The Noise of Time Study Guide

The Noise of Time by Julian Barnes

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: Barnes, Julian. The Noise of Time. Alfred A. Knopf, 2016.

The Noise of Time is a novel about the life of Russian composer Dmitri Dmitrievich Shostakovich. Shostakovich and the other characters in the book are all real figures, and the events are generally true to life, but The Noise of Time is a novel rather than a biography due to its creative structure and liberties. It is structured in three parts, with each part exploring a different period of Shostakovich's life in a creative and nonlinear fashion. In addition, the narration often explicates Shostakovich's thoughts and feelings, but these can only be inferences and creative choices by the author. Also, the author occasionally adds dialogue to scenes where the words spoken could only be known by those who were present. The book's creative structure is used to freely explore the themes and historical scenarios without being tethered to strict recounting of facts.

The scope of the novel extends from Shostakovich's birth to his death (1906-1975), and most of the novel takes place in Russia during the time of the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union was a bureaucratic dictatorship that ruled over Russia and several neighboring countries. The book examines the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin and Nikita Khrushchev, as these were two leaders who ruled over Russia for most of Shostakovich's life. Sections 1 and 2 examine the brutal rule of Stalin, whose programs of execution and forced labor killed tens of millions of people, and Section 3 examines the regime of Khrushchev, who similarly exercised absolute power but without the use of killing.

Dmitri Shostakovich rose quickly to fame and prominence in his music career, and he is often considered one of the most important composers of the twentieth century. The Noise of Time examines how his passion for music, as well as his ensuing fame, make him a target for the Soviet government. In his early career, his musical innovations make him an enemy of the government, who wishes to control musical output. Shostakovich's musical influences are considered too bourgeois by the government, and his innovations are considered too alienating to the working-class. The Soviet government only endorses music that they see as empowering and easily accessible to the working-class, so they condemn Shostakovich during his early career and come close to having him executed.

By the middle of his career, Shostakovich has achieved international renown, and so Stalin's administration uses him as a puppet. They send him to America as part of an artistic delegation and force him to parrot their opinions on art and music, even though they do not correspond at all with his own beliefs. Shostakovich continues to compose, but he is mindful to pursue his own artistic standards while being careful not to offend Soviet sensibilities. By the end of his career, he has achieved great renown both within Russia as well as internationally. Under the Khrushchev administration, he is forced to join the Communist Party and the government-run Union of Composers. Shostakovich

sees this as a sever compromise of principles on his part, but he holds on to the idea that great music can transcend all the unfortunate events of life.

The Noise of Time also examines Shostakovich's personal life, from his childhood to his first love to his marriage and family life. While the book focuses more heavily on his career and interactions with the Soviet government, it repeatedly comes back to his personal life and examines how the two spheres interact, both literally and thematically. The examination of his personal life is also used as a method by which to demonstrate and explore his personality. This exploration helps shape the tone, outlook, and themes of the rest of the novel.

Section 1 – “On the Landing,” Part 1

Summary

Page 3 - 10 – The novel opens with Russian composer Dmitri Dmitrievich Shostakovich standing by the elevator of his apartment building, recalling people, events, and music from his past. He remembers most people from his past in general terms, but he lingers on a few specific anecdotes. First, he recalls the story of a priest who christened him Dmitri instead of Yaroslav, the name his parents had originally chosen. Then he recalls Jurgensen, the manager of a farm where his father used to work. At age seven or eight, Dmitri threatened to run away from his parents and live with Jurgensen, to which his mother responded by escorting Dmitri all the way to Jurgensen’s cottage and releasing his hand once they had arrived, leaving Dmitri to run tearfully back home instead of making good on his threat. This transitions into the image of “grabbing hands” (10), which seem to represent people who wish to take advantage of Dmitri.

Pages 10 - 18 – Dmitri’s mind cycles quickly through topics, going first to his primary artistic patron Marshal Tukhachevksy (a Russian military leader also known as “the Red Napoleon”), then to the free thinking and liberal sexual ideas of his youth. Finally, it is revealed that Dmitri is waiting by the elevator because he fears that government officials will arrive to forcibly take him away. Dmitri attempts to ascertain the starting point or original cause for this present predicament, and he focuses on a specific performance of his opera, Lady Macbeth of Mtensk. The performance was in late January of 1936, and Russian dictator Joseph Stalin was present. The musicians played louder than Dmitri had intended, and the Stalin was seated in a box just above the very loud drum section. Dmitri noticed that the government officials seated next to Stalin were mocking the piece.

Pages 19 - 23 – Dmitri then takes a moment to remember his parents. He views his mother, Sofya Vasilyevna, as the stronger person in his parents’ marriage, and he describes his father, Dmitri Boleslavovich, as a normal, happy man with simple tastes. After his father died at the age of 40, his mother took on menial jobs to support Dmitri and his sisters, and Dmitri grew anxious under the responsibility of having to “be the man in the family” (20). He comments on his poor physical health and fragile nerves in youth, and he mentions the occasional friction in his relationship with his mother. He then mentions his first meeting with his primary patron Russian military leader Marshal Tukhachecvsky, and how when Tukhachevsky wanted Dmitri to relocate to Moscow from Leningrad, Dmitri’s mother persuaded him against it. The narrator comments that Dmitri tended to occasionally feel like a lost boy throughout his adult life.

Pages 23 - 28 – The narrator reveals that Dmitri Shostakvich faced much adversity ever since his career began. The narrator states that despite Dmitri’s large successes, he still faced constant opposition from various Russian communist groups who viewed his music as too experimental, and therefore bourgeois in that it was not instantly understandable and accessible to “the masses” (24). Dmitri recalls reading the Pravda

(the official newspaper of the Russian Communist Party) after Stalin saw Lady Macbeth of Mtensk performed, and seeing his opera savagely condemned by the paper as being a terrible work of art and politically harmful. Dmitri is advised by Platon Kerzhentsev, President of the Committee of Cultural Affairs, to publicly repent for having written the opera, but instead, Dmitri has Marshal Tukhachevksy write to Stalin on his behalf, asking for the opinion of the opera to be reconsidered. Tukhachevsky agrees to write the letter, but he visibly sweats while doing so.

Analysis

Each of the novel's three sections maintains the same structure that Section 1, "On the Landing," introduces. Namely, it revolves around a specific scene in Dmitri Shostakovich's life and reflects backs on important events that have shaped his life up to that point. In Section 1, we see him awaiting possible arrest, and the book slowly reveals the events that have allowed for this possibility. This helps to establish the main tension in the book, namely the tension between Shostakovich and the government of the Soviet Union. Shostakovich is shown to be a successful composer due to his musical innovations, but the USSR has created an atmosphere of de facto conformity, as evidenced by the long list of communist groups that oppose Shostakovich (23-24) as well as the description of the government-sponsored Pravda being described as "holy writ" (27). This tension is shown to be in sharp contrast with the social and political atmosphere that pervaded Russia during Shostakovich's boyhood. Shostakovich grew up during a transitional period for Russia, when the post-Tsarist government was still being formed, and, therefore, there was not yet a centralized authority to limit and restrict personal liberties such as Stalin strove to do.

The conflict between Shostakovich and the will of the government sets the stage for the book's exploration of paradox, fear, and constraint in the Soviet Union. In later sections, the book explores how the USSR paradoxically purports to despise fascism, while at the same time taking the lives and liberties of their citizens in similar ways. The groundwork for this paradox is laid in the specific problems that the Russian government purports to see in Shostakovich's musical work. Shostakovich is decried as a perpetrator of "formalism" (24), meaning his work is not easily accessible to all, and seems to represent bourgeois exclusivity in the way it experiments and innovates with musical norms. The Russian government attempts to create the best possible music by limiting musicians' creative license, and Shostakovich struggles with this paradox throughout the book.

The recollections in this part of Section 1 also serve to establish Shostakovich's personal character. Specifically, he is described as a generally anxious person whose physical health and mental resolve have a track record of being rather shaky. He is dominated by his mother, even in early adulthood, and he constantly fears the dangers and uncertainties posed by life in the USSR. These fears are manifested in the symbol of the "grabbing hands" (10), a symbol that recurs throughout the book. His anxieties are also strongly established following the episode concerning himself, his mother, and Jurgensen, where the novel seems to portray this as a representative moment of great

trauma. His hand slipping from his mother’s grasp is juxtaposed with the slipping and grabbing hands that he fears (9-10). This portrait of Shostakovich serves to raise the stakes of the conflict between himself and the government, led by the ruthless Stalin. This power disparity is directly acknowledged by Shostakovich in the central act of packing his suitcase each night and waiting for arrest. This dichotomy establishes one of the central themes of the book, namely that life is uncontrollable and uncertain, especially under the absurd and ruthless rule of a dictator.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the anecdote of the priest and Dmitri's parents. What significance does it seem to hold at this point in the book? How does it reflect upon Dmitri's parents? What does it seem to mean for Dmitri, and what does it appear to mean TO him? Why is it included at this point in the book?

--While this anecdote is revisited later in the book, this question will give the students a chance to register and consider the anecdote as it is presented at this stage in the narrative.

Discussion Question 2

Discuss Dmitri's recollections of Jurgensen and his boyhood days spent on the estate at Irinovka. What significance does it hold for Dmitri? How does this anecdote relates to the rest of the chapter?

--The estate at Irinovka is referred to multiple times throughout the book, but it is discussed in the most detail in this section. This section also contains the anecdote about Dmitri and Jurgensen. Discussing Irinovka at this point will encourage the students' to explore its significance and prime them for future references to Irinovka in the book.

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the specific complaints that the Communist Party and the Soviet government appear to have against Shostakovich. What are the nature and significance of these complaints? Why does Dmitri compose "Lady Macbeth of Mtensk" despite the fact that he seems to already be aware of these complaints?

--This question will force the students to consider the atmosphere and circumstances of the narrative leading up to the fateful performance of "Lady Macbeth of Mtnesk." It will encourage them to discuss the tension from both Dmitri's side and the Soviet side in order to understand the conflict.

