palace in Rome. He has traveled all his life, and now he intends to travel the entire world. In this section, he likens himself to a laborer traveling from house to house fixing what needs improvement. Hadrian expresses in a particularly poetic passage the intense love he has for the cities that he develops around the empire. This passage indicates a view of the world different from ordinary people, one that imagines self as a part of the historical whole. To create these new and efficient cities - and to imbue them with his and his loved ones' names - is to forever alter the earth for generations.

This section also details perhaps Hadrian's most famous action: the building of his eponymous wall in England. In the novel, he states particular pride in his work in England. This is a land that has been conquered several times by the Caesars but never developed. Hadrian not only fortifies his colony but also delineates where it ends and builds upon it.

The final pages of this section have an odd and ominous air to them as Hadrian realizes that he is a god. Personal statements of divinity and accurate knowledge of oneself rarely go hand-in-hand, but Hadrian is oddly pragmatic about his godliness. He understands that everyone has a different conception of the divine, but all humankind needs a living representative of god on earth. He takes that role seriously.



Saeculum Aureum, 153-171

Saeculum Aureum, 153-171 Summary

After leaving Parthia, Hadrian spends his summer in Bithynia, where he passes his days listening to poetry and staying with the procurator of the province. There he meets Antinous, a charmingly aloof young man who immediately steals Hadrian's heart. Antinous is Greek, and he and the emperor are never apart thereafter. Hadrian thinks on these days as his personal golden age, without care or consideration of the pain that is to follow.

From Bithynia, Hadrian and Antinous travel to Byzantium and then to Greece. In Athens, Hadrian is inaugurated into the mysteries, becoming officially divine. He renovates the tomb of a fallen Greek general, and he holds games for the people. Athens, in a sense, has become his home. He feels comfortable enough among the people to play flute with the musicians. Here, too, Hadrian befriends Arrian, a soldier and scholar who has dedicated himself to recording the words of his philosopher mentor, Epictetus. Hadrian tasks him with consulate of the province. He also befriends the philosopher Euphrates and intends to bring him along as a reader, but the old man is weary of life and asks permission to commit suicide.

Hadrian continues to travel with Antinous for a year, touching all points of the Empire. He likens himself to a shipbuilder who has secured his vessel from all leaks. Now, he has earned his happiness.

Hadrian returns to Rome to discover that Plotina has died. He mourns her for nine days and feels that their spirits will be forever united. He goes about the process of improving the city, renovating the Coliseum and ridding it of the statues of Nero. He converts the dilapidated public baths into a temple. The dedication of this temple is similar to a triumph, with revelry and parades. He attends the dedication of his Parthenon with his administrative consort - Lucius Ceionius, Marcus Turbo, Servianus - and his wife. His wife, by now, remains quiet and restrained, unperturbed by their lack of intimacy and only concerned with her social standing. He occasionally puts her on coins. At night, he watches the fires of celebration in the city with Antinous, whom he dresses in the garments of the emperor.

Saeculum Aureum, 153-171 Analysis

In Saeculum Aureum, Hadrian's life changes forever when he meets Antinous. Prior to this, Hadrian's attitude toward love has been mostly light and simple. He has brief affairs with men and women that he finds desirable. Antinous completely changes that. He is captivated by this aloof boy, and he never wants to be separated from him.

As a character, Antinous is enigmatic, which perhaps indicates a sort of separation between him and Hadrian. Hadrian states that the boy fixates on songs, poems, and



aspects of the world that interest him and ignores others all together. Outside of that, we know little about Antinous. The important aspect truly is his effect on the emperor, who maintains a humble profile as a ruler but is drawn to extravagance by this young man. This is typified by the fact that Hadrian does not wear royal purple himself but he loves to dress his lover in it.

Beyond Antinous, the only other piece of information that we learn in this section is Hadrian's incredible satisfaction with his Empire. He likens it to a tightly made ship; no leaks.



Saeculum Aureum, 171-189

Saeculum Aureum, 171-189 Summary

As time goes on, Antinous begins to mature into a young prince, and Hadrian loves to take him about Rome and introduce him to dignitaries. At this point, Hadrian tells Marcus that he will try to explain how Antinous died young by his own hand. He admits that after a time, he felt the young man's presence was his due for his divinity. One day, he and Antinous are caught in a storm and take shelter in a barn. There, Antinous feeds him fruit, and the emperor truly feels the role of a god.

They travel to Africa before returning to Athens, where many of Hadrian's improvements are being completed. He is given divine titles by Greece and finally feels that Rome and Greece have been wed. He begins to take the young man's affection for granted, taking fleeting lovers to bed. One day, he mocks Antinous's romantic sensibilities, mortifying him. Indeed, his lover's youthful charms are growing aggravating to the emperor.

While in Asia, Antinous asks if he can undergo the same Mithric blood rite that Hadrian undertook in his younger years. The emperor agrees to be his sponsor, and the rite goes forward. By now, though, he is sickened by these small subterranean cults. He considers them incendiary. As their travels continue, Hadrian consults more seers and soothsayers, and he begins to study human anatomy for the first time since studying medicine as a youth. He wonders whether the soul can be transmitted from one body to the other. This culminates in a human sacrifice atop a mountain. On this stormy night, Antinous seems to promise himself that he will kill himself for Hadrian.

They proceed to Jerusalem, a city destroyed years ago by the emperor Titus and since rebuilt largely by Hadrian. Later, they head to Pelusium and visit the tomb of Pompey. They then go to Alexandria, where Hadrian agrees to let Antinous join him for a hunt. In the course, Antinous nearly kills a lion but needs assistance from the emperor. That night, the group drinks to the boy's success in the hunt. Later, the poet Pancrates suggests that they make a poem on the subject of the boy's hunt.

Saeculum Aureum, 171-189 Analysis

As time goes on, Hadrian's life takes on a dark and eerie aura. This aura stems both from his sense of his own divinity and his fascination with soothsayers and sacrificial offerings.

Regarding his divinity, Hadrian begins to view Antinous as his "genius," the Hermes-like spirit that is supposed to look over the emperor. Moments like the rainy night in the barn when Antinous waits on him hand and foot only encourage this attitude. In hindsight, Hadrian realizes that he stopped viewing Antinous as a person and treated him like a sort of divine right. With this in mind, it is not surprising that Hadrian takes other lovers.



More disturbing is Hadrian's curiosity about the transference of souls from person to person. He engages in a human sacrifice in Asia, seemingly to see if he can take the victim's soul. Antinous - feeling less and less secure of Hadrian's affections - seems to be planning something on his way down the mountain from this sacrifice.

This is also the first time we hear of Hadrian traveling to Jerusalem, a city destroyed by the Roman's and now being rebuilt. This holy city will become a major stumbling block for the emperor who longs for peace.



