

Morality Play Study Guide

Morality Play by Barry Unsworth

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Contents

Morality Play Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	4
Chapter 1.....	5
Chapter 2.....	7
Chapter 3.....	9
Chapter 4.....	11
Chapter 5.....	13
Chapter 6.....	14
Chapter 7.....	16
Chapter 8.....	18
Chapter 9.....	20
Chapter 10.....	22
Chapter 11.....	23
Chapter 12.....	25
Chapter 13.....	27
Chapter 14.....	28
Chapter 15.....	30
Chapter 16.....	32
Characters.....	34
Objects/Places.....	40
Themes.....	42
Style.....	44
Quotes.....	46
Topics for Discussion.....	47

Plot Summary

Morality Play is set in fourteenth-century England. It tells the story of a renegade priest, who serves as the narrator, and a company of travelling actors. The priest, Nicolas Barber, happens upon the travelling players, who have stopped at a clearing in the countryside to care for Brendan, a dying friend and fellow actor. Nicolas joins the acting company, taking over Brendan's role, even though he fears that play-acting is considered a sin by the diocese. The players travel with the dead man in their cart for some time but eventually realize that they must stop somewhere to bury him.

The need to bury Brendan brings the players to a mysterious unnamed town that is caught up in a local murder scandal. When the players arrive, they discover that a young boy has been murdered and that a woman has been tried and condemned with the crime. Martin Bell, the principal actor in the group, seeks to exploit the murder scandal to advance his acting reputation. He convinces the other players to create a play about the murder. In order to pull off the performance he desires, the players must speak with various townspeople to gather as much information as possible. As they learn more details about the crime, the players discover that the condemned woman is actually innocent. The real criminal is traced back to the castle of Richard de Guise, a feudal lord who controls the town and its citizens.

As the story progresses, the narrator, Nicolas Barber, takes readers through the murder mystery in a step-by-step process, revealing clues slowly. The novel, however, is more than just a murder mystery. It also tells the tale of Barber's battle between good and evil and his quest to keep his soul intact against sinister forces. From the beginning of the story, Barber is at odds with the Holy Order. By the time he meets the players, he has already committed adultery and gambled away his only worthy possessions. In essence, Barber suffers while he attempts to discover his true path in life. During this difficult journey, he finds he must question himself every step of the way, as he tries to discern which choices are correct and which, on the other hand, will lead him astray.

Barry Unsworth's novel also addresses another important thematic element, albeit addressed by literary fiction. The novel is an unapologetically honest look at the corruption of nobility and the diocese in fourteenth-century England. Unsworth uses the townspeople to represent the hardships suffered under the weight of fraudulent systems of power during that time. The book also addresses the tragedy of lives lost at the hands of the plague or famine.

Overall, *Morality Play* can be described as engaging, suspenseful, and carefully crafted. It is a novel that can easily be compared with other contemporary literature classics. Unsworth's attention to detail and plot development, as well as his extraordinarily beautiful writing style, distinguishes him from less talented writers.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Morality Play begins on a cold December in fourteenth-century England. Chapter one introduces readers to the narrator, Nicolas Barber, as he stumbles upon a group of actors mourning the death of their friend and fellow actor Brendan. Nicolas is an impoverished student of the clergy who seems to evoke the laws of the Holy Order only when they can benefit him. As the chapter opens, Nicolas is attempting to escape the grip of his lover's angry husband. He agreed to have sexual relations with the woman in the hopes that she would give him some food; unfortunately, her husband arrived home unexpectedly, and in his escape Nicolas, left his cloak behind. He flees through the edge of the woods, fearing he may be discovered if he takes the open road. As he is walking, he comes upon an unusual group of travellers who have stopped at a clearing to say their last goodbyes to Brendan. At first, Nicolas believes them to be robbers, due to their strange attire. In fear, he hides behind a tree and watches them.

He looks on as the travellers remove Brendan from their travel cart and lay him down in the open clearing. As they crowd around their friend, Nicolas sees that the group consists of four men, an adolescent boy, and a woman. He soon realizes that they are not robbers, but rather travelling actors who have been on the road since May. It is now December. The actors leave Brendan in the clearing so that he will not die in the cart as they continue to travel.

After a while, the actors spot Nicolas hiding behind the tree. Someone approaches him, knife drawn, and calls him forward. Nicolas explains to the group that he is part of the clergy and offers his assistance, but the group's leader tells him that it is too late: Brendan has died. Nicolas notices that the leader wears a badge of livery on his hat. This badge signifies that he works for the Holy Order; it is considered the license of the lord.

Knowing that the aforementioned husband is still pursuing him, Nicolas asks to travel with the actors. He offers to work in exchange for food and lodging. (As a side note to the reader, the narrator points out that although the church forbids play-acting, Nicolas feels that this situation is acceptable because the group's leader wears a badge of livery.) Martin Bell, the leader who declares himself as the principal actor in the group, tells Nicolas that they have no need for the work Nicolas has offered but that they do need a singer to replace Brendan. Hesitating, Nicolas admits that he can sing and agrees to take Brendan's place. As chapter one closes, the group of actors elects Nicolas as their new singer.

The company consists of Martin Bell, the principal actor; an old man named Tobias; Springer, a teenaged boy who plays the female roles; a fair-haired twenty-year-old called Straw; and Stephen, a darkly morose player. The woman who accompanies them is Margaret Cornwell. She is not part of the company but is Stephen's lover.



Chapter 1 Analysis

Foreshadowing plays an important role in this first chapter. The first example of this is in the opening lines of this chapter, when the narrator uses foreshadowing to allude to those he is spying on during the makeshift funereal process. He says, "It was as if they played his death for me" (7).

The narrator continues to use foreshadowing throughout the rest of the chapter. Nicolas repeatedly comments that, had he known what he was getting into, he would have walked away. This is in reference to his decision to take Brendan's place within the group. The author uses this statement to inform the readers that danger is on its way, thus preparing us for the impending trouble.

Though chapter one does not reveal a great deal about the actors, we do get insight into Nicolas' character. From the onset, it is clear that the narrator is a coward. Nicolas is introduced, as he is running from someone's husband, only to hide again, fearful of the "robbers" he has happened upon. Nicolas himself confirms his cowardliness; while assessing the group in the clearing, he justifies his trepidation by saying that he is afraid of the passion for violence that people have. Where there is a crowd of people, he cautions, the spirit of murder is always close by. The foreshadowing aligns with the book's opening statement: a death began this journey, and another death has led them forward.

This first chapter takes place in December, a cold month that often invokes the imagery of death. The setting is itself a parallel to the events taking place in the chapter. When a person is near death, it is often said that he is in the winter season of his life. Further parallels resulting from Brendan's death are evident when the narrator compares the scene he witnesses in the clearing with a morality play. Watching the dying actor reminds him of the scene in such plays where a soul that has been weighed down becomes free. This can be connected to the religious irony of acting that is presented in this story. Although the church banned plays during the fourteenth century, morality plays were not banned. Likewise, as a student of the clergy, the narrator considers play-acting to be a sin - yet he views the badge of livery as a loophole that allows him to act. As a side note, the play that the company has been rehearsing is based on the biblical story of Adam and Eve.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Chapter two begins like a confession. The narrator says that he has lived in fault since birth and reveals that by the time he met the actors, he had already been travelling since May, the same time the actors began their journey. He had been working for a knight that wrote poetry, spending his time copying the poetry as well as transcribing Pilato's version of Homer. Nicolas also confesses that this is not the first time he has left the Holy Order without permission. Much to his Bishop's shame, he has already left twice before. Furthermore, readers discover another weakness in Nicolas: he is a gambler. He had purchased a piece of the sail from St. Peter's boat, and then subsequently lost it in a game of dice. Lastly, Nicolas admits that his true motive for joining the company is to cure his loneliness; after months of traveling by himself, he wants to be part of a community again.

As part of Nicolas's initiation, he must switch clothes with Brendan. He dons Brendan's jacket and tunic, while Margaret dresses the dead man in Nicholas's habit.

The players are on their way to Durham to perform a play for Christmas, and there is disagreement among the group about what to do with Brendan. While some of the players want to bury him right away, others, like Stephen, think they should carry him in the cart with them and bury him later. The group finally decides to carry the corpse along until they can pay a priest to bury him properly. Nicolas is stunned that the travellers care so much. He comments that during a time of plague, people become accustomed to death and usually pay little time or respect to the dead. As they resolve the issue, the group sings a song in Brendan's memory. Nicolas calls this Brendan's epitaph.