Vocabulary

eccentric, bluebottle, promiscuous, perverse, affable, patronage, cacophony, christen, annotation, euphemism, exasperation, chafe, sanatorium, pomposity, sanctimonious, connoisseur, sycophantic, vigil, precocious, palpate, intervene, stipend, bourgeois, neurotic, libretto, temperament, aptitude, writ, recant, contrition, inextricable

Section 1 - “On the Landing,” Part 2

Summary

Pages 29 - 36 – Dmitri recalls time he spent with Tatyana “Tanya” Glivenko at Anapa in the Caucasus Mountains. They were both 19 at the time and in love with each other, having met four years earlier in a sanatorium. Dmitri recalls that time with great fondness and idyllic language, describing it as a time of great freedom and happiness. However, the idyllic description is tempered by a sense of uncertainty on Dmitri’s part. Eventually, the relationship ends, Tanya marries someone else, and Dmitri realizes that he had loved her more than she had loved him. He then reflects upon a short story by French writer Guy de Maupassant, which he describes as representing his boyhood ideal of love: love “without fear, without barriers, without thought for the morrow” (34). This pivots to a recollection of when Dmitri met a prostitute named Rozaliya and almost married her in a fit a rash young passion.

Pages 36 - 38 – Dmitri thinks next of Zakrevsky—the Russian official who interrogated him in the Russian government building known as the Big House—and then of Stalin. He reflects upon Stalin’s iron-fisted rule, instilling fear and respect in his government subordinates and instating policies of forced labor among convicts that end up killing many thousands of them. Dmitri remembers meeting Nina “Nita” Varzar, a smart, capable, well-liked woman that Dmitri ended up marrying.

Pages 39 - 43 – Dmitri remembers how Russian critics who had praised Lady Macbeth of Mtensk swiftly changed their opinions after Pravda denounced the work. Not long after, Dmitri began to be publicly labeled an enemy of the people. He reflects upon the Soviet bureaucrats who attempted to control art and artists in the USSR, and how their efforts generally resulted in the stultification and conformity of Russian art, preventing innovation or any diversion from certain norms. In 1936, Dmitri and Nita had a child, Galina, nicknamed Galya.

Pages 43 - 52 – Marshal Tukhachevsky’s letter receives no answer, and instead, Dmitri is interrogated in the Big House by Russian official Zakrevsky regarding a supposed plot by Tukhachevsky to assassinate Stalin. It is clear that the government wants Dmitri to implicate Tukhachevsky, and possibly also himself, in this plot, regardless of whether or not it actually exists. Dmitri denies any knowledge, but Zakrevsky tells him to come back on Monday with all relevant information. Dmitri believes himself to be doomed for execution, but when he returns on Monday, he is informed that Zakrevsky is no longer there, and Dmitri should not return again.

Soon, Tukhachevsky is arrested and shot, along with other supposed conspirators, but Dmitri is left alone.

Pages 52 - 60 – Dmitri does not feel permanently safe, but he goes on composing, and he even manages to gain some favor with the Russian government and citizenry in

general. He composes music for a film called “Counterplan.” The film and the “Song of the Counterplan” are accessible and enjoy wide popularity. Dmitri recalls working as a pianist in a movie theater, where he was fired for playing irregular music that mocked the films, which he saw as ridiculous. Dmitri reflects upon this as a representation of his “career in miniature” (58). However, his fifth symphony was met with great acclaim from the Russian citizenry and government, for the triumphant ending—meant by the composer to be ironic—was interpreted literally by many who heard it.

Analysis

One important facet of the central image in Section 1 is the proximity of Dmitri’s wife and one-year-old daughter as he waits to be taken away by the Russian government. The book, especially in Section 1, spends a considerable amount of time examining his relationship with women. Examining Dmitri’s love life seems to be the primary mode by which the novel explores Dmitri’s personal life in general. In his teens and twenties, Dmitri holds a very idealistic, liberal, even sometimes rash view of love. This manifests in his insecurities caused by slight imperfections in his relationship with Tanya, his first love. He even remains infatuated with her right up until she becomes pregnant by her husband. One potential function of examining this rash, youthful idealism is to contrast Dmitri’s more neurotic and fearful traits. As Dmitri waits to be arrested, it is presented as both an act of bravery and cowardice, and this is mirrored in Dmitri’s approach to love. He is, therefore, presented as a generally neurotic and cowardly character who, perhaps paradoxically, is also capable of very courageous acts. This paradox is explicitly explored on page 53, where Dmitri ponders his motives for waiting on the landing for the possible arrival of Russian officials.

This section also further explores the tension between Shostakovich and dominant political atmosphere of the USSR. Dmitri internally expresses revulsion towards the acts of the government and the Communist Party in general. Shostakovich directly links the death tolls of Stalin’s convict labor programs with Stalin’s own Communist Party, and Shostakovich comments on how “He had never joined the Party—and never would. He could not join a party which killed” (54). This plants the seeds of a tension that comes to fruition in Section 3, when Shostakovich is forced to join the Communist Party under Kruschev’s administration, representing Shostakovich’s ultimate defeat. For now, however, Dmitri’s opposition to the Party simply stands to further enforce the tension between Shostakovich’s own beliefs of decency/liberality and the ruthlessness/autocracy of Stalinism.

The tension between Shostakovich and the government seems set to come to a head in this section when Zakrevsky interrogates Shostakovich, but it ends in a precarious anticlimax when Zakrevsky simply disappears. This anticlimax remains a mystery throughout the book that Shostakovich often refers back to. It is never made clear why Shostakovich is not implicated along with Tukhachevsky, just as it is never made clear whether Tukhachevsky’s supposed conspiracy was real or simply concocted by the government to dispose of him for some unrevealed motive. This uncertainty and randomness of life and death feeds directly into the book’s principle thesis that one has

no real control over one's life. As stated towards the beginning of the book "Destiny. It was just a grand term for something you could do nothing about. When life said to you, 'And so,' you nodded, and called it destiny" (7).

This theme recurs throughout the book, shaping the outlook and tone of the narrative, while at the same time serving as a narrative tool by which to highlight the cruelty and totality of Soviet rule. Shostakovich constantly views himself as a puppet of the government, unable to fully express himself artistically unless by use of irony, as he does at the end of his fifth symphony. This also establishes the theme of irony, which recurs in Sections 2 and 3 as Shostakovich's only means of escape from the control Stalin—and later Kruschev—have over him.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss Dmitri's relationships with Tanya and Rozochka as compared to his relationship with Nina. Discuss both the nature of these relationships and their circumstances. How do these reflect upon Dmitri's personality, and what do they imply for the changing of his character?

--While the book gives relatively little detail about Shostakovich's romantic involvements, it still gives at least basic information about each one of them. It also appears to attach various significances to each of them. This question will encourage the students to examine Dmitri's three relationships in this section and the ways in which they change and reflect upon his character.

Discussion Question 2

Examine the dialogue between Dmitri and Zakrevsky, both in terms of what is being said on the surface and what is being implied. Also look at the narration immediately following their conversation. How do these passages depict the nature of the Soviet government and its relationship with its citizens? How do they present Zakrevsly specifically, and how is this significant in terms of Zakrevksy's ultimate fate?

--While very little is known about Zakrevsky, he is a very important character and is often alluded to by the narration. This question will give students a chance to more deeply consider his function and significance in the narrative by focusing on the one scene where Zakrevsky is actually present.

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the narration's meditation on "the engineers of human souls" (40-41). What does this passage imply about the nature of art and the goals of the Soviet government in this book? It seems to imply a tension between the two, but what exactly is the nature of that tension in this passage?

--This passage is significant in its treatment of art, artists, and government bureaucrats, but its language and logic are not entirely transparent. This question will encourage the students to examine the language more closely and consider its implications for the rest of the book.

Vocabulary

idyll, thoroughgoing, feign, exude, persevere, satirize, masochistic, editorialize, idealism, dumbshow, repertoire, ultimatum, livelihood, pernicious, sonata, punctual, musicologist, divergent, collectivization, rueful, demean, proprietor, opus, philologist, repudiate

Section 2 – “On the Plane,” Part 1

Summary

Pages 63 - 69 – In 1948, 12 years after the central scene of Section 1, Dmitri Shostakovich is on a plane from New York City heading back to Russia. He is with other Russian artists, as they were all sent to New York City as part of a cultural delegation organized by the Russian government. As the other artists drink and celebrate, looking back on the visit as a triumph for the advancement of peace between the United States and the USSR, Dmitri drinks alone and looks back on the trip with a feeling of great regret. He compares his hopes for the trip with the reality of what it had been. He describes the American press as omniscient and brazenly rude, but he admits that there were some positive parts of the visit. He acquired many cigarettes and gramophone records of classical music, he received much applause when he performed for a large audience at Madison Square Garden, and he was cordially received by many American artists.

Pages 69 - 78 – Dmitri had hoped for relative obscurity during the visit, but he quickly realized that he was the most well known of the Russian artists. He was forced by the Soviet government to give a long speech that they had written for him, and he thinks to himself that it was “the greatest humiliation of his life” (70). Dmitri reflects that one of the reasons the Soviets are using him as a puppet is because music became necessary for helping to lift the spirits of the people of Russia during the Great Patriotic War, which is a term for the eastern front of World War Two. He reflects that although he agrees with the anti-Fascism sentiments of the Russian government in this era, the USSR and Russia are incompatible because Russians are inherently pessimistic while the USSR demands optimism. He observes that this is the same as the relationship between himself and the USSR. Dmitri then reflects upon the coexistence of pessimism and optimism in his family life and his position as father. He lived with his wife, Nita, his daughter, Galya, and his son, Maxim, in Kuibyshev during World War 2, and he reflects upon some of the good, simple family memories from that time.

Pages 78 - 90 – The narrator notes that although the Russian government had approved of Dmitri’s fifth symphony, as well as his anti-fascist seventh symphony, it had disallowed the sin of Lady Macbeth of Mtensk from being forgotten by making it part of a school curriculum on music history. The government points to The Song of the Counterplan as evidence that Shostakovich can be a valuable, patriotic composer “if properly directed” (79). The narrator also notes that, with the end of World War Two, the terror of the Russian government had returned in full force to its citizens. Composers and musicologists who express admiration for composers like Shostakovich are disapproved of by the government, and Dmitri is forced to speak a public recantation of all his supposed follies. He is then dismissed from his professorships, but when Stalin calls him personally on the phone and asks him to be a part of the artists’ delegation to America, Dmitri says it would be awkward since some of his pieces are banned in Russia, thus scaring anyone away from performing his pieces. Stalin declares this an

error and has the bans reversed. Dmitri then reflects to himself that rudeness and tyranny are closely connected, and that dictators are much like rude musical conductors who convince the musicians that harsh measures are necessary in order to produce the best performance possible.