Saeculum Aureum, 189-211

Saeculum Aureum, 189-211 Summary

The empress arrives in Lyceum to spend time with Hadrian. Now that she no longer consorts with Suetonius, he is happier to receive her. Lucius comes with her, and Hadrian continues to be deeply affectionate toward his old friend. They all settle for a time in Alexandria, where life is impulsive and the local populace is varied of belief and lifestyle. Antinous becomes something of a source of political ridicule because of his proximity to the emperor. While in Alexandria, Hadrian attempts to negotiate with the Jewish population through a civic leader, Akiba. He finds, however, that the man is so intransigent in his beliefs that negotiation goes nowhere.

One day, Hadrian and his entourage go to Canopus, where a fortune-teller tells the emperor's fortune. Her predictions are full of dire reports. She offers, however, the alternative of a sacrifice to elongate Hadrian's life. Antinous insists on sacrificing his prized falcon. Hadrian reluctantly agrees, and the bird is killed. After the ceremony, Antinous sneaks back to speak with the magician.

Later in the year, on the anniversary of the death of Osiris, a massive festival is held, and the Romans are distracted by the festivities. In this distraction, Antinous breaks away from Hadrian. He leaves the imperial boat and disappears. Hadrian and his men search the area, finding the body in a reservoir intended for native sacrifices. Hadrian is disconsolate.

Days later, Hadrian considers the funeral. Seeing that the boy sacrificed himself in traditional Egyptian fashion, he resolves to mummify him. Later, he speaks to the priests who performed the sacrifice, and he begins the process of converting their college to the worship of Antinous. Out of this grief, Hadrian begins work on the town of Antinoopolis and orders a monument to the boy be built in Rome.

Hadrian realizes as he travels that he has never experienced a death as fully as Antinous's. Meanwhile, the major Roman players of the day are taking positions on the emperor's culpability in the death of the young man. All the while, the empress acts with compassion toward her wayward husband. She asks him to accompany her to the Colossus of Memnon. He stays a while, and before he goes he carves his name into the legs of the statue. As he does so, he realizes the next day would have been Antinous's birthday. Hadrian had thought that his grief had passed, but now it returns.

One day during a banquet, Hadrian discovers that a servant's son has just died. He sends the bereaved man some money. Pancrates writes him a poetic consolation for his loss. Hadrian considers the contention that the soul is the only valuable part of the person. He does not agree with the assertion: after all, a body is a fact, a soul just a hypothesis. Hadrian gives Antinous a lavish funeral ceremony with Alexandrian priest. Afterward, the boy is buried in Egypt. Then, Hadrian re-embarks for Rome.



Saeculum Aureum, 189-211 Analysis

Antinous's suicide is a turning point in Hadrian's life. The boy had been his principle joy in life, and his death raises a storm of emotion. Perhaps the most shocking aspect of Antinous's death is that he did it as a sacrifice to the emperor. Much like the sacrifice of his falcon was supposed to add years to Hadrian's life, his death should bring the emperor strength and longevity. By the end of this chapter, Hadrian's attitude toward the soul has changed drastically. He had been experimenting with rituals and philosophies and studying anatomy as a means to understanding the soul. Now, he is of the mind that a soul is of equal or less importance than the physical self.

Hadrian sets about commemorating his lover in the form of a city and a cult in his honor. He buries him in Alexandria in the traditional fashion of Egyptian kings. He consults the priests who aided in the sacrifice to begin work on the cult of Antinous. His goal is to make his young lover a god.

Politically, Antinous's death is problematic for the emperor. While his friends - even his contentious wife - are supportive, rumors swirl about his role in the death. These rumors run the gamut from allegations of neglect and cruelty to actually culpability in his execution.



Disciplina Augusta, 211-233

Disciplina Augusta, 211-233 Summary

Hadrian travels to Greece, settling in Antioch for a time. He finds the charm of the city diminished and the people duller than he remembers. He goes to Athens and stays with Arrian. During this time, Hadrian decides that he must dedicate energy to preserving history through books. He asks Phlegon to write a history of Rome, and he engages with poets whose work he admires. He begins working on his own histories and poetry.

After a time, he begins to focus more on the particulars of the cult of Antinous. Within the city of Antinoopolis, he places statues of central figures to the cult: Hestia, Bacchus, Antinous, Nerva, Plotina, Trajan, himself. He even includes his deceased sister, though she was married to the annoying Servianus. He begins to wonder what the religious ramifications of Antinous's sacrifice mean to him.

During this time, a prominent Christian sends Hadrian a defense of the faith. Though unimpressed by the mechanics of the piece, he is compelled the argument. Hadrian shows the piece to Arrian, and they discuss it at length. Meanwhile, Hadrian begins to suspect a general moral and intellectual decline, with prominent Romans defrauding the state and showing horrendous judgment.

Hadrian asserts that the ideal of Greece is important, but Rome is the realization on earth of that ideal. As such, the reality of Rome is markedly less romantic than that of the Greeks. Rome must go about the messy business of governing. Hadrian finishes rewriting the Greek constitution, and he opens the massive Olympeion in Athens. He celebrates with games and theatre performances before leaving Athens for the last time.

Hadrian travels throughout Italy to improve the many ancient towns that have long been governed by absent leaders in Rome. His mausoleum on the Tiber, too, is being expanded. References to Antinous, a library, and rooms for future emperors are added. His villa, too, is nearing completion, and for the first time, he goes about entertaining guests with large banquets. He also has theatre performances in his home, and his secretary begins delivering young men to his bedroom. Joy is returning to his life. In his solitary hours, Hadrian wanders his Roman home and looks at his statues.

Hadrian grows more cantankerous, too. He exiles the playwright Juvenal and the philosopher Favorinus because they annoy him. He develops a fear of being poisoned. Small annoyances drive him to rage. At one point, he strikes a secretary across the face with a style, blinding him in one eye.

Disciplina Augusta, 211-233 Analysis

With the beginning of *Disciplina Augusta*, Hadrian enters the latter half of his reign. Now middle-aged and established, he is devoid of romantic illusions, and this chapter reflects



his new pragmatism. Athens seems less magical, and his opinions of Roman life are colored more with incredulity than idealism. He wants to improve the empire, but no longer for some lofty notion of a beacon on a hill. He tires of fiscal irresponsibility, cynical philosophy, and arrogant artist. He has people banished and publicly shamed.

In this section, Hadrian explains his new understanding of his kingdom. Rome is the actualization of the Greek ideal. Athenians wrote the finest philosophy, art, and government; Rome is the power that can enact these ideas. Hadrian views himself - now more than ever - as a civil servant, maintaining order and efficiency in his great shop.

This section, also, contains an illuminating idea of how mortals are deified in ancient Rome. Hadrian puts a lot of consideration into his cult of Antinous. He consults priests and determines the correct assortment of divine figures to include in the shrine of Antinous. These include not only gods like Hestia and Bacchus, but also royal figures like Trajan, Plotina, and Paulina. In this sense, creating a cult is like creating a novel. Hadrian must develop a story and a cast of character for his people to worship.



