

Persian Letters. Translated with an Introd. and Notes, by C. J. Betts Study Guide

**Persian Letters. Translated with an Introd. and Notes,
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Letters 1 - 9

Letters 1 - 9 Summary

In Letter 1, Usbek writes to Rustan. Usbek tries to explain to Rustan his desire to learn about other places. Usbek requests Rustan tell him what people are saying about him and his travels. Letter 2 is written from Usbek to the chief black eunuch whom Usbek has left in charge of his home in Ispahan, Persia. Usbek states that he has no fear that harm or danger will come to his home or wives as long as this trusted eunuch is in charge. He encourages the eunuch to keep his wives happy and let them do what will bring them pleasure as long as these activities are moral and accepted.

In Letter 3, Zachi, one of Usbek's wives, writes to him. She tells him the head black eunuch took them to the country as a form of amusement. Zachi could no longer stand being in the house where she had spent time with Usbek. Zachi remembers a time when Usbek chose her above the other wives during a contest. She feels Usbek has left because he does not understand the importance of being loved. Zephis, another of Usbek's wives writes him a complaint about the head black eunuch in Letter 4. Zephis claims the eunuch is trying to take her slave, Zelide, away from her. She claims the eunuch is making up stories about her and the servant that never happened.

In Letter 5, Rustan writes to Usbek that the entire community is talking badly about Usbek and his decision to travel beyond the boundaries of Persia. Also Rustan supports Usbek's travels because he is Usbek's friend, Rustan misses Usbek. Letter 6 is written from Usbek to Nessir. In this letter Usbek confesses that he is now ill at ease about his decision to leave his wives and travel away from his homeland of Persia. Fatmé, another of Usbek's wives, writes to him in Letter 7. Fatmé tells Usbek that even if she were able to leave the seraglio, she would still only love Usbek. Although he is gone, Fatmé still takes care of herself just as she did when he was there.

In Letter 8, Usbek writes to Rustan the real reason that he has gone away from Ispahan. Apparently Usbek had intended to uncover some failing that he had discovered. Instead of receiving praise from the ruler, however, Usbek made enemies and evoked jealousy. Although Usbek moved to the country, he still feared for his life. For this reason, he asked the king permission to leave the country on a trip to discover scientific learning. In letter 9, the chief eunuch writes to Ibbi, who has accompanied Usbek on his trip. The eunuch indicates that he believes Ibbi's job easy compared to his. At one point this eunuch was greatly attracted to the beautiful women that he served. His job put him in a situation so that he could not get away from the object of his desires. On top of this, his master has sent him a letter of praise which the eunuch actually says was full of veiled threats. Finally, the women he deals with try to make his life as difficult as possible for him.



Letters 1 - 9 Analysis

The Persian Letters is a collection of letters written to Usbek and his group of men, and from Usbek and the members of this group while they are on a trip away from Persia. Usbek first tells one of his friends that he is making his trip only as a learning venture. In a latter letter, however, Usbek tells the friend that he actually left Persia because he feared for his life. Apparently, Usbek had uncovered some failing in the leadership of his country. When he told about this failing, instead of receiving praise, he found he became a man with many enemies. He tried to hide from his enemies at his country house, but still feared for his life. For this reason he asked to king to allow him to leave Persia under the cover of seeking out scientific knowledge.

Many people are talking badly about Usbek because it is unusual for a resident of Persia to want to leave the country. Rustan is one of the few people who supports Usbek's travels. In their letters to their husband, two of Usbek's wives openly mourn his absence. Zelide, however, complains to her husband that the chief eunuch in charge of taking care of the wives while Usbek is gone has been making up stories about her. In a letter to another servant, this main eunuch shares with Ibben what a bad position he has been put into by his master. Although the master has written him a letter that, on one hand, could be considered to be full of praise and high opinion, but the eunuch sees this letter as a veiled threat. Meanwhile, the women under his care are using some of the eunuch's past indiscretions against him. The wives are making his life miserable by working him to death.

One theme that begins to develop in this section is the idea of life in the seraglio. Although Usbek is away from his home, he is still viewed as the head of his home. Both his wives and the eunuchs who are in charge of protecting these women look to Usbek to settle their quarrels. Usbek is the central figure in his wives' lives. They do not understand why he has left them. They also don't know what to do with themselves with their leader gone. Although Usbek has given the head eunuch permission to do whatever will make the women happy, the eunuch feels the letter is full of veiled threats. The eunuch also feels as if the women are purposefully causing troubles with which he must deal.