Analysis

By 1948, Dmitri Shostakovich appears to have risen to great prominence, both within Russia and internationally. As such, he is sent as part of a cultural delegation to New York City with other Russian artists. It is important to note that Dmitri is essentially forced to take part of this delegation, as he is unable to refuse the invitation, despite his attempts to resist. This frames the entire visit as an instance in which the Soviet government uses Shostakovich for its own purposes, and Shostakovich is powerless to refuse, for his own continued safety. Shostakovich's importance in this scheme is emphasized by the fact that he appears to be the most prominent of all the artists in the delegation. This is a great source of pain for Shostakovich, for he feels all the more acutely how he is being used as a puppet for the purposes of a government he despises.

Shostakovich's subservience and lack of autonomy are strongly emphasized by the speeches he is forced to give at events during the visit. The entire content of the speeches has been written for him by government officials, as he is disallowed from expressing his own opinions. This is enforced by the present Soviet officials, whose implicit purpose is to make sure the Russian delegates adhere to protocol. Dmitri thinks of reading those speeches as was "the greatest humiliation of his life" (70). The specific cause of humiliation is left vague at this point in the text, but it foreshadows the true nature of Shostakovich's humiliation as it is more fully examined in the second half of the section. For now, it is enough to know that Shostakovich is powerless to resist the demands of the Soviet government.

This chapter also explores the value that Shostakovich's prominence, talent, and fame provide under Soviet rule. At the end of Section 1, it is unknown why Shostakovich is spared from being implicated in Tukhachevsky's supposed treason, but Section 2 seems to illuminate the use that the government sees in Shostakovich. When Dmitri speaks on the phone with Stalin, he manages to convince Stalin to remove all bans on his music in order to avoid awkwardness during the delegation. This implies that the government is willing to recognize Shostakovich as a legitimate composer, but only to the extent that it allows them to further their own purposes. In this section, Shostakovich's value appears to be that he is renowned abroad, and thus the government contrives to send him abroad and use him as a mouthpiece to tout their own values and further their own agenda.

In addition, this chapter more fully explores the roots of tension between Shostakovich and the government, as well as the tension between the government and the Russian population at large. As the narration notes, the Soviet Union is obsessed with optimism, implicitly so that they may further their own goals of production and economic

development. Shostakovich, on the other hand, is generally pessimistic, which is a trait that the text attributes to his Russian heritage. He therefore wishes to explore tragedy with his music, not just triumph and happiness. This is positioned as a parallel for the tension between the Soviet government and the Russian people. The social ethos of the Russian people is described as pessimistic, and the Soviet government under Stalin absurdly attempts to correct this by purging dissidents and instilling terror.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the supposed pessimism of Russia and Shostakovich as opposed to the supposed optimism of the Soviet Union. What causes could there be for each? Why is neither side able to compromise its outlook? What are the ironies and absurdities of this tension and each side's position?

--These outlooks are stated fairly matter-of-factly in the text, but they seem to conceal deeper complexities. This ideological opposition offers many new ways to interpret and examine the natures of Dmitri, the Russian people, and the Soviet government and this question will encourage students to explore these possible implications.

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the continued legacy of "Lady Macbeth of Mtensk" as discussed on pages 78 and 79. What does this mean for Dmitri's work going forward? How does it function as a tactic of the government, and what does it imply about the government's goals? Finally, what is the significance of how it has shaped Dmitri's subsequent work?

--"Lady Macbeth of Mtensk" is an important marker in the book for tracking the ongoing relationship and struggle between Dmitri and the government. Examining this passage will provide a good jumping-off point for examine the relationship more thoroughly as presented in Section 2.

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the phone call between Dmitri and Stalin. In what ways does Dmitri show bravery in this passage, and in what ways does he show cowardice? What are the significances of each?

--This conversation is very significant in that it is his only direct contact with Stalin, and it therefore may illuminate much about Dmitri's character in relation to his fears and the Soviet government. Since bravery and cowardice are two important themes in the book, they are two apt lenses for examining this interaction.

BOOKRAGS

Vocabulary

immolation, warmongering, warder, ideological, proletariat, delegation, concession, burnish, typhus, raucous, cherish, fantastical, egotistical, morbid, intelligentsia, jaunty, chastise, expunge, reiterate, theolinguistics, lavish, neuropathological, asphyxiate, mitigation, indulge, fugue, allot, colleague, tannoy

Section 2, “On the Plane,” Part 2

Summary

Pages 91 - 96 – Dmitri reflects that irony is necessary in order to survive in a harsh and unforgiving world like that of the USSR, but that irony can easily degrade into sarcasm. Dmitri thinks of sarcasm as destructive, while irony may possibly be used to protect things that a person values, such as music. Dmitri recalls Maxim having to vilify his father on a school music exam, and he realizes that irony was of no use in that situation. Dmitri then thinks of Shakespeare and the female Russian poet Akhmatova, and he compares them as figures using poetry as modes of expression in the face of authority. However, Dmitri then reflects pessimistically on the brutality of the USSR and how he personally does not possess the skills or the social background necessary to remain in the government’s favor. He thinks of composer Tikhon Khrennikov, who Stalin appointed as the First Secretary of the Union of Composers in 1948, and who led an assault against “formalist” composers.

Pages 97 - 104 – Dmitri reflects upon Vladimir Lenin’s quote that “Art belongs to the people” (97). Dmirtri concludes that art does exist for the sake of people, but that he writes music for himself and for whomever else appreciates his music. Meanwhile, Stalin’s most recent relationship to music is partially expressed by his search to find the great composer of the USSR, aka the “Red Beethoven,” and Shostakovich is ruled out for being born to the bourgeois intelligentsia as opposed to the proletariat. However, no strong candidates for the title of “Red Beethoven” appear, and Stalin blames supposed sabotage by musicologists and formalist composers such as Shostakovich. Dmitri then turns his thoughts back to the trip to America and the humiliation therein. He contemplates suicide but realizes that the Russian government would simply respond by destroying his legacy.

Pages 105 - 115 – Dmitri recalls reading the Soviet-prepared speeches in America, a brief one on Friday and a long one on Saturday. On Friday, he reads the brief one quickly and without inflection to emphasize that the words are not his, and on Saturday, he simply reads one page of the Russian version before sitting down and allowing the English translation to be read in full. However, the speech includes a denunciation of one of Dmitri’s heroes, Igor Stravinsky, and when he is answering questions after the speech, Dmitri has no choice but to give answers the USSR government would approve of. He feels very ashamed and humiliated by these events. Dmitri reflects on the whole trip as a tactic by Stalin to trick Americans into thinking these artists really do endorse the Soviet government and are not being forced to say so. He reflects that no one outside the USSR can understand the full extent of its problems and oppression.

Pages 116 - 120 – Dmitri mentally elaborates on Soviet oppression, observing that composers cannot even get manuscript paper without government consent, and that composing secretly and sneaking his music out of the country to be performed in the West would make him even more of a target. Furthermore, if a citizen of the USSR

became a target of the government, then that person's family became targets as well. Dmitri believes his betrayal of Stravinsky and of music to be the worst moment of his life. When he returns to Moscow, he finds a newspaper article written by the government, but he is listed as the author, and the article declares the triumph of his visit to America and the weakness of "the rulers of Washington" (120).

Analysis

Dmitri's activities and humiliations during the delegation in America are more fully illustrated when the text revisits the speeches he is forced to give. Even though Dmitri shows some resistance by reading the first speech tonelessly and only reading one page of the second speech, leaving the English translator to read out the rest on his own, Dmitri still feels shame as acutely as if he had read both speeches wholeheartedly and in full. This appears to be because the content of the speeches betray Dmitri's own artistic principles. For example, the text emphasizes a detail in the second speech wherein expatriate Russian composer Igor Stravinsky is identified as morally corrupt and artistically barren. Igor Stravinsky is one of Dmitri's personal influences and heroes, so in allowing the Soviet government to associate him with these speeches, he feels that he has betrayed his own principles and betrayed music in general. This dynamic is further emphasized when audience member ask Dmitri questions and he only answers as he believes the Soviets would want the inquires to be answered.

This section further illustrates Dmitri's role as a puppet by further developing the government's dynamics of control. This section closes with an imagined argument between Shostakovich and a hypothetical denizen of a western country. The westerner attempts to suggest ways that Dmitri could circumvent Soviet control of his artistic endeavors, but Dmitri simply points out all the ways that the Soviets could then threaten him and his family. Earlier, the text notes that anyone outside of the Soviet Union can never truly understand the totality of government oppression in the USSR, partially because the Soviet government employs various techniques to withhold the truth and project falsehoods (for example, using Dmitri as a mouthpiece during the delegation.) The significance of these facts is that Dmitri has no true freedom, as the Soviet government can direct his movements and his public actions however they want. While Dmitri's prominence affords him some protection, that protection lasts only as long as the government finds him useful, and he can easily be disposed of if he dissents or ceases to be useful.

Other important factors in Dmitri's powerlessness are his inability and unwillingness to ingratiate himself to the government as much as possible. Tikhon Khrennikov acts as a literary foil to Dmitri in this instance, for Khrennikov actively seeks to stay in the favor of the government by any means, Meanwhile, Dmitri does not possess the proletarian background necessary to be looked upon favorably by the government, nor does he wish to stray from his own artistic beliefs more than is necessary for keeping himself and his family safe. In light of this, Dmitri attempts to further employ the use of irony in order to protect himself from full complicity with the government and full responsibility. He attempts to utilize irony both in music and in how he operates his own behavior and

thinking. However, most of this chapter seems to illustrate that such use of irony can only do a very small amount of good, and that Shostakovich generally exists in a state of powerlessness.