Disciplina Augusta, 233-251

Disciplina Augusta, 233-251 Summary

Hadrian's construction in Jerusalem is impeded by frequent attacks and revolt by Jewish zealots and growing tension between the Jews and Persians. Hadrian only exacerbates this by his uninformed abolition of circumcision throughout the Empire. The emperor has developed distaste for the Jewish people because of their certitude regarding their religion. He considers them fanatics.

Among the Jews of Jerusalem a zealot leader arises in the form of Simon Bar-Kochba. He rouses the people to open revolt, and the civic leader Akiba proclaims him messiah. Roman soldiers are massacred, and the region erupts with war. Hadrian sends a commander named Severus to put down the Jewish forces, but Severus soon realizes that the guerrilla fighters will have to be decimated completely to be defeated.

The fighting goes on for over a year before Hadrian himself travels to Jerusalem, taking with him an adviser named Celer. By end of the third year of fighting, the city is largely destroyed and Simon is huddled up with his followers in the citadel of Bethar. Hadrian is disturbed by his body's frailty. He readily admits that Jerusalem is one of his few defeats. He fears Jewish unrest throughout the empire because of the intense violence in the holy city.

Hadrian realizes that the time is approaching when the world will cease to need the Romans as a governing power. They will turn to other peoples to guide them in civilization, art, philosophy, etc. During his time in Judea, Hadrian takes ill, beginning with a prolonged nosebleed and ending with near-death. Hadrian is diagnosed by Hermogenes with heart disease. He is forced to stay bedridden for days and is miserable.

As the battle continues, the teaching of Jewish law is outlawed, and Akiba is executed for breaking the edict. As the war winds down, the moderate Jews curse the Romans for defiling the city, and Christians praise Rome for delivering heavenly justice on the Jewish people. Simon is eventually killed and his head presented to Hadrian. The ruined city is rebuilt modestly and forbidden to all Jews. Judea is renamed Palestine.

Hadrian returns to Rome, enjoying the sight of countries he assumes he will never see again. Returning to the capital, Hadrian has only two things in mind: Choosing his successor and his death.

Disciplina Augusta, 233-251 Analysis

This section deals entirely with Hadrian's massive quagmire in Judea. Throughout the novel, Hadrian expresses an acute sense of pluralism when it comes to religion. He considers all deities to be part of a whole heaven. He even considers the once seditious



cult of Jesus Christ to be a reasonable expression of a universal ideal. He equates Baal with Jupiter and Nirvana with Plato's cave metaphor. He understands the etymology of faith with an unusually modern mindset.

The Jewish community of Jerusalem, however, has always been a sticking point for him. Leaders like Akiba are insistent that Jehovah is the one true god, and they will brook no Roman meddling in their religious affair. Regarding a man like Akiba, this is annoying. When Simon Bar-Kochba enters the scene, Hadrian must respond with force. The ensuing pages are a chronicle of a military morass that recalls more modern examples. A superior military force enters a foreign land controlled by ideologues and finds that it cannot defeat a force that blends in and fights from hidden position. Hadrian's only option is annihilating every suspected fighter and destroying Jerusalem.

This is a particular defeat for Hadrian, whose goal is a unified and peaceful empire where conquered peoples do not feel subjugated. The only way to end the Judean War, he finds, is to raze Jerusalem, give it a Roman name, and forbid Jews to enter it. He knows this will breed further extremism. In this chapter, Hadrian feels he can see the end of the Roman world, not immediately but eventually. He realizes that however completely the Romans have settled the world, a new power will have to eventually unseat them.



Disciplina Augusta, 251-271

Disciplina Augusta, 251-271 Summary

The Roman citizens hold a triumph for Hadrian upon his return, and he adds Arrian's name to the honors. Owning quite a bit of land in around the city, he creates the comforts of his favorite lands within Rome.

As he approaches the issue of choosing his heir, Hadrian wonders whether it would have been wiser for him to have had a child. In the end, he reasons that a great man's issue is rarely as able as his father, and the system of adoption has worked best for Roman emperors. Though annoyed by Trajan's refusal to choose a successor until the last minute, Hadrian has done the same thing. Servianus, thirty years his elder and continuing to scheme for the throne, is out of the question. Marcius Turbo is too old, and Severus is Greek. He is left considering his old friend Lucius, who remains something of a debauchery but is only thirty and has served well in his governmental positions. Hadrian believes Lucius to be improving and Turbo agrees. In the end, he adopts Lucius, who takes the name Aelius Caesar, and grooms him for the throne.

Meanwhile, Sabina dies, and in her last days she publicly berates Hadrian as useless and impotent. She was a supporter of Servianus, and with her death he realizes that if he wants the throne, he must move quickly. Servianus connives to kill Hadrian, but the emperor's spies catch wind of the plot. Hadrian has Servianus and his grandson killed. The public is not much concerned.

Not long after this, Lucius begins to take ill, collapsing during exercise and coughing up blood. He takes a governmental post in Pannonia and does well, but his health continues to deteriorate. After a time, Hadrian calls him back to Rome and tends to him at his villa. Hermogenes is certain he is dying. On the day that Lucius is supposed to speak to the Senate regarding his adoption by the emperor, he suffers a hemorrhage and dies.

During Lucius's dying days, Hadrian has time to consider other successors. He chooses Antoninus, a virtuous and able senator distantly related to Plotina. Hadrian reasons that the Senate, angered by his murder of Servianus, will forgive him because of this gesture. Hadrian adopts Antoninus, but he also has eyes on the serious, intelligent son of the Verus family, Annius. He sees great potential in this young man, who takes the name Marcus Aurelius, and adopts him as a grandson. Thus, he ensures his line for two generations. His last decision on the matter is to adopt Lucius's son as a co-heir to the throne with Marcus.

Disciplina Augusta, 251-271 Analysis

By the end of *Disciplina Augusta*, Hadrian has moved back to Rome for good. He faces his next great challenge: choosing a successor. The process of succession, as told by



Hadrian, seems oddly based on merit. Hadrian explains that the process of succession by blood is rarely a good idea, since there is no way on ensuring the ability of the heir. As a result, imperial adoption has become the most efficient way to ensure the best possible royal line. As such, the choice of a successor is based upon merit, intelligence, and popularity.

Lucius proves an able statesman despite his personal flaws, and Hadrian considers him the perfect candidate. His untimely death is another great blow to the emperor, but unlike the death of Antinous and the Judean war, this blow is one from which he quickly recovers. Experience has rendered Hadrian more able to withstand setbacks like these. He is prepared for his friend's death and ready with another option. In the same way, he is better prepared for Servianus now than he was in his youth. Hadrian is prepared to do what needs to be done.

Sabina also dies in this section. She has been a strangely ambiguous character in the novel. She is supportive of Hadrian after Antinous's death. Her acquaintances, like Servianus and Suetonius, are distasteful to the emperor, but she makes little trouble throughout her life. He takes care of her throughout his reign, but he neglects her. In her last days, bitter and despairing, she curses him publicly. This costs her her royal rites of passage into death.