Further character description in this chapter reveals Brendan as a drunkard but also a talented singer and songwriter. The narrator also reveals that Springer, the young boy, not only plays the female roles in the company's productions, but is also trained as a tumbler and stilt walker.

Chapter 2 Analysis

When Nicolas vanishes, he is working on transcribing Pilato's version of Homer, who is famous for telling tales of a brave wanderer. Like Homer's epic heroes, Nicolas sets off on his own travels.

Nicolas calls his piece of St. Peter's sail his lost Holy Relic, and this serves as an important symbol early in the story. It is after Nicolas loses this relic that he commits adultery and runs off with a company of actors. The loss of the holy treasure symbolizes his descent into the world of sin. Continuing with the theme of loss, Nicolas reflects upon the cloak he left behind while fleeing from his mistress's husband in the previous



chapter. These losses represent Nicolas's destitution: he has become a wandering vagrant who no longer possesses anything of value.

In exchanging clothes with Brendan, he forfeits his habit, symbolizing his final split from the Church. It is ironic, too, that Brendan unwittingly becomes the new owner of Nicolas's habit. He "died with sins," and now he will be buried in priests' clothing. In yet another example of allegorical symbolism in this chapter, the players wrap Brendan up in a stage curtain. Nicolas notices a gleam of light upon dead oak leaves and a copper tray at the back of the cart, and sees Straw still dressed in a white angel robe. All of these images represent a death that is transcendent.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

The players walk alongside the cart while they travel, and Martin Bell uses this time to train Nicolas in acting. He begins by teaching him thirty hand gestures that he feels are essential to every actor. As a teacher, Bell is restless and stingy with compliments. He informs Nicolas that the most important skills for an actor are quick wit, easy movement, and a ready tongue for improvisation. Because Martin's father was an actor, Martin was raised as one too, and this helps explain his passionate and dramatic nature. Nicolas learns that he will play the part of the devil's fool, Brendan's former role. However, this role involves juggling, which Nicolas has a more difficult time learning.

Nicolas discovers that each member in the group can help him in some way. Straw, for example, is a gifted mime. Of the entire group, he is closest with Springer. Springer was born into a family of performing acrobats and is thus trained in this talent. His father abandoned him when he was just boy. He tells Nicolas that he is fifteen years old, although he is not positive about this.

Stephen is less skilled at performing, but has a great memory for remembering lines. He tends to take on more serious roles such as God, King Harold, and the Archangel Michael. He was previously an archer for the Sandville family, specifically for Robert Sandville, the Earl of Nottingham. Stephen raided and fought for this family, but after he lost part of his finger in a battle against the Earl of March, was unable to continue working as an archer. Thus, he became an actor. In fact, the company of players is owned by the Sandville family. The actors are commissioned to put on plays for the Earl, but as he is away, they must travel to find other audiences, although they are not paid for these other performances. The group's Christmas trip to Durham is for the Sandville's cousin, Sir William Percy. Stephen is also the reason that Margaret, a former prostitute, travels with the group. She does the company's washing, mending, and cooking.

Tobias acts out the small roles of the play. He also plays drums and bagpipes and acts as a handyman. He repairs the cart, looks after horses, and catches game to feed the players. Tobias teaches Nicolas to fall without hurting himself. Although the narrator reveals the pasts of the other players in this chapter, Tobias' story is kept hidden. As Nicolas says, Tobias does not talk about the past.

The players have been saving money to bury Brendan. As the chapter winds down, the rapid decay of Brendan's body prompts the group to stop in the next town to bury him. While they are there, the players plan to perform the Play of Adam, which they have been rehearsing. They arrive during the Feast of Lazarus and approach the town square, drawing attention with their costumes and music. Stephen is dressed as God, Springer as a virgin, Tobias as "mankind," and Nicolas as the devil. Martin is dressed simultaneously as the serpent of Eden and an angel.



Chapter 3 Analysis

Excitable and moody, Straw is prone to fits of gloom, perhaps the result of a stunted adolescent. Straw is, after all, the second youngest of the group, at twenty years old. The proximity of age between Straw and Springer helps explain their close friendship.

Stephen carries a bronze medallion of St. Sebastian, the patron saint of Archers. This is a symbol of his commitment to the aristocracy.

When Nicolas sees the town from a distance, he notices light glimmering off the roof of a castle and hears bells ringing. He sees this as a sign of guidance and compares it to the guidance he felt when he first met the players. It is possible that he believes that God is guiding this journey. Together, it seems that these statements symbolize destiny.

As the group nears the town, Nicolas leaves the reader to decide the goodness or badness of the town. For this one moment, the narrator steps out of his storytelling role to acknowledge that he is speaking directly to an audience. This parallels the narrator's new role as an actor and can be interpreted as a symbol of his integration into this career.

Unsworth invokes foreshadowing again when Nicolas reports that the group has hidden Brendan's body to hide the fact that they have brought death into the town. He is certain that death is waiting for them in the town as well.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

As the acting group settles into the town, they rent out a space in a barn adjoining the town's inn. Although they are unhappy with their overcharged fee at the inn, the group nevertheless agrees to the price because they have nowhere else to stay. They unload their belongings, including Brendan, into the barn. Margaret changes Brendan's clothes again because he cannot be buried in a clerical habit.

Martin and Tobias visit a priest to arrange Brendan's burial and return to the barn enraged because the priest has also overcharged them. Martin's comments about the priest offend Nicolas, but he says nothing. Tobias explains that there are good and bad people in every role.

The narrator discovers that the castle in the distance belongs to Lord Richard de Guise, who owns the town and all the land eastward to the ocean.

The inn is filled with a number of people during this time, including a blind man with a young girl, several soldiers, a group of three prostitutes, and a knight with his squire from Darlington. Jousting competitions are scheduled in the town over the next 10 days, bringing knights from all over the country. Sir William, the son of Lord Richard de Guise, is one of the competitors. He is a great jousting knight who has yet to be beaten. The knight at the inn travels to various competitions and lives off the prize money.

The players discover that the King's Justice is coming to town, and an inn worker informs Nicolas that there has been a murder. A man named Thomas Wells has been robbed and murdered, and Roger True's daughter has been tried and found guilty of the crime. As punishment, she will be hanged. Margaret suspects that Wells betrayed the woman. The Lord's monk found the suspect money in the home of the woman. Since there has already been a trial, no one is sure why the King's Justice is coming.

Chapter 4 Analysis

In this chapter, Nicolas wears Stephen's wool cap. It is too big for him and comes down over his eyes, blinding him in another symbolic parallel: as Nicolas gets closer to becoming an actor and further away from the priesthood, he begins to turn a blind eye to the goings on around him. As an example, he doesn't stand up to Martin to defend the priest.

Nicolas questions his own identity. He sees himself as a fugitive priest, but also as an untested actor. In chapter one, when Nicolas happened upon the players in the clearing, he commented that it was as if they were playing Brendan's death for him. Now, as he watches the crowds of people at the inn, he makes the same observation: people are acting like they are free - as if they are simply going through the motions. This theme



continues when he realizes that each of the actors plays a certain role offstage. Martin is the fanatical one, while Springer is timid and affectionate. Stephen is the disputer. Straw is wavering and wild. Tobias is the logical one. Nicolas is the moralizer; he speaks in Latin and turns to abstraction when drama arises. The only group member exempt is Margaret. Nicholas points out that she has no role on stage and, likewise, has no expected part to fill offstage.

In a foreshadowing of danger to come, Straw points out that the town's justice is swift; only two days have past since the murder, and the suspect has already been found guilty. Here Nicolas says that he thought that he was done with this murder, but alludes to the future in commenting that his involvement in this scandal is not yet over. The "shadow of crime" hovering over the players will soon would be hanging over him.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

As the company prepares to perform their Adam play, a group of acrobatic performers (tumblers, tightrope walkers, etc.) arrives at the inn and intrudes on the actors' practice area in the yard. Martin argues with the father of the new group, and the innkeeper defends the actors, but afterwards demands extra payment from them for the space. Margaret negotiates with the innkeeper, promising him a percentage of the actors' earnings from their performance.

The players set up the yard and an audience starts to arrive. Unfortunately, the yard is only half full; the other group has lured other potential customers to a performance. In the play of Adam, Nicolas takes the stage as an attendant devil and later plays the role of devil's fool, while Stephen plays God, Tobias plays the devil, Martin plays Adam, and Springer plays Eve. As the attendant devil, Nicolas makes the children in the audience cry, which leads him to believe that he has played the role successfully. When he goes into the barn to change into his devil's fool costume, he finds a depressed Stephen sitting alone, drinking. When he returns to the stage as devil's fool, the crowd loves him.