Discussion Question 1

Pages 93 through 101 present several different anecdotes in rapid succession. Each anecdote deals with art, artists, and their relationship to government. Compare and contrast these anecdotes. What significances do they hold, and what do they seem to imply about these relationships?

--These pages appear to form an intentional tableau of brief anecdotes, with each anecdote in conversation with the others. Examining these passages as they relate to the passages immediately around them will not only provide a good exercise for exploring how the book's structure functions, it will also illuminate the implications of each this section of text as a whole in relation to the rest of the book.

Discussion Question 2

Examine the episode of the speech Dmitri is forced to give and the audience questions he answers afterwards. How does this scene function in relation to the rest of the book? What is Nicolas Nabokov's function in this episode?

--This episode is important for examining the larger implications of the trip to America. It appears to act as a demonstration of the specific ways in which the Soviet government is using Dmitri, and examining this passage will provide the students with deeper understanding of the particulars that dynamic.

Discussion Question 3

Even though Stravinsky refuses to meet with the Russian delegation, Dmitri feels deeply ashamed when the speech he is forced to give contains a denunciation of Stravinsky. Discuss why this is and what this denunciation means to Dmitri.

--The denunciation of Stravinsky contained within the second speech appears to be a pivotal moment in this chapter. This question will encourage the students to consider the significance of this moment as well as the significance of Stravinsky in the narrative.

Vocabulary

saboteur, liable, vilify, fortissimo, dossier, rebuke, detractor, exalt, devoid, voluptuous, rescind, inflect, gabble, stratum, trite, juncture, ardent, bilious, dais, allege, masquerade, putrid, echelon, malign, temerity, rhetorical, hobnob, intransigent

Section 3 – “In the Car,” Part 1

Summary

Pages 123 - 128 – In 1960, 12 years after the central scene of Section 2, Dmitri Shostakovich sits in his car as it is driven by his chauffeur. Nikita Khrushchev is now the leader of the Soviet Union, succeeding Stalin, who died in 1952. Dmitri notes that the Soviet government no longer kills many citizens, but that it still kills in a less literal sense. The narration mentions the musical tribute to Stalin that Dmitri wrote after he returned from New York. The narration also notes the many awards that Dmitri has received from the government, and Dmitri privately reflects on these awards as a dishonor.

Pages 129 - 138 – Dmitri recalls the tutor—“Comrade Troshin,”—assigned to him by the Communist Party to better instruct him on Marxism, Leninism, and other Soviet political matters. Troshin believes wholeheartedly in the values of the Soviet government, and Dmitri pretends to accept Troshin’s teachings with gratitude. Dmitri then wonders to himself how he survived the Stalin era without being arrested or killed. He thinks again on the absurdity and terror of the Soviet Union and comforts himself by thinking that good music would always be good music and that great music could never truly be defiled. He decides that only inner convictions can protect against external adversity. He then recalls his friend Profokiev, who died of natural causes on the same day as Stalin and who generally strove to maintain his artistic integrity.

Pages 139 - 149 – Dmitri no longer fears being killed, but he reflects that death is a better fate than endless terror. Moreover, he notes that the nature of the government’s power has mutated under Khrushchev. Dmitri notes that the government exercises power not through threats but, rather, through suggestion. He recalls meeting Stravinsky when Stravinsky visited Russia after Khrushchev took over. The meeting is underwhelming, and Dmitri recalls with bitterness how Stravinsky never spoke out against the Soviets when he was safely in America. He then thinks of the many national and international awards he received over the years, as well as the USSR government rejected his opera Lady Macbeth of Mtensk a second time when he revised it and resubmitted it for review.

Pages 150 - 158 – Dmitri then reflects on love and marriage, deciding that Free Love is meant for the young and childless. He recalls his wife dying after falling ill. The text mentions a character—referred to only as “A.”—with whom Dmitri’s wife seemed to be spending most of her time. Dmitri reevaluates the Maupassant story mentioned in Section 1, and he wonders if he is more like the cuckold husband of the story rather than the male lover. He then notes the continued presence of Khrennikov in the government before thinking of his second marriage. In loneliness and panic, he married Margarita, an employee of the Communist Youth Organization, but it soon ended in divorce.

Pages 159 - 169 – The Communist Party then reaches out to Dmitri and asks him to join them. Specifically, Pyotr Pospelov, a leading figure in the Russian Communist Party, asks Dmitri to join the Party so that they can appoint him Chairman of the Russian Federation of the Union of Composers. Dmitri refuses, but Pospelov argues that it is the best thing to do for both himself and the good of the nation. Pospelov hounds Dmitri relentlessly in daily life, and eventually Dmitri breaks down and agrees to Pospelov's proposal.

Analysis

Section 3 focuses on Shostakovich's late life and career. The central scene of this section is Shostakovich in his car being driven by his personal chauffeur. This scene seems to readily suggest an accumulation of wealth and notoriety, and indeed the narration quickly notes the many formal awards he has received both in Russia and from other countries. However, much like the other sections, the central scene of Section 3 seems to have an air of sadness and isolation. Not a single word is exchanged between Dmitri and the driver, and as Dmitri reflects upon the achievements of his career, it is with a general sense of sadness and regret, despite his wealth and fame. For example, when he thinks of the many awards that the Russian government has given him, he seems to see them as a dishonor. This mode of reflection, along with the melancholy tone of the central scene, serves to highlight the fact that despite his many successes, Dmitri still laments his subservience to the USSR and his inability to escape its controlling grasp.

This section is significant in that it deals with the period in Russian history after Stalin's death, during the period that Nikita Khrushchev led the Soviet Union. One significant change caused by this transfer of power was that Khrushchev stopped programs of killing that Stalin had put in place. Thematically, this is very significant because Dmitri still finds himself subservient to the Soviet government, and yet he finds himself with less of a reason to be so obedient. As the narration states, "Before, they tested the extent of his courage; now, they tested the extent of his cowardice" (142). In other words, because the government's method of control has shifted from threat of death to simple persistence, Dmitri now finds himself obeying governmental orders simply out of fear of being hounded endlessly. This is exemplified in Pyotr Pospelov's dogged, unceasing requests that Dmitri join the Communist Party and become the chairman of the Union of Composers of the Russian Federation. Dmitri agrees, but not out of fear of death, simply out of fear of the constant demand.

Dmitri's agreement to join the Communist Party represents a climactic defeat for the composer, and in some ways, it stands in for the missing climactic confrontation in Section 1. Instead of being arrested by Zakrevsky in the Big House and executed, he is chased down by Pospelov and all but forced to suffer a death of identity. From the very beginning of the book, Dmitri expresses opposition to the ruthless and violent Communist Party, and in joining their number, he has suffered a symbolic death by sacrificing one of his most basic principles. Earlier in the section, the idea of irony is explored further in the scenes with Comrade Troshin, but Dmitri's symbolic death by

joining the Communist Party again tests the idea of whether irony can be of any use or any real protection. Pospelov's success in forcing Dmitri to join the Communist Party again reinforces the fact that Dmitri's only real freedom exists in the spheres of his life that the government has no interest in. In turn, this reinforces the book's even more general theme that lives are greatly shaped by the things people cannot control.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss Troshin and Prokofiev as foils for Dmitri. How do their personalities and beliefs compare and contrast with Dmitri's? What does this reveal about Dmitri's own character and his relationship to the environment he inhabits? What does it reveal with regards to Troshin and Prokofivev?

--Troshin and Prokofivev are both quite prominent towards the beginning of this section, and they are both portrayed as having certain fundamental differences from Dmitri. Examining these two literary foils will help students deepen their understanding of these three characters and their environment.

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the second rejection of Dmitri's opera, "Lady Macbeth of Mtensk." Examine the scene on pages 147 - 149 in which this rejection takes place. What does it reveal about the similarities and differences between Stalin's regime and that of Khrushchev?

-- Dmitri's conversation with bureaucrats from Khrushchev's administration acts as a prominent demonstration of both the similarities and differences between life under Stalin and life under Khrushchev. This question will prompt students to consider those similarities and differences as well as their effect on Dmitri.

Discussion Question 3

Dmitri still appears to be within the complete control of the government, even thought the threat of violence is now no longer present. Discuss why you think Dmitri remains obedient. What does this imply about the new Soviet regime and his relationship to it?

--Dmitri's obedience under Khrushchev's administration is never explicitly or fully explained beyond the pestering of Pyotr Pospelov. This question will encourage students to further explore the new atmosphere of the Khrushchev regime and the ways in which the government maintains control. It may also allow students to consider the implications upon Dmitri's personality.

BOOKRAGS

Vocabulary

hindrance, credentials, injunction, steppe, dacha, elysian, solecism, disgorge, sanguine, veracity, punctilious, synchronicity, elation, colic, diligence, lackey, aloof, egocentric, wheedle, helpmeet, posterity, impresario, meticulous, tryst, repatriate

Section 3 – “In the Car,” Part 2

Summary

Pages 169 - 174 – After officially joining the Russian Communist Party, Dmitri goes to Leningrad to stay with his sister, away from Moscow, the center of government. He tries to avoid being present for the formal announcement, but the government simply waits and lets the information slip out in the meantime. Dmitri recalls crying the day he joined the Party, the only time his son saw him cry other than the day his wife Nina died. Dmitri labels himself a coward and then reflects upon the ironic courage it takes to be the cowardly lackey of the government for one’s whole life. Then he considers the national soccer team, which he also depicts as means by which the Soviet government controlled its people and exercised its power.

Pages 175 - 181 – Dmitri contemplates the modest luxuries and minor influence he now possesses, and he thinks on the changes in his identity as marked by his technical allegiance to the Party. He attends Party meetings, and his opera Lady Macbeth of Mtensk, retitled Katerina Izmailova, is even allowed a production in Moscow. Dmitri sees this state of affairs as both integrity and corruption on his part, selling out political principles to promote artistic ones. Dmitri remarries, this time to Irina Antonovna, a woman barely older than his daughter. Meanwhile, the government continued to communicate with him, constantly sending pre-written letters and editorials for him to sign.