Patientia

Patientia Summary

Arrian writes Hadrian from the Black Sea where he has overseen the completion of Hadrian's modernizations. He reports that the local populace is thankful to the emperor and prosperity abounds. Hadrian is gladdened by the news, but he is also deeply depressed by the deterioration of his body.

He recalls giving the philosopher Euphrates permission to commit suicide, and now he wants the luxury of ending his life quickly. He asks a Samaritan servant to kill him, but the man believes him to be immortal and flees the room in terror. One day, while Hermogenes is away, Hadrian asks his assistant to concoct a poison to give him. The assistant does so, but he drinks it himself to avoid following the emperor's request. After this incident, Hadrian decides that killing himself would be unfair to the people of Rome and vows to live the full course of his time.

As Hadrian continues his administrative duties with fervor, he acknowledges that the citizenry consider him a god. They no longer compare him to the Olympian gods; rather, they speak of him as his own deity. They call to him for miracles, and he takes his station seriously.

Moreover, the cult of Antinous has spread throughout the Empire. The image of the young man has become synonymous with Hermes and Bacchus. He is considered a protector of dead children. In Antinoopolis, games and celebrations are held regularly in his honor. Hadrian is not certain that he is ready to die, but he knows that Antinous is waiting for him in the underworld.

Hadrian's dreams are more vivid, and he believes he can see into the future. He believes that Rome may again decline and fall into a state of endless war, but it will again become a beacon to the world, a symbol of peace and freedom. He knows that Christianity and some barbarian tribes threaten to overtake the Empire in time, but he believes they will adopt much of the Roman way of life.

At this point, many of Hadrian's friends are about his bed. He feels the end of his life approaching, and he intends to depart it with eyes open.

The last page is the inscription on Hadrian's tomb.

Patientia Analysis

In the final chapter of the novel, Hadrian is overcome by an intense depression. He longs to die quickly rather than linger in agony like a drowning man. He makes two attempts to end his life with the help of another, but each time his servant cannot bring



himself to help a god die. Over time, he decides that the price of imperial power is the willingness to continue through one's natural span of life.

Hadrian is proud of his achievements. As he ends his life, the empire is at piece, his succession has been arranged, and the cult he has created for Antinous has flourished. He feels he has made amends to his lover, whose memory has fostered Hadrian's will to continue living.

More importantly - and more central to the overall theme of the novel - Hadrian understands that the world cannot be controlled, even by a hand that only wants peace and prosperity. He strove as emperor to create a world-wide Roman utopia, but he had to acquiesce to the gods of war and murder from time to time. In the end, Hadrian states that he will enter death with eyes open. It takes him much of his life, but now he lives life with eyes open as well.



Characters

Hadrian

Hadrian is the protagonist and narrator of the novel. The narrative of the novel is told as a letter that Hadrian writes as an old man dying from heart disease. He is writing to his successor, Marcus Aurelius.

Hadrian is born in Italica to a Spanish family, and he studies in Spain and Greece. During this time he develops what will be a lifelong love of Greece. He also trains in the military. During the waning days of Domitian's reign, he goes to Rome and works several years as a judge. There, he lives a life of debauchery until he returns to active duty in the Pyrenees.

During his time in the Pyrenees, the emperor Domitian and his successor Nerva die, and Hadrian's cousin Trajan takes the throne. Trajan is uncertain of Hadrian's value and skills, but Hadrian proves himself in the Dacian Wars with acts of valor. Trajan tentatively chooses him as a successor. Hadrian marries into the family, and at the insistence of the empress, Plotina, he becomes Trajan's speechwriter. Later he becomes governor of Syria and begins to believe that the role of an emperor should be to ensure peace and prosperity throughout the Roman world. Trajan dies, and Hadrian takes the throne.

Hadrian does not care for Rome and spends most of his reign traveling the provinces. He makes peace with the Parthians, begins rebuilding Athens and Jerusalem, and builds centers of trade throughout the provinces. He also pushes reforms increasing imperial transparency and rights to slaves. While in Bithynia, he meets a beautiful Greek named Antinous and falls in love. The young man becomes his constant companion.

About this time, Hadrian realizes he is divine. He begins to take his young lover for granted, and Antinous kills himself as a sacrifice to the emperor. Hadrian is devastated, and he has Antinous interred in Alexandria. He builds hundreds of statues and sets about creating a cult to his dead lover.

Not long after, Jewish zealots in Jerusalem massacre Roman troops and send the city into revolt. Hadrian sends his best commander, but the battle continues for three years. Jerusalem is reduced to rubble, and the Jewish people become uniformly opposed to Roman rule. Hadrian wonders whether the Roman people are still worthy leaders of the world.

Upon returning to Rome after the Judea battle, Hadrian goes about choosing his successor. He settles on his friend Lucius Ceionius. Unfortunately, Lucius falls suddenly ill and dies. Hadrian then chooses a popular and able Senator, Antoninus, and a prodigious child of a renowned family, Marcus Aurelius, to succeed him. For a time, Hadrian is suicidal in his old age, but he recovers his hope that he can do good work. As



Hadrian lies on his deathbed, he thinks back on his life and work. He has achieved prosperity and peace in the Roman world and his lover is an established god, now. He dies contented.

Antinous

Antinous is a young Greek who grows up in Bithynia and meets the emperor Hadrian one summer. He is a somewhat aloof boy with a wandering wit that fixates on certain things while ignoring others entirely. Hadrian is enamored of him and becomes his lover. After that summer, the two are inseparable. Antinous accompanies the emperor on his royal vessel as they travel the realm. One day, they go hunting together and kill a lion.

Later on their travels, Antinous takes part in the same Mithric blood rite that Hadrian underwent at his age. Antinous is a romantic and associates himself with Patroclus, Achilles' young friend who sacrifices himself for the great warrior. As Hadrian begins to believe he is a god, Antinous becomes somewhat marginal in his affections. The emperor begins to take other lovers. One day in Alexandria, Antinous sacrifices his favorite falcon to Hadrian. A few days later, he kills himself in the emperor's honor.

After his death, Antinous is mummified and buried in Alexandria. Hadrian has hundred of statues cast in his honor. He forms a religious cult in his honor that catches on throughout the Roman world. In different regions, the god Antinous is associated with Bacchus, Pan, and Thracian horsemen.

Trajan

Trajan is Hadrian's cousin and the emperor who immediately precedes him.

At the beginning of Hadrian's memoir, Trajan is a renowned and popular general during the horrendously unpopular reign of Domitian. After a palace coup results in the murder of Domitian, the elderly politician, Nerva, ascends to the imperial throne. Due to his ill health and old age, Nerva immediately adopts Trajan as his heir. Hadrian travels to Trajan's encampment to congratulate him and catches word that Nerva has died.

Trajan is a pragmatic, plainspoken, traditional military man, and he does not care for politics or public speaking. He is also unsure of his opinion on his libertine cousin Hadrian, but Hadrian endears himself to the emperor with his heroism in the Dacian and Samaritan campaigns. Trajan makes Hadrian his chief speechwriter, governor of Syria, and military prelate.