Letters 10 - 17

Letters 10 - 17 Summary

In Letter 10, Mirza writes to Usbek. He begs Usbek for an explanation of a statement Usbek made about justice before he left on his journey. In Letters 11 through 14 Usbek responds to Mirza's letter. In order to explain his statement Usbek writes out the text of a story of the Troglodytes that he hopes will make his point clear. This breed of man decides not to have rulers, but instead to act only in a way that benefits their own best interests. He tells Mirza there were only two families that survived this period of injustice and wickedness. These two families lived in harmony with each other in a secluded part of the country. These families multiplied into a whole country full of virtuous and loving people.

When nearby peoples saw how bountifully these people were living, they wanted to steal their flocks of livestock. The Troglodytes offered to allow these people to be part of their community but instead the people attacked the Troglodytes. The Troglodytes defeated these enemies. At this point, however, the Troglodytes attempt to name a king over their kingdom. The elderly man who is chosen for this position regrets the townspeople's decision. He tells the people he feels it is the beginning of their downfall. He believes it indicates the men would rather be governed by a man, who is less strict, than their own virtues.

In Letter 15, Usbek writes to the mullah who lives among the tombs at Qum. Usbek indicates to Mehemet Ali that he is limiting his great intellect and spirituality by staying in this place. However, Usbek asks permission to spend time with the mullah among the tombs. In Letter 16, Usbek writes of his impatience to hear a response from Mehemet Ali. Usbek hopes this holy man can help guide him back to the path of right living. Usbek asks this man if things can be pure or impure in and of themselves. He then suggests it is perhaps the senses that draw a judge to decisions of what is clean and what is unclean. Mehemet Ali finally responds to Usbek in Letter 17. The mullah first suggests that Usbek refer to the Traditions of the Doctors to find answers to his questions. He then reprimands Usbek for not embracing the lifestyle of the mullah, which Usbek seems to admire so much.

Furthermore, the mullah tells Usbek he is a man of little intelligence. To answer Usbek's question about the pig, the mullah explains that while on the ark a pig was born from elephant excrement.

Letters 10 - 17 Analysis

There are two distinct sections of letters in this part of the book. The first section is comprised of letters written to Mirza from Usbek explaining his comment about justice.



In the second section, Usbek writes to Mehemet Ali twice and then finally receives a response at the conclusion of this section.

Usbek uses four letters to share with Mirza the story of the Troglodytes. In this story there is a group of people who destroy themselves and each other through their selfish and evil lifestyles. There are two families who break off from the group and live by the guidance of their own virtue. As the group grows and prospers they eventually want to appoint a king to rule over them. The man intended to fill this position is sad to hear of the peoples' decision because he believes they will move from their desire to be ruled by virtues to a desire to be ruled by laws and a king. This story makes a statement against monarchies as well as self rule. Usbek seems to believe that the only way to live well is to allow one's life to be ruled by the virtue in their heart.

Although Usbek's response to Mirza request seems very intelligent, Mehemet Ali does not believe Usbek is very intelligent. Although Usbek asks a valid question, the mullah tells Usbek he should refer to religious books for his answers. In response to Usbek's questions about whether or not pigs are unclean, Mehemet Ali refers to a fable told by a man supposedly raised from the dead.



Letters 18 - 32

Letters 18 - 32 Summary

In Letter 18, Usbek writes to update his friend Rustan on his location. He is now in Smyrna. Usbek writes of the troubled Ottoman Empire. Usbek says Smyrna is the only city that can be considered great or powerful. The only reason he sees this city is doing well is because it has been taken over by Europeans. Usbek writes about the offense caused him by his wife Zachi in Letter 19. Usbek has heard that Zachi was found alone with a white eunuch instead of the black eunuchs that should be serving her. This is a crime punishable by death to the white eunuch. Usbek claims that even if the white eunuch did not touch Zachi, he wonders what she would do if she were left to her own devices. Usbek assumes that it is because her female servant Zelide suggested that Zachi's relationship with the white eunuch was improper that Zachi took a disliking to her.