Pages 181 - 188 – The book suddenly jumps ahead another 12 years, to when Dmitri expects to die, as leap years have held bad luck for him. However, it seems his bad luck is to continue living. In these later years, he dwells on his failings and humiliations, and he thinks back on his early life. He thinks of his father, his time at Anapa with his first love Tanya, and the disastrous first performance of his first symphony. He compares one of his son’s pieces of physical comedy to Stalin’s regime (“a vast act catalogue of farces adding up to an immense tragedy,” 187) and he compares the disproportionately constructed summer home of his youth to the absurd construction of Soviet Russia. Dmitri then briefly ponders the lower points of his career and what possible value they may have had.

Pages 189 - 197 – Dmitri contemplates irony once more and how it is used to defend both oneself and one’s soul. He wonders whether irony truly matters if no one else notices. He once again considers his personal view of art and contrasts it with the Soviet treatment of art. Dmitri becomes more fixated on death, and he becomes more insecure about his legacy, thinking himself as a rather mediocre composer. In this, he believes that the Soviets, in a way, killed him by allowing him to live. He rejects the idea that the composers who are remembered are the ones who deserve to be remembered. Dmitri simply settles for the idea that music belongs to music. The novel ends with a memory Dmitri has of sharing vodka with a train passenger and a beggar. The beggar

declares them “a triad,” which is also a music term, and Dmitri thinks that this communion may be the type of thing to outlast time and hardship.

Analysis

Once Dmitri joins the Communist Party, he is portrayed as having submitted to a great defeat, and yet the section still recognizes the advantages that this deal has given him. For example, the acceptance of his opera by government officials is a very significant turn of events with regard to how brutally the opera was denounced in Pravda in Section 1. The denunciation of Lady Macbeth of Mtensk in many marked the beginning of Dmitri’s political woes as portrayed in this book, and to have the opera finally accepted by the Soviets—even if it is accepted with some revisions and a new title—still marks a very important reversal of misfortune. Dmitri struggles with this artistic victory, however, because the price was the forfeiture of his own political beliefs. Like many of the multifaceted moral problems that the book struggles with, this scenario is presented as a complicated conflict between two forces, with neither side having a clear victory. Specifically, this is presented as a conflict between political and artistic principles.

Another important effect of Dmitri’s final submission to the will of the Communist Party is that his function as a puppet of the state both changes in nature and increases in scope. Specifically, he appears to become a primary mouthpiece for the government’s opinions on music in Russia. He is frequently called upon by the government to sign letters, papers, and editorials about music, and potentially a wide array of other things. Shostakovich generally does not read them, as he is powerless to alter them, just as he is powerless to refuse signing them. This is a very ironic turn of events, as the Pravda, one of the government’s other primary modes for expressing its opinions on music and all other subject, was used to disseminate that significant denunciation of Lady Macbeth of Mtensk in 1937. Now, Dmitri occupies an almost identical position as the Pravda, spouting the government-endorsed positions with no freedom to stray from the mandates. This represents the completion of Shostakovich’s journey from being a citizen persecuted by the government to being a tightly controlled pawn in the government’s grasp.

However, despite all the pessimism and adversity in this book, it ends with a relative amount of optimism. Dmitri resolves his question about the purpose and ownership of music by deciding that “music, in the end, belonged to music” (195). This can be interpreted a number of ways, but it seems to represent a recommitment by Dmitri in the idea that great music possesses an untouchable beauty that transcends the suffering and absurdity of daily life and persists beyond the confines of specific eras. In addition, the book ends with a relatively optimistic epilogue that appears to be a continuation of the prologue at the beginning of the book. When Dmitri makes a toast with the beggar and the other man (who may be Prokofiev, although it is never stated), the communion is stated in musical terms by the beggar (“a triad”) thus positioning the moment of friendship between the three men as an example of something good that can survive in a world of fear and uncertainty.

Discussion Question 1

In Section 3, Part 2, the narration mentions the image of a young Dmitri watching his older self in the car as it drives past. What do you think young Dmitri would think about his older self and how his life turned out? How would this compare to old Dmitri's own reflection on his life?

--This question will prompt students to consider how Dmitri's character has evolved over the course of his life, both in terms of goals and personality. It will also provide a wider context by which to discuss the various decisions Dmitri has been forced to make over the course of the book.

Discussion Question 2

When Dmitri nears his old age, he reflects upon both his music and his love life. How do his ideals of love and music compare to the realities of each over the course his life? How have these ideals interacted with and shaped his reality?

--Discussing Dmitri's own assessment of these ideals and how well he has lived up to them will provide a good framework for discussing his personality, his end-of-life views, and the book's reflections on these themes of love and music.

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the prologue and epilogue of the book as one scene. How do each reflect upon and book as a whole? How do they relate to the book's tone and themes?

--The epilogue and prologue, while brief, do a lot of work to shape the tone and themes of the book. It will be an informative for the students to discuss how they view the function of these passages, as well as how successfully they believe each to have achieved those functions.

Vocabulary

interlocutor, duplicity, omission, disposition, intercede, dither, abject, synchronous, irk, nomenklatura, pious, null, remorse, luxurious, quotidian, cajole, cyst, melodramatize, peat, concerto, wizened, heliotropic, consummate, refute, delve, posthumous

Characters

Dmitri Dmitrievich Shostakovich

Dmitri Shostakovich was a Russian musical composer. He is considered one of the greatest composers of the twentieth century. He was born in St. Petersburg in 1906 and died of lung cancer in 1975. He rose to great prominence during his lifetime, and his music was performed both within Russia and in many other countries across the world. He is renowned for his classical music, which included 15 symphonies, six concertos, 15 string quartets, and several other pieces for piano and strings, but he also composed, operas, song cycles, and music for ballet and film.

Shostakovich had a difficult relationship with the government of the Soviet Union, which existed from the early 1920s and continued past his death. The government disapproved of much of his work, believing it to be bourgeois and inaccessible to working-class people. Meanwhile, Shostakovich disapproved of the oppressiveness of the Soviet government, which was controlled by the Russian Communist Party and which killed many of its citizens under the reign of Stalin. The government sought to shape artistic output in it own image. In order to keep himself and his family safe from the Soviet government, he strove to write great music that would not anger the government, he followed all government orders, and he even joined the Communist Party later in life when the government demanded that he do so.

This novel is based on this real person from history, but it is considered a fictional take on his life due to the author taking liberties to provide thoughts and some dialogue for situations he could not know.

Joseph Stalin

Joseph Stalin was the leader of the Soviet Union from its creation until his death in 1952. He was born in 1878 and joined the Bolsheviks—Russian communist revolutionaries—in 1903. He proved to be an effective organizers, and he soon became one of the leaders of the Bolsheviks during the Russian Revolution of 1917, He became the leader of the Soviet when it formed in the early 1920s, and he proceeded to rule with an iron fist for the next 30 years, until his death. Tens of millions of Soviet citizens died under his rule. Causes of death primarily included execution, brutal work camps, and starvation due to extreme and ineffective rearrangement of resources.

Nikita Khrushchev

Nikita Khrushchev led the Soviet Union from 1953 to 1964. His administration created a much less violent era in the Soviet Union, although he continued to consolidate government power. At the beginning of his administration, Khrushchev denounced Stalin’s executions and other violent programs. He allowed a modest amount of

freedom in the arts, but as seen in the book, Shostakovich is required to join the Communist Party under Khrushchev's administration, and he is forced to sign many pre-written letters and editorials as chairman of the Union of Composers.

Mikhail Tukhachevsky

Mikhail Tukhachevsky was a Soviet military leader from 1918 until his execution in 1937. Before his death, he achieved the rank of Marshal of the Soviet Union, the highest military rank in the USSR. Tukhachevsky was very interested in the arts, and he became a political patron and close friend of Shostakovich after meeting him in 1925. In 1936, when Shostakovich's opera Lady Macbeth of Mtensk was denounced by the Russian Communist Party, Tukhachevsky wrote to government on Shostakovich's behalf, asking the stance to be reconsidered. In 1937, Tukhachevsky was arrested by the Soviet government and executed, purportedly because he was plotting to overthrow Stalin. However, his arrest and execution were actually part of Stalin's efforts to attain complete control of the military and, thereby, attain absolute power in the USSR.

Dmitri Boleslavovich Shostakovich

Dmitri Boleslavovich Shostakovich is the father of Dmitri Dmitrievich Shostakovich. He was born in 1875 and studied physics and mathematics at St. Petersburg University before going to work for the International Bureau of Weights and Measures as an engineer. He married Sofya Vasilyevna Kokoulina in 1903. He is described in the book as a simple and happy person, as well as intelligent, kind, well-read, and well-liked by his children. He died at the age of 40, when Dmitri Dmitrievich Shostakovich was only eight or nine years old.

Sofya Vasilyevna Kokoulina

Sofya Vasilyevna Kokoulina is the mother of Dmitri Dmitrievich Shostakovich. She is portrayed as strong-willed and protective of her son, as well as very domineering over him. When Marshal Tukhachevsky attempts to move her son to Moscow, she thwarts the attempt. She also seems to disapprove of most or all of her son's girlfriends before he gets married. When her husband dies, she supports herself and her children by teaching piano and doing clerical work for the Bureau of Weights and Measures, the same international organization that had employed her husband.

Igor Stravinsky

Igor Stravinsky was a Russian musical composer. He is considered an important figure in twentieth-century music, generally even more so than Shostakovich. He was born in 1882, and his music greatly influenced that of Shostakovich. Shostakovich clearly idolizes Shostakovich in the book, even keeping a framed photograph of Stravinsky in his study. However, Stravinsky generally acts as a literary foil for Shostakovich in the

book. Unlike Shostakovich, Stravinsky spends much of his life living in America, out of reach of Soviet oppression. Also unlike Shostakovhc, Stravinsky's personality seems largely self-assured, even arrogant. However, neither composer freely speaks out against Soviet oppression, although Stravinsky seems to have the safe position necessary to do so.

Zakrevsky

The government official who interrogates Shostakovich in Section 1 is known only as Zakrevsky. Julian Barnes states in the afterword that his name may have been something slightly different. This shows that very little is known about the actual person aside from his interaction with Shostakovich. However, while Zakrevsky only ever speaks with Shostakovich once, he is given considerable attention in the book. He interrogates Shostakovich at the government building known as the Big House, and he attempts to implicate Shostakovich in the supposed plot by Tukhachevsky to overthrow Stalin. However, when Shostakovich arrives to his second required appointment with Zakrevsky, the agent is not there and never contacts Shostakovich again. Shostakovich seems to think that Zakrevsky himself was arrested for some unknown reason.