As the devil's fool, Nicolas sings Brendan's song to Tobias. Afterwards, Nicolas improvises and Tobias picks up on this cue, following his lead. At the end of his performance Nicolas fakes falling down, drawing laughter from the audience. He admits that he loves being able to make the audience laugh.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Nicolas is astonished by the stark contrast of his reception by the audience, depending on his role: "how quickly shifting are our love and hates, how they depend on mocks and disguises" (52). Nicolas sees that the human tendency to play out different roles in life is directly related to other people's expectations.

He realizes that playing characters is a dangerous thing. Acting makes it easy to forget who one is, and he says that he can feel his soul slipping. A masked Nicolas can barely see through the eye slits in his devil's fool mask. He can only see Tobias, dressed as Satan, before him. This scene symbolizes Nicolas's continued descent into sin. This profession is beginning to seduce him.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

After the play is finished, the company discusses their performance. Nicolas is pleased with his own performance but keeps his happiness to himself because the others are depressed, as they brought in less money than they had hoped for. Martin divides up what little money they have left among them, and Stephen and Margaret exit to go get drunk. As the remaining players continue their discussion of the play, Nicolas becomes offended by the way Martin speaks about the nature of God. Martin explains that he is only referring to god as a character in the play. He informs Nicolas that the church made God a player when priests began to act out his role during church service, referring to priests' reading of biblical text during sermons. Martin further mollifies Nicolas by praising his performance, and Nicolas is happy that he has pleased him.

Later the same night, after the others have gone to sleep, Martin asks Nicolas to go for a walk with him. As they wind through the now-empty streets on their way to a small tavern, Martin shares with Nicolas that when he was fifteen, his father died from the plague. He also confesses his fear that their small company will not be able to compete with the new, popular twenty-player companies. They must come up with a new idea, he says, in order to make enough money to survive. He comments that the Garden of Eden story is too old; its predictable ending lends it little appeal. He suggests a novel idea: they should act out the story of Thomas Wells' murder.

Martin gives Nicolas the information he has gathered about the murderess. She is an unmarried woman with no interest in men. Furthermore, Thomas Wells was in fact not a man, but rather a twelve-year-old boy.

Chapter 6 Analysis

When Martin speaks of God, he refers to him as a nobleman. God, he says, is the original estate owner. Adam and Eve, his tenants in bondage of service, must pay Him dues of obedience. This statement is symbolic of the feudal system that acts as the backdrop to the novel.

Nicolas claims that he knows the location of Eden. The Library of Lincoln Cathedral, where he held office as a sub-deacon, contains a map that clearly depicts the location of the famous garden. It is in the Far East, cut off from the rest of the world, and lies empty, awaiting the return of the saints. This notion adds a mysterious appeal to the story.

Nicolas becomes filled with dread when he hears the idea for the play of Thomas Wells, in a side note that foreshadows future events in the novel.



Nicolas also alludes to masks in this chapter. As the characters in this story are performers, the reference is literal. However, the protagonist's role as part of the clergy gives this reference further meaning. Nicolas says that there are many masks of power and human desire and notes that powerlessness wears various masks as well. This symbolism recalls earlier comparisons to acting on the stage and acting out parts in life.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

This chapter opens with Brendan's funeral. The company worries that if Nicolas attends, the priest overseeing the funeral may notice Nicolas's tonsure. As a solution, they shave Nicolas' head and claim that he had ringworm. Brendan is buried near plague victims. Nicolas notices a new child's grave in the same yard and assumes it is the grave of Thomas Wells. He finds it odd that the town has disposed of the victim as quickly as it has blamed someone for the murder.

After the funeral, the company heads back to the inn, but Martin stays behind to speak to the gravedigger. At the inn, Nicolas sees two riders coming up the hill toward him. From a distance, they are a fearful sight; the horse looks like a great black beast with red eyes, and the rider has a red shape above his head. Nicolas fears that this is a sign that the end times are coming and worries because he has not held onto his faith. The riders turn out to be the knight and squire who have been staying at the inn. The beast is a black stallion, the knight's warhorse. Straw and Springer confirm that they too were initially afraid of the sight.

After dinner, as Stephen and Tobias begin to load the cart up to leave, Martin returns to the inn and stops them. He says he wants to speak to everyone first. Pointing out their current poverty, Martin suggests that they stay in town and perform "The Play of Thomas Wells." Nicolas describes Martin's persuasion of the others to perform this new play in a wolf-like manner, both sinful and devious. He is haunted by an idea. Nicolas protests the play, saying that other plays are based on text, therefore allowing the players to know God's meaning. With this murder, he insists, it is too early to know the intended meaning, and the performance would therefore be blasphemous. Tobias agrees, saying that it is a sin for men to assign meaning to things.

Although the group members initially protest, Martin eventually persuades them one by one, and they agree to put on the play. They decide to treat the murder as a morality play, using lines from other morality plays they have performed and improvising the rest. The play will illustrate the battle for the soul. Nicolas sees this as exploitation; they are profiting from the tragic death of a child. However, as he does not want to be cast out of the company, he decides to go along with the idea.

A beggar approaches the group, and Martin calls the man forwards. The man begins to speak of Thomas Wells, saying that they found him before the angels did, when normally angels find the children first. He mentions the names of other deceased children: Robert Moore's son, Simon the smith's youngest son, and John Goody. Angels, he tells them, carried these children away. He saw it himself. He also describes seeing a light that was too bright for his eyes.



Martin suggests that the players go into town the next day to collect information about the murder. He would like someone to speak to Jack Flint, the man who found the dead boy. Martin is convinced that his idea is ahead of its time; in the future, he is certain, plays will be based on true stories.

Chapter 7 Analysis

When he died, Brendan was dressed in Nicolas's clergy clothes. At the funeral, however, he is laid to rest wearing pauper's shroud and is buried without a coffin. This change in attire suggests a superimposition of his career over even his death: he changes costume even after he has passed away. It is as though he continues to play parts even after death.

As Nicolas notices Wells' grave, he sees a blue heron rise through the air on "heavy wings." This alludes symbolically to future information that the group will gather that suggests that children in the town are carried away by angels.

The description of the approaching riders alludes to certain signs in the Book of Revelations in the New Testament. Nicolas comments that although he initially feared that the knight represented death, he knows now that the death the knight seemed to carry was his own. Knights serve as an important symbol in this chapter. While in the past they served to protect the people from oppression, they no longer serve a purpose, fighting each other only for sport. They have become mere performers. Nicolas says that it is now the common person's responsibility to fight for his own rights.

The group isn't sure what to make of the beggar. His manner of speaking betrays that he is mentally challenged. His arrival in the story adds a new twist to the plot and raises further questions about the town and the murder, leaving the reader to wonder what really happened.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

The players are in town looking for information. They meet back at the inn afterwards to share their findings. Nicolas begins the session. He tells them that a monk witnessed the murderess near the crime scene on the night Wells was killed. He adds that Wells was small for his age and was frequently beaten by a drunken man who lived with Thomas's mother. Springer mentions that the boy's father left years ago to join the wars. Stephen notes that the Wells are poor and that the man in the house is in bondage to the Lord De Guise.

Martin adds that the drunken man frequents the inn, trying to convince the innkeeper that he is sober in order to be served. The innkeeper waits until the drunk stumbles to kick him out. Nicolas puts in that the impoverished family had just sold their cow, and the boy was carrying the money from the sale when he was murdered. Tobias elaborates further with news that the family had sold the cow six miles outside of town, in the village of Appleton. The mother and her man had stayed behind in the village to get drunk, sending the boy ahead with the money for safekeeping.

A man who was out collecting kindling at the woodland border was the last to see Thomas in the afternoon on his way home. Later, the boy's body was discovered half a mile outside his town, near the house of the murderess, on the edge of the common. The woman lives with her father, who works as a weaver. Thomas had been strangled. Flint, the man who found the boy, had been out looking after his sheep. When he saw Wells, he put the boy on his mule and brought him into town. The group realizes that the story is complicated and raises many questions. What, for example, was the woman doing out there?

The company heads into town in costume to announce the new play. Nicolas, who will play a priest, is dressed in his habit. He notes that his clothes smell of Brendan. Stephen announces the title of the play, and tells the townspeople that their first showing will be at noon the next day. The King's Justice arrives and onlookers block the road back to the inn, forcing the players to stay for the moment at a street crossing. They finally arrive at the inn and begin rehearsal. The play will be separated into three parts: Setting forth, Encounter on the way, and Finding the money. The players must all double up on parts. Springer will play Thomas Wells and Straw will take Springer's usual role of playing the woman. Martin will play both Avartia and the monk. Tobias is Pieta. Pieta and Avartia represent virtues and vices in the struggle for the woman's soul. Stephen will take the role of Drunken man and Nicolas will play Good Counsel. To make the story more believable, they tailor the plot to suggest that the woman tempted the boy away from the road, killed him elsewhere, and later deposited his body back on the road.