Letter 20 contains Usbek's command to the head white eunuch that he should fear Usbek after what he has allowed the eunuch Nadir to do. Usbek indicates that the man should thank Usbek for allowing him to live since the only aspect the eunuch has in his favor is his ability to serve. In Letter 21 Usbek writes to Ibben that his group of travelers has reached Livorno. Usbek first notes the freedoms enjoyed by the women in this city in Italy. He finds this Christian city strange. Usbek tells Ibben he is planning to travel to Paris.

In Letter 22, Rica writes to Ibben that the traveling group has been in Paris for more than one month. He describes the fast pace of life in Paris, saying that he sometimes acts like a Christian as a result of the rudeness he encounters in the street. Rica goes on to attempt to describe the governmental structure of Europe. Rica's description begins with a sketch of the King of Europe whom he describes as being powerful as well as a great magician. Rica explains this king can make his people believe things that would otherwise make no sense. Rica describes the pope as another magician. He indicates the pope is even more powerful than the king. Rica also describes a revolt in which some people were refusing to accept the ideas included in a document called the Constitution. Women are the leaders of this revolt since the document will not allow women to read the Christian equivalent of the Qur'an. In Letter 24, Usbek writes to his virtuous and modest wife Roxane, about the crude ways of Eastern women. Letter 25 is a letter from Usbek to Nessir. Usbek complains that his health is failing, making him feel even more out of place in Europe. Nessir asks Usbek to tell no one that his health is getting bad.

Rica writes to Ibben describing the hierarchy of Catholic leadership in Letter 27. In Letter 28, Rica writes to Ibben about the extreme curiosity of the people of Paris. He notes that everywhere he goes people stare at him. When Rica wears European clothes instead of his Persian clothes, people no longer stare at him. Rhedi writes to Usbek in Letter 29 that the only thing he dislikes about Venice is the fact that there is no fresh



water. In Letter 31, Usbek writes to Rhedi about the divergent effects laws sometime have on human behavior. He uses the instance of laws prohibiting the use of alcohol. In this same letter Usbek also addresses the different ways in which different cultures try to remedy diseases of the spirit. In Letter 32, Rica attempts to describe to Ibben the differences between men and women of different cultures. Even though Persians are serious, Rica writes that Turkish people are the most grave. Parisians, however, are happy. One of the Parisians comments about the slaves of the Orient. He wonders about the baseness of their condition.

Letters 18 - 32 Analysis

In this section the differences in cultures, particularly the way women act in these cultures, is brought to the forefront. For instance, Persian women are strictly guarded from the view of men other than their husbands. They are guarded by eunuchs, who are men thought to be incapable of sexual attraction. In the European countries, however, women are given great freedoms. Women are allowed to show their faces in public and even converse with men other than their husbands.

Note also the differences between Rica's letters and Usbek's letters. Rica's letters are full of descriptions about the people he encounters and places that he sees. Through his correspondence, one gets the idea that Rica is enjoying his travels immensely. Usbek, on the other hand, does not seem to notice what is going on around him. He tells Usbek in Letter 23 that he is not as quick as Rica to pick up on cultural differences. However, it appears that Usbek's health is failing. He seems more concerned about his family in Persia than he does about what he might be able to learn while traveling about the country. When Usbek does write about cultural differences, his emphasis is on differences in religion and religious beliefs instead of general life.



Letters 33 - 45

Letters 33 - 45 Summary

Usbek writes to Gemchid in Letter 33 seeking his opinion of Christians. Usbek sees many parallels between his religion and that of the Christians, the only difference being that the Christians do not believe in Muhammad or Ali. In Letter 34 Usbek writes to Rhedi about Paris coffee houses. Although he writes that those who visit these houses feel smarter when they leave than when they entered, they waste their intelligence arguing about unimportant matters. In one instance where the people are arguing about birthplace and time of death of a Greek poet, Usbek wonders how much more violent the arguments might be if there were actually a living person about whom to argue.

In Letter 36, Rica writes about the debate in different parts of the world concerning the rights of women. They wonder if women should be subject to men and if a docile woman is better, or if she is less tempting, than one who is more of a free thinker. In fact, Rica points out that in some of the stronger societies, it is women who are deemed the leaders, not the men. In Letter 38 Usbek writes about the European practice of grieving over the dead. He writes that humans do not know the proper times to grieve and show joy.