As the emperor ages, he focuses on a bold campaign of conquest against Parthia, encouraged by his ambitious firebrand counselor, Lusius Quietus. He succeeds initially in conquering Parthia, but an earthquake and Eastern revolts stymie him. He eventually retreats, but his health falters. While making his way back to Rome, Trajan dies naming Hadrian his successor in his will.



Plotina

Plotina is Trajan's empress and one of Hadrian's chief supporters throughout his life. Early in her husband's reign, she recognizes Hadrian as a strong politician and recruits him to write speeches for Trajan. She and Hadrian are kindred souls, not romantically but rather intellectually. As her husband nears the end of his life, Plotina assists Hadrian by feeding him information on his enemies and evaluating his friends. She tells him that his prime enemy will lead Trajan's troops in Parthia. Plotina is with Trajan when he dies, and she announces his choice for successor. This leads to speculation that she forged his will. She and Hadrian remain good friends well into his middle age, when she dies.

Servianus

Servianus is one of Hadrian's major competitors for the imperial throne. When Trajan is declared emperor in Rome, Servianus sends a messenger to beat Hadrian to Trajan's encampment, unsuccessfully. When Hadrian ascends to the throne, Servianus remains in the service of the government and quietly assembles supporters. Two key supporters are his wife Paulina, Hadrian's sister, and Hadrian's wife, Sabina. When Hadrian chooses Lucius Ceionius as his successor, Servianus plans his assassination. Hadrian catches wind of this and has Servianus and his grandson killed.

Lucius Ceionius

Lucius Ceionius is Hadrian's best friend, a bon vivant and popular politician in Rome. He lives in the city, in a generally loveless marriage that results in many affairs. On occasion, he joins Hadrian on his travels and is with him when Antinous kills himself. As Hadrian approaches the end of his life and needs to choose a successor, he chooses Lucius who is thirty years younger. Hadrian adopts Lucius, who takes the name Aelius Caesar. Lucius falls horrendously ill, however, and the day he is supposed to speak to the Senate regarding his successor he dies. Hadrian adopts Lucius's son as his grandson.

Sabina

Sabina is Trajan's niece and Hadrian's empress. He marries her - at Plotina's insistence - when she is very young. The marriage connects Hadrian to the royal family. Sabina and Hadrian do not love each other and rarely spend time together. After he takes the throne, Sabina consorts with his rivals and annoyances, like Suetonius and Servianus. She becomes Servianus's primary supporter. As time passes, she grows more openly antagonistic toward Hadrian. She dies several years before him.



Attianus

Attianus is Hadrian's guardian while he is at school and in the military at an early age. He makes the decision to send him to Athens to study philosophy, and he confers with him and Plotina, regarding his succession in Trajan's last days. After Hadrian takes the throne, he tasks Attianus with dealing with his bitter rival, Lusius Quietus. Attianus kills Quietus and several of his allies, causing Hadrian to fear public reprisal. As punishment for his overreaching, Attianus retires from public life.

Hermogenes

Hermogenes is Hadrian's personal physician, with whom he spends much of his latter years. In Judea, Hermogenes diagnoses the ailing emperor with heart disease. He also tends to the dying Lucius Ceionius. Hermogenes is a competent but political figure, who often sugarcoats bad news. When Hadrian is contemplating suicide, he needs to get rid of Hermogenes to commit the act.

Lusius Quietus

Lusius Quietus is a Roman politician and military man who is Hadrian's chief rival to the imperial throne. Quietus is of Arab lineage, and he represents every political aspect Hadrian hates: shortsightedness, arrogance, mindless militarism. Quietus encourages Trajan's campaign in Parthia, and he leads the troops in the conquest. After Hadrian is selected as Trajan's heir, Quietus tries to kill him in an ambush during a hunting trip. Hadrian eventually has Quietus and his supporters killed by Attianus.

Marcus Turbo

Marcus Turbo is Hadrian's commanding officer during the Dacian campaign and his most trusted military adviser throughout his reign. Turbo is his sponsor when he undergoes the Mithric blood rite. When Hadrian is looking for a successor he strongly considers Turbo but decides he is too old. Turbo is his adviser in choosing an heir.

Arrian

Arrian is a soldier and scholar in Athens and Hadrian's most trusted advisor in the east. Hadrian advances his career significantly. Arrian is instrumental in maintaining peace in Jewish communities during the Judean War.

Osroes

Osroes is the king of Parthia. During Trajan's Parthian campaign, Hadrian meets secretly with him to discuss peace. After Trajan dies, Osroes and Hadrian quickly enact



their peace agreements. Year later, rebellions flair in Parthia, and Hadrian makes another deal with Osroes. He gives Osroes his daughter - long held captive in Rome - in exchange for civil peace. The peace holds the rest of Hadrian's reign.

Simon Bar-Kochba

Simon Bar-Kochba is the leader of a sect of Jewish zealots in Jerusalem. He instigates a massacre of Roman soldiers resulting in the Judean War. Local Jewish leaders declare Bar-Kochba the messiah, and much of the Jewish community joins the armed resistance. As the war continues, Jerusalem is reduced to ruins and Bar-Kochba and his remaining men hull up in the citadel of Bethar. He dies there, and his head is presented to Hadrian.

Marcus Aurelius

Marcus Aurelius - originally called Annius Verus - is the serious and gifted son of the powerful Roman family. Hadrian has been impressed with the boy from a young age and adopts him as his grandson, putting him in the line of imperial succession. The letter that comprises the Memoirs of Hadrian is written to Marcus Aurelius.

Paulina

Paulina is Hadrian's sister. They rarely have contact with each other, except one meal every time Hadrian is in Rome. She marries Servianus, further straining relations. Paulina dies many years before Hadrian.

Antoninus

Antoninus is an able and honest Senator who Hadrian chooses to succeed him. He is Hadrian's second choice after Lucius Ceionius, but Hadrian is assured Antoninus will succeed.

Akiba

Akiba is a Jewish civic leader in Jerusalem who negotiates with Hadrian regarding Roman-Jewish relations. Hadrian is annoyed at the man, who is unwilling to bend on any point of negotiation. The meeting yields nothing. Later, when the revolt flares in Jerusalem, Akiba declares Simon Bar-Kochba the messiah. As the Judean War rages, Hadrian declares the teaching of Jewish law to be an act of sedition. Akiba continues to teach and is executed.



Severus

Severus is the able and competent military commander that Hadrian sends to Jerusalem after Roman troops are massacred there. He realizes early that the guerrilla fighting in the city means that the zealots will have to be completely annihilated. After the war, Hadrian considers naming Severus as a successor. He decides, however, that Severus's Greek origin will make him unacceptable to the people.



Objects/Places

Nerva's Ring

The emperor Nerva gives this ring to Trajan after he dies, and Trajan passes it off to Hadrian after his success in the Dacian campaign. Hadrian regards it as a de facto acknowledgment that he will succeed Trajan.