Chapter 8 Analysis

As Nicolas tries to sleep the night before the play, he again becomes filled with dread. His instinct can be seen as a type of foreshadowing. Because he is recalling a story, he knows what happens later. His recollections of feelings of dread, therefore, are clues he gives the reader. These same clues may be compared to a person wishing that he had picked up on certain clues, in hindsight of a negative event.

As Nicolas drifts off to sleep, he sees visions of the murderess being tempted by demons, and sees these same demons guiding him and his peers. As in the symbolism of earlier chapters, this demonstrates Nicolas's further distancing from the Holy Order and the path of God.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

When Nicolas wakes up the next morning, he notices that Stephen is having a nightmare. Nicolas rises and sees two men in leather aprons clearing away the snow near the inn. He notes that he wants to remember this peaceful moment that precedes the turmoil he knows will soon come. He does, however, find it odd that he would want to remember this moment, as he notes that at this moment, his sins are upon him more than ever. He reviews his past acts: he never finished the transcription he was commissioned to do, he left the diocese without permission on a number of occasions, he gambled away his Holy Relic, and finally, he joined a troupe of players. He warns, however, that all of these sins together are nothing compared what will follow with the Wells play.

As the other players wake up, they begin another rehearsal and prop setup. Margaret and Tobias make an effigy of Thomas Wells for the final scene. As noon arrives, the yard begins to fill with audience members, and Stephen and Tobias perform tricks to entertain them. When the yard is full, Martin opens the play with the prologue. The players are all fearful as they begin. As the Drunken man, Stephen initially draws out laughter from the crowd, but the laughter quickly dies off. Nicolas steps out next, delivering a long sermon as "conscience." He falters in his line delivery but the crowd, which has trained its attention on Straw miming his part as the murderess, doesn't notice. Springer, as Thomas Wells, stands between them, and silence falls over the crowd. Straw gestures lewdly, implying that the woman is seducing the boy. This elicits a shout of protest from Wells' mother, who is in the audience. Her son was a good boy, she exclaims, and would not have gone with the woman. As muffled conversation and shouts ripple through the crowd, the company becomes nervous but continues the play. As they near the end, Stephen begins to improvise. Speaking directly to the audience, he questions why the women did not hide the money and why the monk was near her house the night before the murder. After this speech, the now-frightened players end the performance abruptly.

As the audience begins to leave, Margaret approaches the group with the night's earnings, the highest the group has ever gotten for a performance. She notifies them that King's Justice spoke with her and asked many questions about the players. He wanted to know where they came from, where they were going, and how they had found out so much about the murder in such a short time. Tobias and Springer suggest that they gather their belongings and leave town. Martin, however, protests. He is attracted to the monetary potential of the play, as well as the fame they might enjoy if word spreads about their play. He convinces the rest of the actors to stay and continue with the play again for the sake of potential earnings.

The group discusses the details of the murder again and decides that they must investigate and learn more. Martin asks Margaret to speak with Flint again to ask



whether the boy's body was covered in snow or frost when he was found. This will reveal how long the boy had been dead on the side of the road. Martin wants to create an astounding play that will leave the audience changed. The group will perform the next part of the play later that evening.

Chapter 9 Analysis

As the play begins, Nicolas notices a strange light on everything. There are no shadows anywhere. He says it seems as if all have gathered there for their play. This image suggests that perhaps the light of God is over them as they begin their performance.

In this chapter, Nicolas questions what truly drew them forward: was it the money or another force that used money as a lure? These thoughts show that to some degree, Nicolas still struggles to hold on to the values of the Holy Order, but he fears he is being pulled by something evil.

Nicolas mentions the monk in chapter 9 as a side note. He says that the monk, Simon Damian, is at the castle to secure grants and privileges for the Order. In another foreshadowing, Nicolas comments that, just as in the case of Brendan, he will never know the monk's living face. This suggests to readers that at some point in the story, the monk will die.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

The players set off into town again in search of more information about the murder. In the marketplace, Nicolas sees the beggar from the previous night. The beggar informs Nicolas that the father of the murderer is John Lambert, and mysteriously says that if she were brought to speak, the woman would tell where the others were. This is likely a reference to the other children who have been killed or are missing.

Nicolas decides pay Lambert a visit under the guise that he works for the Justice. A man carrying kindling points out Lambert's cottage to him, and Lambert, believing Nicolas works for the Justice, invites him inside. Nicolas questions the father on the details of the murder. When he asks where they found the money, however, Lambert replies that there was no money. Upon further questioning, Lambert unveils Nicolas's real identity.

He tells Nicolas that the town hates him because he travels around, speaking out against the rich and the priests. He is a religious man who believes that the priesthood has become corrupt, and refers to the monk who came to his house as a "servant of the antichrist." He explains that on the night of the murder, the monk had actually come to find him, but he was out of town visiting friends. Only his daughter Jane was home. Jane, he says, would have not committed the murder. Nicolas tells the man that his group is creating The Play of Thomas Wells. Upon hearing this, Lambert asks that the players reveal the truth of the murder in the play.

Chapter 10 Analysis

When the beggar comments that the murderer has information regarding the location of "the others," he raises questions about the woman's possible connection to other missing children.

Nicolas's description of Lambert insinuates that he considers this man to be a more likely murderer than his daughter. Lambert, Nicolas says, has strong, thick fingers that could choke either a boy or a man.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

Martin and Nicolas visit Jane Lambert in a prison guarded by two men. One of the guards will let visitors enter in exchange for a monetary bribe. Martin had already spoken with the guard, so the visit is expected. There, a guard leads Nicolas and Martin to the dungeon below ground where prisoners are kept. The sound of a voice and the rattle of chains waft through the air. The guard explains that the Lord de Guise owns the prison and that the prisoners they hear are two men who left the Lord's land without permission. They left in search of higher wages, and when the Lord found out, he sent armed men after them to bring them back to the prison.

Jane Lambert is in the last cell. Martin is allowed in, but Nicolas is told to wait outside. He watches them through a small opening in the cell door. Jane is chained at the ankle. Martin begins to speak to her, but she responds with indiscernible noises. He realizes that she is deaf and mute and begins to mime to her. She signs back to him.

Afterwards, the two men return to the inn. Martin confides that he believes the woman is innocent. By his words, it is clear that Martin has fallen in love with her. Back at the inn, Nicolas and Martin share their news with the group, except Stephen, who is not there. The others believe that the monk is guilty. After he found the money, they propose, he needed a reason to explain why he had it, and fabricated his tale of seeing the woman on the road the night before the murder. Margaret then tells the others that Flint told her that the boy's body was neither frosted nor covered with snow. Tobias adds that if the boy's money had already been taken and found again, the robbery would not have been the motive for the murder. Springer notes that it is likely that the monk and the boy happened to be travelling on the same road. Springer and Straw relay rumours they have heard that the Lord's son, William, has been hiding away in his room for days. The people at the castle speculate that he is pining for someone, "wasting for love."

Stephen finally arrives at the inn, completely intoxicated. He has spent the day drinking with the gravedigger, who informed him that he did not see Thomas Wells' burial. The Lord's steward paid the priest and oversaw the burial. He also reported that four other boys have been reported missing in the past twelve months, taken from the town or country road. Thomas Wells, then, was the fifth boy to fall prey to danger.

Martin considers how to revise the play to reveal Jane Lambert's innocence. The actors decide to modify the story to include the new details they have discovered. They are running out of time for rehearsal, however, and in addition are anxious about implications of the new version, especially if the murder is somehow related to the Lord de Guise. Martin wants to save the woman, while the others wish to leave town. They agree to perform the play one last time, and then leave immediately.



Chapter 11 Analysis

While the rest of the group goes into town to talk with the townspeople, Springer and Straw head to the castle. As they talk to the people outside of the castle gates, they discover that no one seems to care about the boy's murder. They are too caught up in the excitement of the jousting activities due to begin the next day. Springer and Straw note that the castle seems to exist in its own world. Hear, Unsworth portrays the realities of feudal orders. Wealthy landowners are completely disconnected from the common people. Despite close physical proximity to the commoners, they live in their own world, far from the concerns of everyday struggles.



Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

The players set up in the yard, blocking off a makeshift stage, and Stephen announces the play as "The True Play of Thomas Wells." The audience crowds into the yard as if they were assembling into church, and Springer is alarmed by how quiet they are. Martin begins his prologue, much the same way as in the first performance. He has written new lines for the introduction. Nicolas is worried because he isn't wearing a mask. Straw's new performance as Jane, under the tutelage of Martin, now includes mimicking her noises and signs. Stephen improvises his lines, mentioning Christopher Hobbs, the gravedigger, as his source of information. As the play continues, the players begin to implicate the monk as the murderer. Martin removes his cloak and mask, and the others follow suit by removing their masks one by one.

Margaret shouts something from behind the crowd. Unable to hear, Nicolas moves toward her through the audience. She tells him that the monk is dead. He has been hanged. A group of the Lord's soldiers at the gate of the inn are carrying the dead monk with them. Nicolas tries to make his way back to the stage but is stuck in the crowd. The audience is turning on the players. He sees someone throw a stone at the stage.

Nicolas realizes that the only way to save their selves is to save the play. As the crowd grows angry and restless, Martin lies, saying they knew that the monk was to be killed that night, and asks to finish the play. Nicolas returns to the stage, where he acts as God's Justice. As they conclude the play, painting the woman's innocence, the players assume that the performance is finished. Much to their surprise, Martin continues in his role by questioning why the monk was hanged. He comments that he was punished for finding the body, not for killing the boy. When they discover the motive behind the monk's hanging, he says, they will find the true culprit in the murder. He asks the audience if Wells' mother saw her dead son. Someone answers that she did not; they would not show him to her. Martin continues with the explanation that the Lord's steward oversaw the burial and that the monk had also worked for the Lord. With this statement, he implies that the Lord de Guise is somehow connected to the crime.

A group of the Lord's soldiers, with the Lord's steward, surrounds the stage. They have come through the inn. The steward informs the players that the Lord de Guise wants to be entertained and has invited them to the castle.

Chapter 12 Analysis

The author continues to foreshadow in this chapter. Before the players begin their performance, the narrator notes that Martin seems to have recovered from being outvoted but that his recovery has brought moral danger to them all. He comments that no one in the group is aware how far Martin will go to save the accused woman.

Nicolas is afraid because he doesn't wear a mask during his performance. As the performance continues, however, all the players eventually remove their masks. In the context of previous mask imagery, it is fitting that as the players reveal the truth of the murder, they also reveal their true identities.



Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

The players are given a short time to change their clothes and remove their makeup before they are escorted to the castle. They are told to bring only their costumes. Margaret stays behind. The group travels to the castle on mules, with guards both in front and behind them. When they arrive, they are led up a stone staircase into the chamber where they will stay. The chamber is a square stone room with hay on the ground to sleep on. The guards tell them that the Lord has gone to bed for the night and says that the room overlooks the tiltyard where the jousting will take place the following day. The Lord will require their services after the jousting is over. Before they go to bed, the actors decide that they will perform the Nativity for the Lord de Guise.

At sunrise, someone enters with food for the players. Outside, they hear voices of those who are preparing for the joust. Richard de Guise enters the yard, but the players are too high up to see him. He is tall and imposing, with a long, narrow face. He speaks clearly and with dignity, Nicolas notices - qualities, Martin has taught him, that are the valued in actors. As Nicolas listens to the Lord de Guise, his thoughts turn to the Lord's son, William. He wonders what romantic distress could possibly keep him away from jousting.

After de Guise finishes speaking, Nicolas notices the knight and squire from the inn. The knight is announced as Roger of Yarm, a knight who fought in Normandy. After winning his first fight, he decides to fight again in the afternoon. This time, Roger competes against an older knight. As they prepare to joust, Nicolas's earlier premonition regarding the knight grows stronger. As the two joust, Roger receives a blow to the head and falls to the ground.

Chapter 13 Analysis

Amidst the fear that permeates this chapter, Nicolas notes the beauty of the tiltyard. He notices the doves rising in the air, frightened by a sounding trumpet, and the crisp white snow that covers the yard beneath their chamber. He seems to be swept up in the majesty of the jousting ceremonies. As Nicolas observes the knights, he compares them to players.

Nicolas's earlier prediction about the knight comes to life in this chapter. With the monk dead the knight is gravely injured, following an early premonition, the story exudes a feeling that death surrounds the players, hinting that they perhaps will meet a similar fate in this town.



Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

After dinner, the players are finally summoned to perform for the Lord. As they approach the private apartments of Richard de Guise, Nicolas notices a dark passageway that leads off in the opposite direction from where they are going. He sees a door open in the distance, and a stream of light peaks out as a nun exits. She is carrying cloths, and Nicolas recognizes the stench emanating from the room: she is tending to someone with the plague.

The players pass through an arched doorway into a small antechamber. They notice that despite ample room to perform, there is little space for an audience. The room is empty except for a single high-backed chair, and the players' costumes and masks are set up on the floor. Martin asks the steward why he was so hasty to pay the priest and oversee the child's burial. The steward doesn't respond. Springer then asks him if he was the one that hanged the monk, and Tobias questions why the monk was hanged.

The door to the room opens and Richard de Guise enters. He relieves the guards but asks the steward to stay. He tells the players to begin. Martin suggests the Nativity, but the Lord requests the Thomas Wells play. Martin assents, and the group begins. While they put on their costumes, they agree to perform as before but omit the inquiry about why the monk was killed. Martin, however, betrays the group again. He improvises a speech about pride, and calls out the Lord as the true murder culprit.

A knock on the door interrupts the play. The Lord's daughter comes in with news that Roger of Yarm is on his deathbed and that no one can find a chaplain to administer the sacrament. She informs him that her mother sent her because she had heard that one of the players is a priest. Nicolas identifies himself as the priest and follows a guard to Roger's room. The squire is kneeling beside the young knight's bed, crying. Nicolas asks Roger if he is ready to make his confession, then realizes that the blow the knight received has taken away his hearing and speech. Nicolas knows that he cannot give the knight absolution without his repentance, so he gives the knight his own repentance as the knight dies.

The remainder of the chapter describes Nicolas's escape from the castle. With a guard waiting for him outside the knight's room, Nicolas notices that the room has an additional door. Before anyone notices, he exits through that door, which leads him through a maze of passageways in the castle and the deserted gallery of the Great Hall, before dumping him out into the courtyard, where he hides from arriving guests. He turns down an alley and arrives at an open field, which he realizes is the tiltyard. He uses his new tumbling skills to climb up to the roof and make his way down the other side to the town.



Chapter 14 Analysis

It is important to note this room that Nicolas notices. In addition, although the scene he witnesses does not yet connect to the rest of the story yet, it holds within it an important piece of the puzzle. Throughout this book, the author uses foreshowing again and again to hint at future events, creating an enigmatic story that keeps the reader guessing until the very end.

Nicolas compares the Lord de Guise to the Lord of the damned, conveying that he sees the feudal lord as Satan.

The knight's death provides another allusion to role-playing. Nicolas says, "Now he has no role left to play but this last on of dying, that comes to us all" (182). This draws close parallels to Brendan's death. Between Brendan's death and burial, he went through three costume changes, indicating that even death itself is a role to be played.



Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

Once Nicolas has arrived in town, after his escape from the castle, he is surprised to see that no one is after him. He heads to the inn to speak with the King's Justice. The King's Justice invites him inside and listens as Nicolas begins to recount his tale from the beginning. He explains first his encounter with the players, and continues with the rest of their journey, informing the Justice that the other players are now held up at the castle. He describes information they have gathered concerning the murder. He speculates about the monk finding the boy's body and bringing it to the road, as well as the Lord's steward overseeing the burial. He also adds that Martin has fallen in love with Jane Lambert and has subsequently betrayed the others in an attempt to save her.

The Justice asks why he left the diocese and joined the players. When Nicolas explains that he acted on impulse, the King's Justice reprimands him for his foolishness.

He tells Nicolas that they are the first players to have been allowed into the Lord's private apartment, as the Lord typically has no interest in plays. Nicolas describes the smell of the plague oozing from one of the rooms in the apartments, and the Justice explains that they have had trouble with de Guise in the past, so he has been keeping an eye on him. The Lord takes justice into his own hands; he has his own court, prison and army. This is problematic because he commands his own justice and not that of the King's. He also says that they have heard stories of missing boys in the past year, and it is fortuitous that the final boy was found. In fact, the Justice came to town on news of Thomas Wells. There are more than five who have disappeared, he says, including orphan boys who beg outside the castle gate. He believes that someone in the castle is sexually abusing the boys and killing them afterwards.