In Letter 39, the head black eunuch writes to Usbek the one of the eunuchs have died and must be replaced. Although the head eunuch tried to convince a black slave to become a eunuch, even attempted to force him, the slave did not accept the proposition. The slave, Pharan, writes to Usbek in Letter 40 about the same situation which is addressed in Letter 39. Pharan writes that the head black eunuch is trying to gain vengeance on the slave because the slave made jokes about the eunuch's condition. Pharan describes the way in which the head black eunuch attempted to take away his manhood. The slave contends this although this action taken on an infant is cruel, on an adult, the misery would cause him to die. Usbek responds to this slave in Letter 41. Usbek refuses to allow his eunuchs to lay a hand on Pharan before Usbek returns. Usbek warns the slave, however, not to take advantage of his master's kindness.

In Letter 44, Usbek writes to Rhedi about the way in which Christians aren't good Christians or even good citizens. He indicates there are so many rules and regulations concerning religion that it is hard for the common man to know what is actually pleasing to God and what isn't. Letter 45 is a letter from Zachi to Usbek. She tells Usbek that she has reconciled her argument with her servant and the seraglio is now peaceful again. Zachi tells Usbek how two men were killed for coming too close to the ladies' vehicles while they were taking a trip to the country.



Letters 33 - 45 Analysis

Differences between the European and Persian cultures are described in this section. The greatest difference is that the European countries are primarily Christian countries while those who live in Persia practice the Muslim faith. Usbek shows a great deal of concern for what he sees as the foolish ways of the Christians. In fact, in Letter 33, Usbek writes to a dervish, a highly religious Muslim, asking his opinion of the Christians. Usbek wonders if the Christians will be condemned to Hell simply because they are ignorant of the Muslim faith. Although Usbek seems to be fascinated by the way in which Christians observe their religion, it is obvious that Usbek does not have much respect for Christians. He seems to find the way in which these people practice their religious beliefs lacking in faith and reverence for their God.

Through the letters exchanged between Usbek and those living in the seraglio, the reader learns more about the ways of life for those living in these seraglios. The women are protected by eunuchs. These eunuchs are men who are castrated, generally at birth. This castration causes the men not to develop sexually. For this reason, they are not attracted to the women whom they serve. The eunuchs, however, were highly respected men, on a level higher than the average slave. Although these eunuchs did enjoy more respect, not all men necessarily wanted to do what was necessary to become a eunuch. For instance, in Letter 39, the head black eunuch attempts to force a black slave to become a eunuch. This slave writes to Usbek begging him to allow him to remain whole. The slave reasons that if the castration occurs at birth, the child never knows what he is missing. To perform the same action on an adult, however, would be punishment since he would be aware of what has been taken away from him.



Letters 46 - 65

Letters 46 - 65 Summary

In Letter 46 Usbek reports that his acquisition of knowledge keeps him continually busy. He continually studies the people around him. He finds all that he sees highly interesting. Usbek has found a man who will give him information about the people who he meets. Usbek is surprised at one man who says his profession is to string along ladies. In Persia, such a person would not have been allowed to live with such a stated profession. Usbek does not know what to think about such a depraved sort of person.

Rica writes Letter 48 to an unidentified recipient. Rica speaks of loving people whose virtue was so wonderful that they seemed to be unaware of their qualities. Rica dislikes those who are prideful of themselves. Rica writes that he met such a prideful man who even denied that he was full of pride. In Letter 49, Nargum writes to Usbek about some strange traditions followed by the people of Muscovy. First, any male visitor entering a home must kiss the wife of the man living there. Also, although it is generally forbidden in most marriage contracts, the men of Muscovy show their affection for their wives by beating them. Those wives who are not beaten believe they are not loved. Zelis writes to Usbek in Letter 51 about the marriage of her slave Zelide to a white eunuch. She asks if he approves of and will allow this union. In Letter 53, Rica describes the way in which European wedding nights differ from those of the Persians. Persian women continue to defend their virginity even after marriage. It is understood that on the night that Europeans are wed, the husband and wife will consummate their vows that night. Rica also indicates how common infidelity is in Europe.