Athens

Athens is the city that Hadrian feels most at home. He is a lover of all things Greek, and Athens is presented as a lively - if rundown - epicenter of culture. Over the course of the novel, Hadrian rebuilds much of the ruined city.

Jerusalem

Jerusalem is a furnace of warring interests and extremism. The emperor Titus destroyed much of it, and Hadrian dedicates much time to rebuilding large portions. Jewish zealots rebel late in his reign, taking over the city. Hadrian's troops raze the city, and he renames it Aelia, forbidding all Jews to live there.

Rome

In the novel, Rome is depicted as a cosmopolitan center of commerce. Hadrian dislikes it as overly political and ugly. He avoids it as much as possible, but later in his reign he improves the city with a renovated Colosseum and an Acropolis.

Hadrian's Ship

Hadrian builds a massive imperial ship with all the comforts and amenities of the palace. This allows him to maintain the affairs of state while staying abroad as much as possible.

Alexandria

Alexandria is portrayed as a melting pot of ideas, cultures, and religions. Hadrian, Sabina, and Antinous spend a significant amount of time here. In Alexandria, Antinous kills himself and is buried.



Bithynia

Bithynia is the city - located in modern-day Turkey - where Hadrian meets Antinous. The emperor is spending a season there, listening to poetry and relaxing, when the two meet.

Londinium

Londinium is the major Roman settlement in England. Hadrian spends a significant amount of time there fortifying and developing the city. He characterizes it as a wild, eerie, mystical area.

Parthia

Parthia is nation in Asia that serves as a trading point between the Roman Empire and India. Late in Trajan's reign, he attempts a bold campaign of conquest against Parthia.

Dacia

Dacia is a nation in modern-day Romania. Hadrian leads troops in a bold conquest of the region under the reign of Trajan.

Italica

Italica is the town when Hadrian is born.

Antinoopolis

Antinoopolis is the town built by Hadrian near Alexandria in honor of Antinous. He begins work on it after the boy's suicide. Antinoopolis becomes the epicenter of the cult of Antinous, created by Hadrian and picked up by virtually the entire Roman world.

Trajan's Column

Trajan's Column is a monument in Rome built to honor the conquests of the Emperor Trajan. Hadrian regards it as a symbol of the reckless militarism he wishes to end. The designer and builder of the Column is a political enemy of Hadrian, and the emperor eventually has him killed.

Social Concerns And Themes

Critically acknowledged as a tour de force in the genre of historical fiction, *Memoirs of Hadrian* has been described by the author as "a psychological novel and meditation on history."

Attempting to explore the aesthetic boundaries of the human condition while assimilating the configuration of absolute power, the novel literally creates a portrait of its central character, the Emperor Hadrian, as well as the Roman Empire of the second century. Written in the form of a letter by Hadrian to his adopted grandson and eventual successor, Marcus Aurelius, *Memoirs of Hadrian* allows the protagonist to ruminate on the circumstances of his life and more importantly the inevitability of his death. The author of essentially a self-analytical autobiography, Hadrian is at once addressing his own mortality while orchestrating the exchange of authority and the transference of experience by composing a philosophical treatise on the nature of man, art, beauty, love, and statesmanship.

Rooted in historical fact, *Memoirs of Hadrian* is an artistic composite of scholarship and imagination. The character of Hadrian is conceived to represent the reflection of modern man in the mirrored image of antiquity. Born in A.D. 76, Hadrian succeeded his uncle, Ulpian Trajanus, as emperor in A.D. 117 and during a reign of more than two decades, incorporated intuition and intellect into effective leadership responsible for constructive public achievement, political stability, economic reform, and cultural appreciation. In essence, the novel exposes the dichotomy of Hadrian: man and emperor. Wise and inexpedient, compassionate and impassioned, humanistic and callous, Hadrian is by nature and position a singular entity; however, his sense of detachment is simultaneously a strength and a weakness, responsible in part for a reign threatened by animosity and rebellion. Determined "to enter into death with open eyes," Hadrian attempts to reveal the private person hidden behind the public image as a final act to measure his sense of accomplishment.



Themes

Peace Can Be as Arduous as War

As Hadrian is considering the possibility of his becoming emperor, he is leading troops in Trajan's campaign of conquest over the Parthians. During this time, Hadrian sees the way the Roman people have ill-used the outlying provinces. Citizens are over-conscripted, and revolts and dissent are met with vicious military force. Hadrian determines that the best course toward a strong empire is peace on its frontiers. He views Rome as a beacon of security, liberty, and plenty. He is also a lover of multiculturalism and feels respect and development of these native cultures will lead to a unified Roman world.

Hadrian cannot enact his plans for peace while Trajan is in power. The old man is obsessed with conquering Asia, but after his death Hadrian makes peace with the king of Parthia. He sets about a campaign of development in the East, along the Black Sea, and in Africa and England. He builds a wall in England to separate the loyal subjects from the barbarians. He builds ports, libraries, temples, and roads. He seeks peace between the Greeks and the Jews; also between the Jewish community and Rome. For a time, this leads to peace throughout the Empire.

Hadrian meets the limits of peace in Jerusalem, however. Jewish Zealots led by Simon Bar-Kochba massacre Roman soldiers, and the city becomes a quagmire of guerrilla fighters. Hadrian is forced to level Jerusalem and expel the entire Jewish population. The brutality of the conflict makes him question his idealistic view of Rome. Perhaps the world cannot be united under the banner of his nation.

The world is at peace by the time Hadrian dies, but he has come to the conclusion that permanent peace is not possible, but all civilized people will eventually press for an end to continual war.

All Humanity is Connected

Hadrian is an unabashed pluralist, and his love of different cultures and faiths does not diminish his personal faith. Indeed, he is greedy for the heavenly, taking part in Mithric blood rite, Celtic fortune telling, and all sort of sacrificial ceremonies. He understands how all human faith is combined, that Zeus, Jupiter, Baal, and Jehovah are all the same deity.

As such, Hadrian is a faithfully integrated and strangely modern individual. He can simultaneously understand the etymology of his belief system and believe himself to be a god within it. He can create a cult around his dead lover, Antinous, and understand how the young man's image will become synonymous with existent gods through the various provinces of Rome. He even understands the value of Christianity despite the fact that he has no faith in it himself.



What Hadrian cannot understand are belief systems that breed extremism. Central in his disdain are the Jewish people, whom he believes to be intransigent in their faith. In his negotiations with the Jerusalem civic leader Akiba, he is stymied by the man's refusal to acknowledge the value of Rome's culture and beliefs. This attitude is extreme and seditious, according to the emperor. It implies an exceptional attitude that undermines the rest of the Empire.

For Hadrian, Rome is a unifying idea joining disparate people and providing them with constant security, development, trade, and faith. These people look to him as their leader and god, and any group that indicates having a higher power to the emperor is a danger to the peace he has created.