The King's Justice tells Nicolas to wait for him outside; they will take a ride together later. Nicolas assumes they will take a trip to the castle. When he enters the inn yard, he runs into Margaret, who tells him that she had planned to wait for them until morning; if they didn't show up, she had planned to leave. She divides the remaining money between herself and Nicolas. Strangely, Margaret doesn't ask about the others. Nicolas, however, informs her that they are trapped in the castle. She doesn't care; she is angry that she was not included with them. She had felt that she was part of the group, but realized when she was left behind that she counted for nothing. She tells Nicolas that she is going to live with Flint and advises him to go back to the Bishop, where he belongs. She does not even care about the fate of her lover, Stephen. She simply tells Nicolas to relay Flint's wonderful attributes to Stephen, hoping to arouse his jealousy.



Chapter 15 Analysis

In her anger over her exclusion, Margaret tells Nicolas, "They are players, the play is theirs." Margaret childishly states that they have made their own choices and must now face the consequences.

Nicolas tells Margaret the story of "The Devil and the Player." He explains that before players existed, the devil tried to tempt a man. The man refused every temptation the devil offered. When the devil offered to make the man a player, however, he agreed, seeing no harm in it. The devil knew that players borrow bits and pieces of other people's souls. In time, their own soul begins to slip away, enabling the devil to claim it easily. Nicolas explains that this has been the fate of players ever since. This story points to earlier symbolism in the book, when Nicolas says that he can feel his soul slipping. The return to this symbolism gives the narrative a cyclical feel. The story itself seems it will unravel this same way for the reader, as the plot transports the reader back and forth through memory and presents clues to the solution of the mystery.

One of the most profound moments in the story comes at the end of chapter 15. Nicolas wonders if there is a larger play still, one in which Kings and Emperors believe they are the center, only to discover that they are marginal. Appropriately, this statement foretells the end of the feudal system and the future rise of the bourgeoisie in England.



Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary

The King's Justice comes for Nicolas, bringing a saddled mule for him to ride. Accompanying him are twelve hooded, armed men. They ride out to the graveyard and dig up Thomas Wells' coffin. As the men open the coffin, Nicolas notices the smell of plague again. The Justice calls Nicolas forward. He sees the face of Thomas Wells and describes it as "lost in death. The boy's face, he says, appears less real than Springer's face when he acts out the part of Wells' effigy that the players made as a prop. The men examine the boy's body and find signs of sodomy. They note that the body had either not been cleaned at all or had been cleaned too quickly, as there are still traces of blood. They see the characteristic sign of the plague on the boy's body, a black swelling under his arm and on the groin. In addition, they find that although there are strangulation marks, Wells' neck has also been broken. Someone strong would have been needed to do this.

The men bury the body again and leave. The King's Justice tells Nicolas that it was the monk who procured the boy and that there must be a secret place in the castle where the other bodies have been hidden. The culprit is the Lord's son William. He was the source of the plague smell in the castle. Wells already had the plague when William took him. The monk worked for William, not the Lord de Guise. He likely knew about William's actions before the Wells murder.

William must not have noticed the boy's plague symptoms until after he had abused him. No one wanted to touch the diseased boy; thus, he was left somewhere overnight. It is widely believed that the virus dies twelve hours after a person dies, explaining the monk's delay in moving the body. No one knows why the monk decided to blame the weaver. Nicolas assumes the monk chose the weaver simply because he didn't like him. The Justice then notes that no one with the plague survives more than six days after the first sign of infection, meaning William has likely died overnight or by morning.

As morning approaches, the group travels to the prison to release Jane Lambert. Nicolas waits outside as the King's Justice goes into the prison to retrieve her. The Justice asks Nicolas to watch over her and suggests, like Margaret, that he return to the diocese. Nicolas considers this over but realizes that as sub-deacon, he simply acted out the orders of the Bishop. The Bishop is the master actor and the Cathedral, his acting company. As sub-deacon, Nicolas was unable to be his true self, and he cannot serve God if he is deceiving himself. His impulse to run away from the Holy Order, then, came from the wisdom of his true heart. Nicolas discerns that his true destiny is to be a player - but a player careful to guard his soul, unlike the one in the tale he told Margaret. He thanks the King's Justice but says that he will remain a player. Though disappointed, the Justice tells Nicolas that the choice is his. He thanks Nicolas for his help and leaves to talk to the Lord de Guise at the castle. In a final note, Nicolas observes Jane Lambert



as she attempts to fix her untidy hair and he wonders if Martin will still love her now that she is free.

Chapter 16 Analysis

As Nicolas arrives at the graveyard, he notes that Brendan's grave looks as though it already belongs to a remote time. This notion symbolizes the acceleration of time since they have been arrived in town, with respect to how much has happened and how much they have changed.

Yet another reference to masks appears early in this chapter when Nicolas notices that the armed men who work for the Justice wear protective masks over their nose and mouth as they examine the dead boy. This correlates with the masks that the players wear to protect their identity. Indeed, during the final inn yard performance of "The Play of Thomas Wells," Nicolas is petrified when he has to perform without his mask. In addition, in a symbolic act of revealing the truth, all of the players remove their masks during that same performance.

As morning light warms the town, Nicolas describes this vivid image as a symbolic allusion to the new day - and new hope - that has arrived.



Characters

Nicolas Barber

Nicolas Barber is the story's protagonist and narrator. He describes himself as a twenty-two year old impoverished clerical scholar. Though short, he is still favoured by women. The relevance of this statement is clear from the opening chapter describing Nicolas on the verge of committing adultery. Although he is a cleric, he seems shaky in his devotion to the Holy Order; he has committed adultery, gambled, and left the Holy Order without permission. In chapter one, Nicolas is fleeing from the husband of his lover, and stumbles upon a group of actors attending a dying friend. Nicolas also admits to cowardice often in the novel, as illustrated in his flight from the husband. As he acclimates himself to his new role, he faces a constant struggle between good and evil, always fearing that play-acting is itself a sin. The story Nicolas recounts is largely a description of his own struggle to keep his soul intact and resist temptation. Through his journey, Nicolas runs across many obstacles. He is far from a model cleric even before he joins the troupe, and as the story progresses we see that he is easily seduced by money and attention - both attainable in a career as a player.

Through his narration, Nicolas succeeds in revealing his personality. He is good with words, often wins arguments, and is able to talk his way out of things. This is likely a talent he developed working as sub-deacon for the Bishop at Lincoln Cathedral. He explains that when he first meets the actors, he had already been travelling since May to escape a transcription job he has been commissioned to complete. This, in fact, was the third time he had abandoned the diocese. He furthermore confesses that he joined the company in part due to loneliness. He is a dependent person, eager to please others. He longs to be part of a community.

Brendan

Brendan's death sets the stage for Nicolas to meet and join the group of actors. When the players remove their ailing friend from their travelling cart and place him in the clearing, Nicolas watches from afar. He sees that Brendan has blue eyes that are wide when death creeps into them. He is bald with a round head, fat face, and crooked mouth that hangs open when he dies. When his soul has departed, the group puts him back in the cart and pushes him along until they find a place to bury him. His burial, necessitated by the decay of his corpse, causes the actors to enter an unnamed town that becomes the principle setting in the book. After Brendan's death, Nicolas takes his place in the travelling show. Although Brendan dies in chapter one, he serves as an important character in the book. Besides his role as catalyst for many of the events in the story, he represents the lives of all actors. After his death, he goes through several costume changes, indicating that acting is more than simply a player's job. It becomes his entire identity.



Martin Bell

Martin Bell is the group's leader and the company's principal actor. He is of medium height and slight build, with a narrow oval face and grey-green eyes. Nicolas calls him wiry and quick. When he first meets him, he notices that Martin wears a badge of livery on his green hat, indicating that the company works for the Holy Order. Nicolas later discovers that Robert Sandville, the Earl of Nottingham, owns the company. Martin takes acting more seriously than the others, having been raised as an actor by an actor father. To him, there is no distinction between the stage and real life, and he dreams of finding fame with his acting company. It is his idea to perform the "Play of Thomas Wells." Martin is a visionary, ahead of his time; he sees the possibility that a good performance can change the audience. He believes that plays in the future will tell stories beyond those in the Bible; they may even be based on real life. It is Martin that leads the group into danger, first with the Wells play and then with his attempt to save the life of Jane Lambert, the woman convicted of Wells' murder.