Tikhon Khrennikov

Tikhon Khrennikov was the secretary of the Union of Soviet Composers from 1948 until the collapse of the Soviet Union. He led a harsh campaign against "formalist" composers such as Shostakovich, and he acts as a literary foil to Shostakovich in many ways. While Shostakovich is described as being quite inept at staying in the favor of the Soviet government, Khrennikov is described as being favored by the government. He has no reservations about using any means to ingratiate himself to the government, and he even successfully maintains this favor through all the leadership changes of the Soviet Union.

Comrade Troshin

Shostakovich's government-assigned tutor, known only as Comrade Troshin is appointed to teach Shostakovich about Marxism, Leninism, and communist politics as interpreted and agreed upon by Stalin. Troshin represents another literary foil for Shostakovich in that Troshin is loyal to the government and agrees with its teachings and policies. Moreover, Troshin is portrayed as very earnest in his loyalty, while Shostakovich strongly disagrees with the Soviet government and only ironically pretends to be loyal in Troshin's presence.

Nina Vasilievna Varzar, Galina, and Maxim

Shostakovich's wife and children, while they are given relatively little focus in the book, play an important role as a unit in Shostakovich's story. The protection of his family is

one of the primary reasons given for Shostakovich's acts of compliance with the government. Shostakovich marries Nina (nicknamed "Nita") in his early 30s, his daughter Galina (nicknamed "Galya") is born within one year after the marriage, and his son Maxim is born two years after Galina. When Shostakovich marries Nina, he has only recently given up on trying to woo his first love, Tatyan Glivenko.

Tatyana "Tanya" Glivenko

Shostakovich meets Tanya in a sanatorium when they are both 15 years old, but his mother keeps them apart for years. At age 19, after Shostakovich has achieved some money and early fame, they go to the town of Anapa together for a romantic retreat in the Caucasus Mountains. They live in separate cities, but they continue the relationship until Tanya ends it. She marries another man, and Shostakovich continues to attempt to woo her until she becomes pregnant by her husband. He then marries Nina. Tanya appears to represent the ideals and values of Shostakovich's youth, and his marriage to Nina seems to represent an acceptance of responsibility and adulthood on his part.

Sergey Sergeyevich Prokofiev

Sergey Sergeyevich Prokofiev is a fellow composer and friend of Shostakovich's. Prokofiev's personality markedly contrasts with that of Shostakovich in that Profokiev appears to be more optimistic and pragmatic than Shostakovich. Prokofiev seems to maintain the belief that artists can change the Soviet government's position on art through argument and producing worthy works. Prokofiev also appears less neurotic and more generally outspoken than Shostakovich. Like Shostakovich, Prokofiev opposes Stalin, but Prokofiev dies of natural causes on the very same day as the death of Stalin.

Andrei Zhdanov

Andrei Zhdanov was the Chairman of the Soviet Union under Stalin, as well as Stalin's assumed successor. However, Zhdanov died of natural causes in a sanatorium before the death of Stalin. It is speculated that Zhdanov's death may have been due to an intentional misdiagnosis. In Section 2 of the book, Zhdanov represents one of the main government figures acting in opposition to many of Shostakovich's own artistic beliefs. In one anecdote, Zhdanov gathers Russian composers together in person and explicitly chastises them for formalist tendencies. Shostakovich is also forced to publicly profess his agreement with Zhdanov's artistic opinions and policies when Shostakovich is sent to visit New York City with other Russian artists.

Vladimir Lenin

Vladimir Lenin was a political theorist and leader in Russia who organized and led the communist Bolsheviks in the Russian Revolution. He then served as leader of the

Russian government and Russian Communist Party until his death by stroke in 1924. His theories and actions formed the basis for the destruction of the old tsarist government in Russia and the establishment of the Soviet Union. He makes no physical appearance in the book, as he is dead during most of the book's events, but he is mentioned often due to his historical relevance to the Soviet Union.

Symbols and Symbolism

The Big House

The Big House not only represents Stalin's intimidating absolute power, it also represents Shostakovich's first direct and personal contact with government forces. This first encounter lays the groundwork for all subsequent encounters, such as Stalin calling Shostakovich on the phone and Khrushchev's officials bringing Shostakovich into the governmental fold by appointing him as to the Union of Composers.

The Big House is the epithet used to refer to the large government building near Shostakovich's apartment in Section 1 of the book. This house is the main setting in which the Soviet government communicates with him during the period of his early 30s. Zakrevsky interrogates Shostakovich in the big house and attempts to implicate him in a supposed conspiracy led by Marshal Tukhachevsky, but Shostakovich is ultimately saved when Zakrevsky no longer appears at the Big House for their second meeting.

Cigarettes

This motif is used in order to create three distinct levels of separation between the inhabitants of the USSR: Stalin at the top, his cronies and other government officials below him, and Shostakovich at the bottom with the rest of the population of the USSR. Despite the supposed communist doctrine that all citizens should be equal, the use of this symbol points out the hypocrisy that Stalin and his subordinates each occupy positions of dominance, while Shostakovich and his peers are all at the mercy of those above them who hold positions of power.

Recurring throughout the book are three specific types of cigarettes; Shostakovich notes that Stalin prefers Herzegovina Flor brand cigarettes, while his subordinates all smoke Belomory brand cigarettes, and he himself prefers Kazbeki cigarettes.

Pravda

Pravda, a Russian newspaper and the official newspaper of the Communist party of the Soviet Union, symbolizes the control of the Russian government. The newspaper's name translates to truth. Pravda plays a prominent role in the book when Shostakovich's opera Lady Macbeth of Mtensk is wholeheartedly denounced in its editorial section. Pravda, as a newspaper owned by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and therefore run by the government, acts as the primary mouthpiece through which the government of the USSR disseminates information and opinions to the USSR's population at large. When Shostakovich's opera is denounced within the pages of the Pravda, it is essentially an official statement by the government that the opera is harmful and that its composer has harmed the USSR by writing it and having it performed.

Formalism

Formalism is the term used repeatedly through the book by Soviet officials to describe music that appears contrary to the values of the Soviet government. Formalist music is described as bourgeois and inaccessible to working-class citizens. Shostakovich's music is repeatedly labeled as formalist due to its artistic innovations and tendency to be influenced by classical composers such as Tchaikovsky and Stravinsky, whom the Soviet government declares to be decadent and contrary to Soviet values.

NKVD

NKVD is the Russian acronym for the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs. This is the police force of the USSR, and it represents much of the physical force wielded by the Soviet Union over its citizens. When Shostakovich waits on the landing of his apartment in Section 1, he is specifically waiting for NKVD officers to potentially arrive and arrest him. While the NKVD never makes a physical appearance in the book, the image of the NKVD is often invoked in narration as a symbol of the power that the Soviet government may utilize at any time to exercise its will over Shostakovich.

The House at Irinovka

The site of several of Dmitri's childhood memories, the house at Ironovka represents a time of youth and innocence, but at the same time, other aspects of it represent fear and tragedy. Irinovka is the setting for Dmitri's threat to leave his parents and live with the estate manager, Jurgensen. His mother plays along, and the episode ends with Dmitri in tears, running back into the main house. This episode is told in relation to his future fears of being abandoned or taken advantage of. The house is also described as being rather disproportionately built. In Section 3, this is compared to the poorly conceived Soviet government, whose construction leads to a rather distorted and terrifying whole.

Grabbing Hands

Grabbing hands symbolize someone or something taking advantage of, or taking control from, Dimity throughout the book.

Directly after the episode in Section 1 when young Dmitri threatens to go live with Jurgensen, the image of the "grabbing hands" is introduced. They are described on page 10 in reference to various people and forces that mean to take advantage of Dmitri. Throughout the book, this image recurs in reference to the Soviet government and the various ways in which they control Dmitri, take advantage of him, and force him to sacrifice personal and artistic principles in order to survive and keep his family safe.

Prokofiev's Silk Pajamas

Silk pajamas seem to represent a disparity in wealth between the Soviet Union and the "western" countries. Section 1 contains an anecdote in which Sergey Prokofiev was returning to Russia from abroad, and the border patrol was suspicious of his silk pajamas because they had never seen anything like them before. The silk pajamas are often used as a way to refer back to this anecdote throughout the book. The pajamas also seem to represent Profokiev's willingness to travel outside of Russia, as well as his willingness to return despite the country's oppressive political situation.

Wood Chips

the image of wood chips is repeated several times throughout the book as a way of referring back to the Soviet Union's destructive nature, and this image eventually signifies Dmitri's moral objection to the Soviet Union's violence and oppression. In Section 2, the following quote appears in narration: "When you chop wood, the chips fly: that’s what the builders of socialism liked to say. Yet what if you found, when you laid down your axe, that you had reduced the whole timberyard to nothing but chips?" (92).

Maxim's Clown Show

Dmitri uses Maxim's clown show as a metaphor for the Soviet government. On pages 186 - 187, the narration describes Dmitri's son Maxim performing a humorous clown show in which Maxim attempts to tie his shoelaces using the most complicated and inefficient movements possible. Dmitri reflects upon this performance as representative of the Soviet government, saying that they both may be seen as "a vast catalogue of little farces adding up to one big tragedy" (187). In the same way that Maxim's clown character is victim to its own stupidity, the people of Russia are victim to the violence and absurdity of the Soviet Union.

A Triad

In the epilogue, as Dmitri raises vodka glasses in a toast with a beggar and a fellow passenger, the beggar declares the three of them "a triad" (196). It is important to note that a triad is a musical term for three notes played together, and Dmitri sees the moment of communion as a moment of goodness that can survive the evil around him. Therefore, the moment is representative of both music and humanity's power to overcome even the worst oppression, at least in a momentary and symbolic fashion.