Love Subdues All Men

In the preamble of his letter to Marcus Aurelius, Hadrian analyzes the nature of love and states how it differs from other sources of joy like food, money, sleep, etc. He makes two points: love involves another person, and its effects last far beyond the actual relationship. A lover feels the pain and joy of the rest of his life. This assessment reflects Hadrian's experience with love.

Hadrian's marriage to Sabina is largely a matter of appearance, and his affairs before Antinous are slight and simple. Antinous changes everything, for Hadrian is completely overwhelmed by the young man. He is Greek, and he has a breezy way about him. Hadrian takes him along on his travels, and the two are inseparable. After a time, however, the emperor begins to take on the bearing of a god and neglects Antinous. The young Greek is saddened, but he longs to please his master. Knowing Hadrian's growing interest in sacrifice, the boy kills himself in sacrifice to him.

Hadrian is disconsolate. The remainder of his life is dedicated to making amends to his fallen lover. He develops a cult to Antinous which takes hold throughout the Roman world. At the end of his life, Hadrian wonders if Antinous is waiting for him on the other side. In short, this man - this god - who controls the entire world and all the people in it is destroyed by his intense love for another. It is a joy and a pain beyond his reckoning, one that he can never entirely escape.

Style

Point of View

Memoirs of Hadrian is told from a first person point-of-view in the past tense. The novel is epistolary in frame, with the entire narrative told by the emperor Hadrian at the end of his life in a letter to his successor Marcus Aurelius. The only slight difference in the point-of-view is in the final paragraph, when Hadrian is preparing to die. Only the tense changes to the present.

Hadrian is by-and-large a reliable narrator. Well-educated and relentlessly self-examining, he precisely describes the events of his life and acknowledges when he is relying on hearsay and conjecture. Moreover, he regularly editorializes when describing an event, waxing poetic on the importance of Rome to the world and the correct role of a ruler. These moments could well obfuscate the events if told by another, less lucid character. In this case, Hadrian uses these opinionated moments to clarify his attitude toward an event and explain why he made his choices.

Perhaps the most effective choice as a narrator is the preamble of the letter in the first chapter. In this chapter, Hadrian clearly lays out his biases and techniques: his affectation in love, his distrust of official documents, etc. This first chapter - though somewhat plodding - informs what the narrative we are about to read. After spending these pages learning about Hadrian the man, we can evaluate Hadrian the ruler.

Setting

Memoirs of Hadrian takes place in various locations throughout the Roman Empire in the second century AD. The letter that comprises the body of the story is being written immediately before Hadrian's death - presumable around 140 AD.

Since Hadrian is such an itinerant ruler, traveling from place to place, the novel covers a lot of ground. Hadrian delineates clearly the defining qualities of each location, but he does not spend a lot of time describing the physical attributes of each town. These different cities are defined by the culture inherent in the populace and the individuals with whom Hadrian interacts. As such, Rome is a bustling center of commerce with insufferable bureaucrats and cloying merchants. Athens is an elegant if downtrodden mecca, Hadrian's favorite city in the world. England is a wild, untamed, and mystic land full of strange seer and bonfires. Jerusalem is a furnace of intermingling interests and intrigues, waiting to explode.

The novel pointedly contains no dates. Only occasionally does Hadrian mention his age. As such, events merge together and time passes at its own pace, or rather at the pace of Hadrian's memory. Only when a person suddenly dies of old age (Plotina, Sabina) do we realize how much time has passed.



The result of this literary technique is that we experience the life of a dynamic ruler who controls a massive Empire but we understand this life in a strangely personal, contained, intimate way.

Language and Meaning

The language in *Memoirs of Hadrian* is extremely formal, fitting being that the narrative is told from the point-of-view of an emperor and directed toward a prince. The vocabulary is eloquent and expansive without seeming pedantic.

The most informal aspect of the novel is Hadrian's use of the term Mark to refer to Marcus Aurelius. There are several moments of confidence between Hadrian and the reader. He explains his feelings towards Antinous and how he took him for granted. He admits to contemplating and even attempting suicide, but he maintains a dignity in the cadence of his words. The sentences are structured and follow all standard grammatical rules. Thought and incidents are clearly delineated by paragraph breaks.

There is no dialogue in the novel. The essence of conversations is related by the emperor, giving the proceedings a rhythm similar to a text book. The only use of anything approaching vernacular is in the last paragraph of the novel, when the author employ ellipses to indicate that the emperor is slipping into death.

In the first chapter, Hadrian states that what began as a simple later will become a true chronicle of his life. This preface prepares the reader for what *Memoirs of Hadrian* ultimately becomes, a measured and impeccably related history.

Structure

Memoirs of Hadrian is an epistolary novel, telling its story through a letter written by the protagonist. As such, the novel takes on the structure of a long and carefully divided letter. It is divided into six chapters, all of them approximately sixty pages in length except for the first and last, which serve as a preamble and post-script respectively.

These first and second chapters seem to exist outside of the central narrative of Hadrian's life. Both deal with the last year of the emperor's life. The first chapter serves as something of an introduction to Hadrian's personality and ruling style. The last chapter is a sort of summation of his achievements and hopes for the future.

The central four chapters cover the span of Hadrian's live, divided into eras: youth, early reign, affair with Antinous, and Judean War and succession. These chapters can be subdivided into shorter episodes - generally about eight per chapter - divided by breaks in the text. This allows the narrator to indicate a passage of time in a novel without dates. These also indicate a moment of particular emotion, be it elation of pain. One imagines Hadrian pausing a moment before continuing.

Taken together, the structure of the Memoirs of Hadrian is evenly categorized and officious. It reflects an efficient and sharp mind with a clear agenda.



Quotes

"I propose now to do more than this: I have formed a project for telling you my life ... The truth which I intend to set forth here is not particularly scandalous, or is so only to the degree that any truth creates a scandal."

Animula Vagula Blandula, pp.20-21

"A part of every life, even a life meriting very little regard, is spent in searching out reasons for its existence, its starting point, and its source."

Animula Vagula Blandula, p. 26

"One night (I was eleven years old at the time) he came and shook me from my sleep and announced, with the same grumbling laconism that he would have employed to predict a good harvest to his tenants, that I should rule the world."

Varius Multiplex Multiformis, p. 31

"I would turn my back on the southern horizon, which enclosed the seas and islands that we know, and on the western horizon likewise, where at some point the sun was setting on Rome, and would dream of pushing still farther ... What climates, what fauna, what races of men should I have discovered?"

Varius Multiplex Multiformis, p. 48

"I was not so sanguine as to think that it would always lie within our power to avoid all wars, but I wished them to be no more than defensive. I dreamed of an army trained to maintain order on frontiers less extended, in necessary, but secure."

Varius Multiplex Multiformis, p. 70

"I like to think that on her side [Plotina] kept almost nothing from me. No bodily intimacy ever existed between us; in its place was this contact of two minds closely intermingled."