Stephen

Stephen is described as ragged and hulking, with a deep voice and a face that never smiles. He has long black hair and "eyes as black as damson." He is often depressed and drinks a fair amount. Fierce and full of conviction, Stephen is a former archer who lost part of his finger in battle, an accident that forced him into another profession. Although he lacks the acting talent of the other actors in the company, he has a great ability to memorize lines. As befits his nature, Stephen performs the serious roles - such as God - in the company's plays.

Straw

Straw's name likely derives from his physical appearance. A young man in his early twenties, Straw has fair hair and pale and unsteady eyes. When Nicolas first meets the actors, Straw is wearing a white angel smock, perhaps symbolically suggesting innocence. Nicolas describes him as strange, excitable, and moody. Martin discovered Straw some years ago at a fair.

Springer

Springer is the youngest actor in the company. Though he claims to be fifteen, he is not certain of his age. He was born into a family of tumblers and trained as an acrobat before his father abandoned him when he was a boy. Because of his youth and high singing voice, he plays the female roles in the company's performances. Nicolas describes him as fearful, though not necessarily cowardly - more a result of his youthful immaturity. Springer and Straw share a close friendship, likely a result of their similar ages.



Tobias

The oldest member of the acting company, Tobias is known for his thriftiness and pragmatism. He generally gets the smaller roles in the company's productions. He is a handy man capable of fixing things on request and looks after the horse. He also feeds the company by hunting game. Though he is not highly intelligent, Tobias is good willed. The narrator does not provide the reader with Tobias's history; as Nicolas says, Tobias "never speaks of the past."

Margaret Cornwall

Margaret is the only woman with the company. She is not an actor, but rather travels with them because she is Stephen's lover. In order to pull her weight, she does the company's washing, mending, and cooking. She often exhibits lewd behaviour and remarks, likely a result of her past as a prostitute.

Lord Richard de Guise

The Lord de Guise is not only the owner of the town's castle, but also lord of the unnamed town that provides the setting of the story, as well as all of the neighbouring land eastward. The Lord is tall and imposing with a long, narrow face, and is clear and deliberate in speech. He has pale blue heavy-lidded eyes and is thin-lipped. A tyrant in the land, the Lord is oppressive and quick to condemn. As the mystery of the story unravels, the players discover that the true murder culprit is somehow tied to the Lord de Guise, if not to Richard himself. We finally discover that the Lord's son is responsible for the sexual abuse and murder of the young boys. The Lord serves as a symbol of the power-hungry nature of feudal lords.

Sir William

William is the Lord's son. He is handsome and well-liked by women, as well as an accomplished jousting. Though he plays an integral role in the plot, he remains heavily in the backdrop of the novel. Indeed, the closest Nicolas gets to him is noticing a distant smell of disease wafting from his room. With the aid of a monk, William had been molesting and killing young boys over the past year. The truth is finally uncovered when the King's Justice discovers that William is dying from the plague and links his ailment to that of William's last victim, Thomas Wells. His character invokes interesting symbolism, revealing that the worst evils sometimes hide behind a charming and beautiful exterior.

Thomas Wells

Wells is the last young boy abducted and killed by William. Of all the missing boys, Wells is the only one to provide clues to the murderer's identity when a monk attempts



to frame a young woman. The actors glean information about the Wells murder for a play they are performing based on the crime. The players discover that the woman is innocent and later discover the true criminal after finding that Thomas was already dying from the plague. As the only discovered victim, he represents all the missing boys.

The King's Justice

The King's Justice arrives in town to investigate the rumours of missing boys. Already distrustful of Richard Guise's behaviour, the Justice has been watching the feudal lord for some time. Thomas Wells' corpse provides the Justice with physical evidence to investigate the scandal. He solves the murder with the help of Nicolas Barber and releases the accused woman from prison. He represents the triumph of good over evil.

John Lambert

John Lambert is the father of the woman charged with Well's murder. A weaver by trade, he is a very religious man who travels from town to town speaking out against priests and the aristocracy. When Nicolas meets John Lambert, he says that Lambert fills the entire room with his strong presence. Lambert represents the hardships faced by many of the townspeople. He has faced several tragedies himself, including the death of his wife and both his sons, from plague and famine.

Jane Lambert

Jane is the woman accused of murdering Wells. She is deaf and mute and lives alone with father, as her mother and two brothers have passed away. When the actors show up in town, she is in prison facing death by hanging. Martin visits the woman under the premise of perfecting his play. He discovers her innocence, falls in love with her, and decides to save her by revealing the truth.

Simon Damian

Damian is a Benedictine monk who lives in the castle and works as Lord Richard's confessor. He also works for Sir William. He is at the castle to secure grants for the Holy Order. We meet this monk after the players initially hear about the murder. It is he who questioned Jane Lambert after he allegedly found the missing money in her house. As investigation into the truth progresses, the Lord's guards hang the monk. Later, Nicolas discovers that the monk had assisted William in his evil crimes. After William discovered that Wells had the plague, it was the monk that moved the boy's body and attempted to frame Jane Lambert.



Roger of Yarm

Roger of Yarm is one of the first characters introduced when the players arrive at the town's inn. A knight who fought in Normandy, he wears a crest of coiled serpent with bars of blue and silver. He is a very young man; Nicolas notes his smooth skin and long lashes. He has a long scar that runs from below temple to line his jaw. Roger represents the many knights who travel from one competition to another and live off the prize money. Nicolas points out that at one time, knights served a purpose. Now, however, they fight for sport. Roger's youth and eagerness help confirm this. Roger is fatally injured during a jousting competition at the Lord's castle. With no other priest available, Nicolas goes to his deathbed and acts as his confessor.

Innkeeper

The owner of the inn where the actors stay, the keeper is a greedy swindler always trying to profit through dishonest means. Nicolas describes him as scornful. He is low browed and brawny, with one eye turned inward.

Jack Flint

Flint is the man who found Thomas Wells the morning after the murder. He is a widower who lives alone. Towards the end of the book, Margaret leaves the group to go live with him.

The Lord's Steward

The Lord's steward is one of Richard de Guise's many employees. He provides a clue to the murder mystery when the actors discover that he has paid the town priest to bury Wells and stayed to oversee the burial.

Christopher Hobbs

Hobbs is the town's gravedigger. After indulging in too many drinks with Stephen, he confesses information about the Wells burial that seems suspicious.

Robert Sandville

Robert Sandville is the Earl of Nottingham. His family owns the acting company, and he commissions the actors to put on plays for him. However, when he is abroad, the company is left to travel and find other means of survival.

Sir William Percy

Sir William Percy is Sandville's wife's cousin. The company has been charged to perform at his residence in Durham during Christmas.



Objects/Places

The Cart

The actors use the cart to transport costumes, set, and props for their plays. It is a small cart covered in oiled canvas. The players do not ride in the cart; however, after Brendan dies, the actors carry his body in it until he can be given a proper burial.

The Clearin

g

The clearing is a deserted spot in the woods where Nicolas first meets the players. The players have stopped to rest and tend to Brendan, who is near his death.

The Copper Tray

The copper tray is a prop used to echo the sound of thunder. It is referenced symbolically throughout the story, likely to emulate God's fury.

Masks

Masks are used symbolically throughout the book. Nicolas refers to the metaphorical masks people wear in life as a disguise or to feel the freedom to play a role.

The Town

The story takes place in a town that is never named. Although the players initially come for a quick burial, they end up staying much longer than expected when they become involved in the investigation of the town's murder scandal. The town is under the lordship of Richard de Guise, a feudal noble who takes justice into his own hands - often to the detriment of his tenants.

The Inn

The inn provides lodging for the players during their stay in the unnamed town. The group also uses the inn yard as a stage to perform their plays. Other notable characters staying at the inn include the King's Justice and the knight Roger of Yarm.



The Castle

The castle is home to Richard de Guise. After the players anger the Lord with their performance of "The True Play of Thomas Wells," he invites them to the castle to perform their play. While they wait for an audience with de Guise, the players watch the jousting competitions that take place at the castle.

The Tiltyard

The tiltyard is an open field inside the castle where the jousting competitions take place. This is also the open space Nicolas reaches after his escape from the castle.

Appleton Village

Appleton is a neighbouring village. Thomas Wells had travelled here with his family to sell a cow, and was murdered on his way back home.

Lambert's Cottage

Nicolas visits John Lambert's house in the hope of finding out more details about the murder. The one-window house is built of stone and enclosed by a timber fence, with geese in the yard. Despite the presence of a central fireplace inside, the house nevertheless remains cold.