Settings

Soviet Russia

The basis for almost every conflict in the book is the Soviet Union and the oppressive power that it exercises over Shostakovich and its other citizens. The Soviet Union was formed in the early 1920s by the Bolsheviks in the wake of the Russian Revolution. Before, Russia's governmental system for centuries had been largely monarchical, with a leader called a "tsar" at its head. Basing their philosophies on Marxist political and economic theories, Russian communists called Bolsheviks overthrew the tsarist government, very briefly established a republic, and then transitioned towards the more bureaucratic governmental system that was the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union was made up of Russia, as well as several surrounding countries, such as Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan the Ukraine, and Belarus. It dissolved in 1991 due to various political factors.

The Landing

Each section of the book grounds itself in a specific scene of Shostakovich's life, with the environment of that scene partially informing the tone and content of that section. In Section 1, the quiet isolation of the landing in Dmitri's building corresponds to the isolation imposed upon Shostakovich by the persecution of the Soviet government. The presence of Dmitri's wife and daughter sleeping in their beds represents the inability of friends and family in his life to intercede on his behalf.

Leningrad and Moscow

In the book, Leningrad is presented as the geographical center of Shostakovich's childhood, while Moscow is presented as the center of his professional life. Moscow is the political, commercial, and artistic capital of the country, and when Shostakovich is first discovered by Marshal Tukhachevsky in Leningrad, the Marshal attempts to relocate Shostakovich to Moscow so that the composer might have more artistic exposure. Shostakovich's mother prevents the move at that time, but the composer eventually does gravitate towards Moscow as his fame and success increase. However, he does make a return to Leningrad after he is forced to join the Communist Party so that he may stay with his sister and temporarily escape the reach of the Party and the government. Thus, the tension between the two cities is further established, with Leningrad representing the composer's roots, and Moscow representing his career.

New York City

Dmitri's trip to New York City provides not only an interesting contrast to his environment in Russia, it also provides further illustration of his relationship to the Soviet

government. Dmitri is sent to New York City in Section 2 as part of a cultural delegation organized by the Soviet government. He is forced by the government to be a part of the delegation, as well as to only say things the Soviets would approve of while in New York. Dmitri receives a warm welcome by Americans, further demonstrating his popularity in the West, but he laments the ways in which no westerner can truly know the full nature of life under Soviet oppression.

Anapa

Anapa is a town near the easternmost border of Russia. It is located in the Caucasus mountain range and near the Black Sea. Anapa is mentioned several times throughout the book as the location of a romantic vacation enjoyed by Shostakovich and Tanya, his first love. Anapa represents a short period in Shostakovich's life filled solely with freedom, love, and contentment, three things later under constant threat by the Soviet government. However, the idyllic nature of this trip with Tanya is also challenged later by the narrative, as Shostakovich's marriage to Nina is portrayed as more stable and ultimately more fulfilling.

The Plane (Section 2)

In Section 2, Shostakovich experiences a similar isolation to Section 1 when he is on the plane heading back to Russia from New York City. Even though he is surrounded by fellow artists, he sits alone and drinks forlornly as he thinks about himself as a puppet to the Soviet government. This tableau corresponds to his continued isolation, and the inability of himself and his fellow artists to change Soviet policies regarding artistic expression.

Dmitri's Car (Section 3)

In Section 3, Dmitri's car and personal chauffeur represent the superficial recognition he has gained over his career, but the non-communication between himself and the chauffeur seems to correspond to the composer's inability to find value or meaning in many of his accomplishments.

Themes and Motifs

Destiny and Powerlessness

Very early on in the book, destiny is defined as “just a grand term for something you could do nothing about” (7), and the term is revisited multiple times throughout the book as a way of addressing Shostakovich’s general powerlessness in the face of the will of the Soviet government. This type of “destiny” is described as inescapable, and it is generally referred to in relation to Shostakovich’s inability to fully control his art and his career under the watch of the government. Shostakovich is constantly forced to reshape the content of his music so as not to offend the Soviet government, or else risk severe punishment.

Moreover, Shostakovich is portrayed as having no ultimate control over his own life, as Stalin reserves the power to have any citizens arrested and killed at any time, and officials under Khrushchev’s leadership hound Shostakovich constantly, breaking down his will until he sacrifices his ultimate principles by joining the Communist Party and signing his name to every letter and editorial the government asks him to sign.

However, Shostakovich does attempt to maintain power in every part of his life where it still seems to be possible. One way he accomplishes this is through the use of irony, both in his artistic work and his communications with the government. Shostakovich is willing to play along with the government whenever it is necessary for his safety and the safety of his family, but he does so in ways that prevent his from fully complying or taking full responsibility. For example, he pretends to agree with the teachings of his assign tutor, Comrade Troshin, and he gives his tragic fifth symphony a happy ending that he means ironically, but that is interpreted literally by the government and pro-Soviet audience members.

Death and Violence

The landscape of Russia under Stalin is one marked by astounding death and violence. Tens of millions of people died under Stalin’s regime, either in work camps or through Stalin’s “purges” (widespread executions.) This creates an environment of extreme terror, and Shostakovich clearly feels the effects. He spends his life in fear of being terrorized, manipulated, and/or killed by the Soviet government, and it is made clear in the book how strongly he feels opposed to Stalin and the Soviets. He is disgusted by the countless deaths that Stalin inflicts on his own citizens, and he believes that no purpose is worth such violence, let alone a purpose that seems as harmful as establishing the absolute power of the Soviet Union.

When Khrushchev takes over after Stalin’s death, he puts an end to Stalin’s violent policies. However, Shostakovich still seems to believe that the threat of a symbolic death at the hands of the government is still a possibility. In fact, while Stalin did not kill

Shostakovich, the composer seems to believe that Khrushchev's administration does successfully kill him in a symbolic manner. Once he is essentially forced to join the Communist Party, Shostakovich thinks of himself as unrecognizable to the person he truly is or wishes to be. Moreover, Shostakovich seems to believe that he actually ends up living too long, and thus experiences a second death by living out his final days in discomfort and alienation before his final, literal death.

Art and Music

Despite all the terror and uncertainty of the world Shostakovich inhabits, he dedicates his life to pursuing truth and beauty through music. He is even willing to risk attracting the potentially fatal disapproval of the government in order to pursue his craft. In fact, composing music seems to be the only method by which Shostakovich believes he can transcend the terror of his time and create some type of meaningful beauty in the world. He believes that truly great music has the potential to maintain its beauty through all periods and all hardships. Under Soviet rule, he deems it dangerous to write music that he sees as fully beautiful and truthful, so he employs artistic irony when necessary, but he still is willing to risk some government disapproval in order to attempt to write at least some music that meets his own personal standards.

However, Shostakovich still struggles with the question of music's true purpose, and whom it should really be intended to benefit. The Soviet government maintains a tight grip on what type of music should be produced, as they wish it to elevate the proletariat and glorify the Soviet Union. Shostakovich, however, values freedom of artistic expression, and his motivation when composing seems to aspire to some higher ideal beyond his time and place. He wishes to write beautiful music free of cynicism, and his only way of measuring this beauty is by his own standards. These standards unfortunately often differ from those of the government, but he decides to trust that those capable of appreciating good music will appreciate his music, if it's worthy. He therefore decides that music belongs only to itself, and that it should not be strictly tethered to specific political concerns or agendas.

Love and Family

Another respite from oppression that Shostakovich is able to find is through relationships of love with other people. In his youth, he celebrates love and sexuality with Tanya Glivenko, and in his adult years, he invests his love and personal energies into his relationship with his wife and kids. Throughout the book, these relationships represent the freedom Shostakovich is able to maintain in his personal life while he struggles to maintain such freedom in his professional life. Moreover, the fact that he maintains a loving relationship with his family and maintains solid parental control over his children seems to represent a major victory in Shostakovich's life. His ability to maintain a comfortable amount of control over his home life allows him a certain amount of agency over his life in spite of government oppression.

However, Shostakovich's home life also contains some messiness and uncertainty, and this appears to mirror the uncertainty of life in general that the book seems to illustrate. First, he marries Nina only after his first love, Tanya, becomes inaccessible to him. Second, he expresses much anxiety and doubt over his ability to be a good husband and father. Last, he is left lonely and heartbroken after Nina's death, leading him to remarry hastily, and the second marriage falls apart quickly. However, despite the fact that his home and love life appear to be something of a microcosm of the fear and uncertainty of the larger world he inhabits, the book seems to portray the love and stability they ultimately grant him as far worth the costs.

Courage vs. Cowardice

Throughout the book, Shostakovich struggles with maintaining courage and integrity in the face of Soviet oppression, but the book illustrate the relationship between courage and cowardice in a rather unconventional and intertwined manner. For example, Section 1 revolves around the image of Shostakovich waiting each night with a packed suitcase, standing on the landing of his building in case government officials should arrive to arrest him. This act is examined in the light of both courage and cowardice, and not even Shostakovich is sure which it truly is. On one hand, perhaps he is facing injustice with resolve and what little volition he is afforded in that scenario. On another hand, perhaps it is simply a manifestation of his unwillingness to fight against injustice, or even a strategy by which to appear innocent and escape injustice altogether.

This theme is carried throughout the book, and the relationship between the two concepts is never fully resolved. Many of Shostakovich's other actions are portrayed as potentially brave or cowardly, often at the same time. For example, Shostakovich's willingness to occasionally sacrifice artistic and personal scruples could be seen as cowardly, or it could be seen as a brave sacrifice in order to protect his family. His agreement to join the Communist Party could be seen as cowardice, or it could be seen as a brave commitment to live a lie for the rest of his life in order to once again protect himself and his family. The world of Soviet Russia is portrayed as very absurd and contradictory, and the inability to be unambiguously brave or unambiguously cowardly appears to be one of those contradictions.

Styles

Point of View

Despite the fact that the narrator is technically separate from Dmitri, the novel appears to maintain a point of view that strictly remains within the bounds of Dmitri's own experience. Whenever other characters are mentioned, they appear to be presented through the lens of Dmitri's own thoughts and knowledge of them. Therefore, even though the book is told in the third-person, it can in many ways be considered a first-person narrative. Thematically, this makes perfect sense. Dmitri is a generally isolated figure in his struggle to pursue artistic beauty and resist the overbearing power of the Soviet government. Even though Dmitri's experiences are shaped by those he loves, whenever Dmitri makes an action to in some way resist the will of the government, it is a choice he makes alone. This first-person perspective also makes sense as a way to heighten the terror and helplessness that permeates the book. The workings of the Soviet Union are large, complex, terrifying, and unknowable, and therefore, keeping the narrative within the bounds of one person's experience helps to replicate that sense of fear and uncertainty.