Varius Multiplex Multiformis, p. 82

"All the problems of the empire fell upon me at once, but my own plight weighed upon me even more. I desired the supreme power. I desired it that I might put my plans into effect, try my remedies, and restore peace. I wanted it above all in order to become my full self before I died."

Varius Multiplex Multiformis, p. 85

"Everything that for ten years' time had been feverishly dreamed of, schemed, discussed or kept silent, was here reduced to a message of two lines ... Attianus, who awaited me on the pier of Selinus, was the first to salute me with the title of emperor."

Varius Multiplex Multiformis, p. 90

"Our Rome is no longer the village of the days of Evander, big with a future that has already partly passed by; the plundering Rome of the time of the Republic has performed its role; the mad capital of the first Caesars inclines now to greater sobriety;



other Romes will come, whose forms I see but dimly, but whom I shall have helped to mold."

Tellus Stabilita, p. 110

"We emperors are not Caesars; we are functionaries of the State."

Tellus Stabilita, pp. 120-121

"I have never had a feeling of belonging wholly to any one place, not even my beloved Athens, nor even to Rome. Though a foreigner in every land, in no place did I feel myself a stranger."

Tellus Stabilita, p. 123

"[Antinous] has the infinite capacity of a young dog of play and for swift repose, and the same fierceness and trust. This graceful hound, avid both for caresses and commands, took his post at my feet ... If I have said nothing yet of a beauty do apparent it is not merely because of the reticence of a man too completely conquered."

Saeculum Aureum, p. 155

"I had governed a world infinitely larger ... and kept peace therein; I had rigged it like a fair ship made ready for a voyage which might last for centuries; I had striven my utmost to encourage in man the sense of the divine, but without at the same time sacrificing to it what is essentially human. My bliss was my reward."

Saeculum Aureum, p. 165

"I tell myself that suicide is not rare, and that it is common to die at twenty; that the death of Antinous is a problem and a catastrophe for me alone. It is possible that such a disaster was inseparable from exuberant joy, and from a plentitude of experience which I would have refused to forgo either for myself or for my companion in danger."

Saeculum Aureum, p. 172

"In principle, Judaism has its place among the religions of the empire; in practice, Israel has refused for centuries to be one people among many others, with one god among the gods."

Disciplina Augusta, p. 234

"Hordes would come, and other false prophets. Our feeble efforts to ameliorate man's lot would be vaguely continued by our successors ... our epoch, the faults and limitations of which I knew better than anyone else, would perhaps be considered one day, by contrast, as one of the golden ages of man."

Disciplina Augusta, pp. 242-243

"Judea was struck from the map and took the name of Palestine by my order."

Disciplina Augusta, p. 249

"[Lucius] was working at it on the morning of the first of January, when he was suddenly taken by a hemorrhage; he grew faint, and leaned against the back of his chair, closing his eyes. Death was not more than dizziness for this light creature."

Disciplina Augusta, p. 267



"A happy fate not unlike that of certain gardeners has been allotted me: everything that I have tried to plant in the human imagination has taken root there."

Patientia, p. 286

"Little soul, gentle and drifting, guest and companion of my body, now you will be below in pallid places, stark and bare; there you will abandon your play of yore. But one moment still, let us gaze together on these familiar shores, on these objects which doubtless we shall not see again ...

Let us try, if we can, to enter into death with open eyes..."

Patientia, p. 295



Topics for Discussion

Discuss death. What is Hadrian's attitude toward death, his own and that of those he loves? Does he believe in an afterlife or a prize for his work on earth?

What is Hadrian's opinion of the role of an emperor? What goals does he set at the beginning of his reign, and how does he go about achieving them? Have his opinions about this role changed by the end of his life?

Discuss peace. How does Hadrian's understanding of peace differ from modern understandings of it? What role does war play in Hadrian's worldview?

What role does Antinous play in Hadrian's life? How does Hadrian's attitude toward his young love change over time, and how does he view Antinous after the boy's death? What do we know about Antinous as an individual as opposed to a fixture in Hadrian's life?

Compare Trajan and Hadrian as emperors and as men. What does each man want to achieve during his reign, and how does he go about it? Was either entirely successful in this respect?

Discuss the notion of religion in the novel. Does Hadrian believe there is such a thing as one true religion? How does he approach the idea of personal faith, and how does he reconcile this with his own supposed divinity?

What role do executions and assassinations play in the maintaining of power during Hadrian's reign? Do you think that he had any other options than killing the people that threatened his power?

Discuss the role of location in the novel? How do the nations and territories that Hadrian visits differ from each other? Do these differences reflect the protagonist's attitude toward them?

How is the Judean War a failure for Hadrian? What does he intend to achieve in the city of Jerusalem, and what obstacles does he encounter? How does his view of the world differ from Akiba's or Simon Bar-Kochba's?

Literary Precedents

Whether history as literature or historical fiction, *Memoirs of Hadrian* is founded in the literary tradition of integrating the imaginative with the factual, notably associated with such writers as Leo Tolstoy, Charles Dickens, and Edward Bulwer-Lytton. As a result, the narrative technique employed by Yourcenar in *Memoirs of Hadrian* which allows for external circumstance to project internal meaning is comparable among a wide assortment of distinguished work to Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1865-1872) and Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), further enhanced by the positioning of the protagonist in direct confrontation with the finality of death. It is difficult, however, to easily categorize as diverse an author as Yourcenar. As a classical scholar and former teacher of comparative literature, Yourcenar has acknowledged the influence of an extraordinary range of authors from the Greek playwrights and seventeenth-century and Renaissance poets to the individual talents of Pierre Corneille, Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf, and Thomas Mann. In the reconstruction of an historical figure, the novel is equal in stature to the *Claudius* novels of Robert Graves as well as Walter Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* (1885). More appropriately, however, *Memoirs of Hadrian* is the artistic culmination of a lifetime of study and inventiveness by an author of unique talent and unquestionable perception of the human condition.



Related Titles

Often cited in conjunction with *Memoirs of Hadrian* as a notable literary achievement, Yourcenar's most widely read and translated work is *The Abyss* (1968). Similar in thematic concerns, both novels center on a single protagonist seeking self-awareness and enlightenment within the milieu of a historical period and supported by a diversified cast of secondary characters providing authenticity and plot development. Set in the mid-sixteenth century of northern Europe, *The Abyss* examines the concept of choice, juxtaposing intellectual and spiritual freedom with the limitations imposed by a repressive society. The central character of the novel is the physician Zeno whose experimentation with alchemy as well as sexual and personal identity results in his trial of faith and testimony of independence. When faced with the challenge to individual liberty, Zeno chooses to take his own life as a symbolic act of ultimate freedom.

In effect, *The Abyss* like *Memoirs of Hadrian* utilizes the past to illuminate the reality of the present, exemplifying Yourcenar's extraordinary ability to create historical fiction capable of psychological insight and human interaction. Of additional interest, *The Abyss* also represents the last of Yourcenar's work to be translated by Grace Frick, who died in 1979.



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