The Prison

As with seemingly everything else in town, the prison belongs to Richard de Guise. Martin and Nicolas visit the prison to talk to Jane Lambert and a guard allows Martin inside in exchange for bribe money. One side of the prison faces a street block. A coat of arms portraying a leopard couchant and three doves in a diagonal line hangs above the door. The prison encloses a courtyard with a sun clock in the center. Prisoners are kept in the underground dungeon.



Themes

Oppression

The historical context of the book sets a background where lords rule over land, and common people struggle as their tenants. The feudal system adds an important thematic element to the story, as the narrator struggles to discover his identity during a tumultuous time when common people are oppressed by bondage. Commoners during this time live under the oppression of not only the feudal system, but also the harsh restrictive laws of the church. As a former sub-deacon, Nicolas exemplifies the struggle to choose between right and wrong in the midst of immobilizing restrictions.

The novel also deals with the corruption of both the church and nobility. Unsworth depicts those characters connected to the feudal lord or the church as villains. The story additionally reveals the harsh nature of justice under a tyrannical lord; de Guise's own justice system is harsh, swift, and self-serving. In the battle between freedom and oppression, the players manage to empower themselves and discover a small taste of freedom. Nicolas Barber finds freedom when he chooses to stay with the players rather than return to the church. He discovers that his true identity is that of an actor, and liberates his soul by following his true path. More importantly, the players discover that their play provides a path to truth. This notion illustrates the transformational power of art in liberating both the players and townspeople. As Martin had hoped, he accomplishes his goal of creating a play that changed people.

Identity vs. False Identity

A principal theme in this book is true identity versus false identity. To address this theme, the author explores the chasm between appearance and reality. Unsworth first introduces this theme in Nicolas's realization that the players carry out certain roles even outside the bounds of a play. He points out that everybody is burdened by certain expectations cast by others. In fact, they are even expected to recite certain lines in response to each other. Nicolas notes that everyone has a role except Margaret. Margaret has neither an onstage, nor an offstage, role.

The narrator also uses the concept of wearing masks in daily life. He notes that people wear masks to disguise the truth or protect themselves. He even suggests that people wear masks to move into their daily functioning roles; he notices people "playing parts even when there was no one by but themselves."

After the players settle into the inn, Nicolas watches people in the yard going about their normal business. In a town under oppressive rule, he wonders whether people merely pretend to be free, or if they are simply transforming into another role. He says, "And I wondered if these people too, who seemed to move as they wished about the yard,



were in truth constrained to behave as they did and were only pretending to be free, as we ourselves had done when we came in procession through the town" (37).

Good vs. Evil

Another relevant theme in the novel is good versus evil. This theme arises early in the book, when Nicolas Barber leaves the Holy Order and joins a group of players, despite knowing that the church considers play-acting a sin. He struggles continually with self-doubt, unable to discern whether his actions are good or evil. His problem is further exacerbated by his tendency to conform to the crowd rather than listen to his own conscience. Aside from the novel's obvious villains, many of the characters have aspects of sin or evil present in their lives. Martin, for instance, suffers from excess pride and worshipping the idol of fame. Nicolas admits that he is a gambler and adulterer, and lacks good judgment because he tends to make decisions based on his cowardice. Margaret is a former prostitute who continues to display lewd behaviour. Finally, the other actors are often willing to go against their better judgment when money is involved.

The real display of evil, however, can be found in the characters of the Lord de Guise, his son William, and the monk who works for them. The Lord de Guise abuses his power in many capacities. The Lord's son William molests and murders young boy. The monk abets William in his morbid crimes. In contrast to these villains is the King's Justice, who represents good in the story. Uncorrupted, he seeks to help the townspeople by bringing true justice to the town.



Style

Points of View

The story is told from the point of view of Nicolas Barber, a fugitive priest who has abandoned Holy Order to perform with a company of travelling players. He tells the story in hindsight, shifting constantly between present happenings and clues regarding the future. However, Nicolas does more than tell a story. Along the way, he tries to distinguish between good and evil even as he moves the reader through the narrative. This is a unique narrative technique that would have been impossible through the narration of another character. A different narrator would have provided the same central story with a vastly distinct slant.

Setting

The novel takes place in an unnamed town in fourteenth-century England. The town struggles under the oppression of feudal ruler who carries out his own brand of justice. The novel takes place during a time when travelling players starved as they travelled from town to town, performing makeshift productions for small audiences. The setting helps ground the story in realism and historical fact. Readers are better able to connect to the characters through a foundation that is believable.

The novel plays up its historical elements to invoke a tragedy. Common people lived under the oppressive rule of both the feudal system and the diocese, and many lost their loved ones to plague or famine. In the novel's unnamed town, the townspeople's harsh lives are worsened by the presence of a child-molesting killer who has already abducted and murdered several young boys from the town. Placing the story in this historical context causes these tragedies to be more logical. The context, however, makes the novel's climatic peak no less horrifying, perhaps because it is so believable.

Language and Meaning

The language in the novel is appropriate for its time period, although the author does not directly explain certain words used to describe period-specific clothes, architectural structures, or forms of entertainment. Through the context, however, the reader gradually becomes familiar with terms like tunic, tiltyard, or tourneys. This appropriate language adds realism to a story that is set in a specific historical context.

Aside from this, the author uses the terminology of actors in both literal and symbolic ways. The literal use of theatre language gives readers a better understanding of the profession, and puts them on a more equal footing with the players. On the other hand, the author also makes use of symbolic theatre language, especially through the character of Nicolas Barber. He addresses the notions of wearing masks and costumes and playing roles as a symbolic way to refer to the role-playing and masks of real



people in everyday life. As a newcomer to acting, Nicolas has the ability to notice the similarities between acting on the stage and acting in real life.

Structure

The novel is told in present tense, although the entire story is only a flashback. The narrator offers foreshadowing and introduces symbols to represent future events. At times he cautions readers outright, warning of impending danger without revealing the exact form it will take. The story is set up as a murder mystery that is not solved until the very end. The narrative flow between present and future adds suspense to the story and urges readers to read on.

Because the story is written from a specific point of view, readers glean information only as it is relevant to the narrator's own experiences. This method adds an additional dimension: the reader learns of Nicolas Barber's own history, giving him or her the ability to assess Nicolas's reactions to events as well as other characters. Readers only see the other characters through the fugitive priest's eyes. However, knowledge of Nicolas's own past allows the reader to agree or disagree with his perceptions, as well as to judge his character.



Quotes

"It was a death that began it all and another that lead us on" (7).

"It was as if they played his death for me and this was a strange thing, as they did not know I watched, and as I did not know what they were" (7).

"Our lord was brought down to be pitied, on the Cross He was too far away" (8).

"Then the sound ceased and I saw them shift back and make space for Death, a thing very wise to do, Death being less provoked when at large than when confined" (9).

"Such faces we see often among the people now, not true faces but masked by sufferings" (12).

"Men are distinguished by the power of their wanting" (17).

"Thus the great art of the player is not in showing but concealing" (33).

"But he was of those who boast where they despise, as if to justify contempt" (35).

"Where sufficiency is, there is stability, and where stability is, there is religion" (43).

"With memory aiding, it is not so difficult to relate events as they follow in sequence. But the dread that comes to natures like mine, that is not so easy to trace, it moves in lurches, forward and backward, it catches at new things" (64).

"I seem to remember some reddening of the light, as if the last poor glow of our fire was diffused round us and we sat there in this light while darkness thickened outside, and we were the same people yet different. It was then we began to see that the matter was not so simple as we had thought" (86).

"Step by step we were moving toward evil and all of us knew it. Aided and encouraged by the others, in that barn of twisting shapes and shadows of masks and hanging costumes and weapons that would not wound, to the sound of the bells from the church above us and the clatter from the yard outside, we were moving toward the knowledge of evil" (133).

"Fear is the patron of self-deceivers but he often comes disguised" (161).

"As my eyes grew heavy with sleep I wondered if there were not a larger play still, in which King's and Emperors and Popes, though thinking they are in the center of space, are really only in the margin" (197).



Topics for Discussion

What parallels are drawn between the Lord de Guise and history's feudal lords?

What is the symbolic relevance of Roger of Yarm's death?

Is John Lambert a visionary or religious fanatic?

Name the instances where masks are used symbolically in the story.

What does Brendan's death reveal about the players?

To what extent were Martin's intentions based on helping Jane Lambert, and to what extent did he become caught up in developing the play?

Why do you think Margaret reacted the way she did when Nicolas told her that the other players were trapped in the castle?

Is Nicolas a representation of the corruption of the Holy Order?

By the end of the book, do you feel that Nicolas has fulfilled his destiny? Or is he still running away from his obligations at the church?