However, when examining how the book treats time, its perspective appears to be very wide and all-encompassing. The book essentially covers the entirety of Dmitri's life, stretching from his birth and childhood all the way to his final years. This does not detract from the book's feelings of uncertainty, because the three sections are placed in chronological order, and thus the reader is kept in suspense about Dmitri's future (unless they are already familiar with the life os Shostakovich.) Thus, the reason the book covers Dmitri's entire life appears to be to demonstrate how the events of his life shape his own thoughts and philosophies. As the book develops these various themes and thought processes, it puts them in conversation with the ones that came earlier, thereby increasing the complexity of Dmitri's inner life as he ages and accumulates knowledge and experience.

Language and Meaning

Due to the fact that Dmitri's environment is often very bleak and full of terror, the tone of the book often reflects this with somber contemplations on the widespread harm and oppression caused by the Soviet Union. However, this is often tempered, or at least complicated, by the interplay of humor, irony, and sarcasm in the prose. Frequently throughout the book, the narration will make an ironic, almost humorous comment on the Soviet Union, and due to the fact that Dmitri is so revolted by the Soviet government, this ironic remark will generally serve to illuminate some atrocity or absurdity present in Soviet desires or activities. This creates an interesting paradox in that, because of this tonal interplay, the narration will often appear to be both dark and humorous simultaneously. This seems to serve two distinct thematic functions. First, it elevates the reader's awareness of these atrocities by presenting them with striking and

offbeat methods. Secondly, it helps to illustrate Dmitri's own internal mechanisms for dealing with the stress and terror of life in the USSR. Dmitri often contemplates the function of irony in the face of oppression, and so his own ironic thought processes appear to be his way of criticizing and processing the monstrousness of the Soviet government.

It is also important to note the sparing use of optimism within the narrative. Dmitri describes himself as a pessimistic person, and this is evident in his outlook and the descriptions of his various predicaments. However, the narrative does provide a few small but significant instances of optimism, which are made all the more significant by how few they number among all the instances of pessimism. This optimism is almost always presented within the context of Dmitri's thoughts about music, and this serves to highlight the recurring idea that music is one of the few things that can rise above the terror and fear of life. This optimistic tone also extends to a few other motifs, such as love and family, and it appears to succeed in the book's epilogue when Dmitri raises a toast with a beggar and another man. However, because these moments of optimism are always surrounded by sources of fear and sadness, it tends to both highlight and complicate those optimistic ideas.

Structure

The Noise of Time is structured in three different sections, each dealing with a different period in the life of Dmitri Shostakovich. Section 1 examines his childhood, youth, and early adulthood, Section 2 examines his middle-aged years and the middle of his career, and Section 3 examines his late career and the last years of his life. In addition, the author specifically centers each of these sections around a single moment in Shostakovich's life. Each of these scenes help to set the tone and themes for that section, as well as providing a hub off of which other memories and contemplative streams of consciousness. This overall structure allows the author to highlight the biggest changes that Shostakovich experiences over the course of his life and career; at the beginning of each section, the reader finds themselves at a point 12 years later, and the author appears to choose central scenes that readily demonstrate the most significant changes in Shostakovich's life. This allows the author to sketch the overall trajectory of Shostakovich's life by providing a few pieces of key information and backtracking to fill in events and information that are the most thematically relevant.

Another important facet of the book's structure is the relationship between Dmitri and the narration. The Noise of Time is a book with very little dialogue, as the bulk of the story is told through narration. However, because much of the story revolves around Dmitri's inner struggles, the narration must assume the duty of explicating these struggles to the reader while also providing all necessary information of time, place, and external events. This creates a complicated relationship between the narration and Dmitri, as it adds ambiguity to the source of some of the sentiments expressed by the narration. At some points, the narration explicitly states that it is referring to specific thoughts and feelings held by Dmitri, but at other times, the narration simply makes editorial claims that do not necessarily have an explicit basis in Dmitri's own thoughts.

The function of this ambiguity seems closely correlated with the ambiguity and confusion that marks most of the moral struggles in the book. Whenever Dmitri struggles with a question of morality, he is always very hard-pressed to come to a distinct and explicit answer, so the ambiguity of the narration seems to be an attempt to mirror this ambiguity in the structure of the prose.

Quotes

Destiny. It was just a grand term for something you could do nothing about. When life said to you, 'And so,' you nodded, and called it destiny.
-- Narration (chapter 1)

Importance: This quote, which appears near the opening of the book, establishes an important philosophical framework by acknowledging that lives are largely shaped by uncontrollable events. This is further explored throughout the book as Shostakovich succumbs to things he cannot change and exercises power in the spheres of his life where he can do so.

[Shostakovich] had replied that his father 'was an entirely normal human being.' This was not a patronising phrase: it was an enviable skill to be a normal human being, and to wake up every morning with a smile on your face.
-- Narration (chapter 1)

Importance: Shostakovich's envy of his father's ability to remain generally content and positive is indicative of the tone and mindset that shapes Shostakovich and the book in general. Unlike his father, Shostakovich is neurotic and pessimistic, and this is exacerbated by the trials of life and artistic prominence in Soviet Russia.

Tchaikovsky was decadent, and the slightest experimentation condemned as 'formalism.
-- Narration (chapter 1)

Importance: Statements like this help to establish the artistic opposition between Shostakovich and the Soviet government. The Soviet government wishes for music to appeal to the masses and be easily understood, while Shostakovich wishes to experiment and build upon the classical music of the past.

His own innocence was irrelevant. The truth of his answers was irrelevant. What had been decided had been decided.
-- Narration (chapter 1)

Importance: Shostakovich's interrogation by Zakrevsky supplies important insight into the nature of the individual's relationship with the Soviet government. Truth is irrelevant in the eyes of the government when it has a specific purpose in mind, so it creates its own truth and forces key citizens to play along.

This was one of the questions in his head: was it brave to be standing there waiting for them, or was it cowardly? Or was it neither—merely sensible? He did not expect to discover the answer.
-- Narration (chapter 1)

Importance: This quotation introduces the theme of bravery versus cowardice, which recurs throughout the book. The recurrences of this themes treat it in a similar fashion,

namely that bravery and cowardice are hard to fully distinguish and define, and that perhaps one simply did what was sensible and what was necessary.

He was conscious from the beginning that it was necessary to render unto Caesar that which was Caesar's…Caesar didn't just demand that tribute be rendered unto him; he also nominated the currency in which it should be paid.
-- Narration (chapter 1)

Importance: This quote refers to a quote attributed to Jesus in the New Testament: "Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's." In this instance, the author uses the quote to compare the dictatorial Joseph Stalin to the dictatorial Julius Caesar. Stalin's control over both tribute and metaphorical currency in this quote helps develop the idea of Stalin's absolute power in the USSR.

To be Russian was to be pessimistic; to be Soviet was to be optimistic. That was why the words Soviet Russia were a contradiction in terms…What they wanted was "an optimistic Shostakovich." Another contradiction in terms.
-- Narration (chapter 2)

Importance: This quote helps develop the tension between the Soviet Union and its citizens, as well as tension between the Soviet government and Shostakovich. The narrator describes the problems caused by the Soviet Union as arising out of an ideological difference between Soviet government and the history, ideals, and outlook of its citizens.

In an ideal world, a young man should not be an ironical person. At that age, irony prevents growth, stunts the imagination. It is best to start life in a cheerful and open state of mind…And then, as one comes to understand things and people better, to develop a sense of irony.
-- Narration (chapter 2)

Importance: The idea of irony recurs throughout the book, and it is examined both in terms of its uses and its possible harmful effects. This quote helps to introduce the idea in those terms and establish its double-sided nature. Shostakovich often uses irony as a tool of expression under Soviet rule, and he often struggles with the questions of irony's true use and effects.

As for love—not his own awkward, stumbling, blurting expressions of it, but love in general: he had always believed that love, as a force of nature, was indestructible; and that, when threatened, it could be protected.
-- Narration (chapter 2)

Importance: The idea of love recurs in the book with relation to Shostakovich's love life and family life. While Shostakovich's own involvement with love is often rather awkward and messy, he maintains is belief that it is a force for good in the world, and that it is fundamentally threatened by the tyranny and iron-fisted rule of Stalin and the Soviet government.

When you chop wood, the chips fly: that's what the builders of socialism liked to say. Yet what if you found, when you laid down your axe, that you had reduced the whole timberyard to nothing but chips?
-- Narration (chapter 2)

Importance: This image helps further illustrate Shostakovich's opposition to the Soviet Union. He opposes its policies for all the deaths that it causes, and this image helps illustrate his view that such practices serve only to cause widespread destruction rather than build anything of actual value.

Akhmatova said that under Khrushchev, Power had become vegetarian. Maybe so; though you could just as easily kill someone by stuffing vegetables down their throat as by the traditional methods of the old meat-eating days.
-- Narration (chapter 3)

Importance: This quote introduces the idea that even though the government under Khrushchev no longer engaged in widespread executions like the government under Stalin, the government still has the power to kill in a symbolic sense. This idea shapes Shostakovich's relationship with the government after Stalin's death and the installation of the new leader.

When all else failed, when there seemed to be nothing but nonsense in the world, he held to this: that good music would always be good music, and great music was impregnable. You could play Bach's preludes and fugues at any tempo, with any dynamics, and they would still be great music, proof even against the wretch who brought ten thumbs to the keyboard. And in the same way, you could not play such music cynically.
-- Narration (chapter 3)

Importance: This quote helps to illuminate exactly what has motivated Shostakovich to dedicate his life to music. He sees it as something beautiful that can maintain its beauty over time, regardless of the messiness or uncertainty or fear that life may bear. In addition, he believes that only truly "great" music can do this, which is why he often resists the artistic mandates of the Soviet Union in order to maintain some loyalty to his own artistic standards.