In Letter 54, Usbek refers to the common habit of gambling in France. Even the women gamble, often in an attempt to destroy their husband's finances. Usbek indicates that it is because these games are against the law that people are calmer and more peaceful than those in Venice. He also indicates that because they have more than one wife, Persian women do not have the power over Persian men that French women have. Rica writes to Rhedi about the various professions found in Paris in Letter 56. In Letter 58, Usbek responds to Ibben's question asking whether or not there are Jews in Europe. Usbek replies that there are Jews in Europe. He adds that these Jews make a display of their religion just as the Jews in Persia do. Usbek also notes that there are steps toward peace being made with the Jews in Europe. He hopes this peace will spread to all religions on earth so that God only need decide between the merits of the believers.

In Letter 60, Zelis writes to Usbek that she is having his seven-year-old daughter confined to the seraglio. Zelis believes by confining the child this early, she will not think of her fate as a punishment later. She will have grown up in the seraglio and will never have known what freedom was. In the conclusion of her letter, Zelis tells Usbek that she believes that her use of her imagination has made her freer and happier than Usbek currently is. She indicates the guards that he has placed to watch her only remind her



that Usbek loves her. In Letter 61 Rica describes to Usbek the verbal game of banter played among those living in Europe. This game of banter is played in various settings ranging from small talk to governmental discussions.

In Letter 62, the head black eunuch tells Usbek how chaotic and out of control things have become at the seraglio. He asks Usbek for permission to punish the women as they deserve so that he can bring things back under control. Letter 63 is a letter from Usbek to his wives. He tells his wives that the head eunuch wishes to take them under control, but Usbek will not allow it. He instead pleads the women to change their behavior based on their own virtue. In Letter 65 Ibben writes to Usbek the story of a Zoroastrian who saves his sister from her eunuch husband so that they can be married. Ibben considers this Zoroastrian to be a virtuous man and has introduced him fully to Usbek.

Letters 46 - 65 Analysis

In this section of letters, the head black eunuch writes to Usbek telling him that things are worse than ever in the seraglio. Although the head eunuch wants to take things under his control by punishing the women, Usbek will not allow him to do so. Usbek pleads with his wives in a letter to them to restore the atmosphere of the seraglio to peace as they promised they would keep when he left. Usbek also asks the ladies to give the eunuchs and slaves the respect they deserve. Usbek's letter shows that he sees his women as more than just possessions. He truly loves them and wants them to act well because he believes they are good and virtuous women.

Also during this section of letters, those who are traveling continue to share the strange behaviors of those living in the European countries. These strange behaviors include an account from Moscow where women believe they are not loved if their husbands do not beat them. There is also some surprise that all European couples consummate their wedding vows on their wedding night. This differs from the Persian culture because women would attempt to protect their virginity even after they were married. Rica believes that it is disgraceful that the time of each couple's first sexual encounter is so well known to everyone. He also expresses shock when he writes about how widespread and accepted infidelity is in the European countries.



Letters 66 - 78

Letters 66 - 78 Summary

In Letter 66, Rica writes that he has dinner with a man who works in the law. Rica is surprised by the offhanded and non-serious manner in which this particular man viewed his job. Rica warns this man that he should be more interested in protecting his own system of justice since there are men who wish to destroy this system. In Letter 67, Usbek gives a philosophical discussion of his views of God and God's attributes. In Letter 68, Zelis writes to her husband of a man who gave his daughter in marriage to a man who asked for her hand. When the daughter was taken to her new husband's house, he demanded the dowry be increased before he would accept her. The husband is persuaded to take the girl, but returns her with cuts on her face claiming she was not a virgin. Usbek responds to Zelis' story in Letter 69. He writes that he pities the man and daughter to whom this disgrace was done. However, he is proud of Zelis' love and caring for her own daughter.

In Letter 71, Rica describes the powerless French Academy. He indicates the only job those who are members of this academy have is to "babble incessantly." Rica indicates that there is no group like this in existence in Persia. In Letter 72, Rica writes that he has learned that in Paris affluence is based on a person's own feelings of superiority, instead of the manners. Rica points out that in Persia a person's superiority was proved by his kindness. In Letter 73, Usbek writes about the many disputes that occur in the Christian faith concerning practices and beliefs. He indicates these people rotate between an inability to believe in their own faith and a true faith in God. In Letter 74, Usbek responds to the cruel nature with which the bodies of those who have committed suicide are treated in Europe. Usbek reasons that if these people are hurting so badly they wish to end their own lives, this relief should not be denied them. Usbek believes these actions on the part of the Europeans spring from a peoples' sense of pride and desire to be an important part of the universe.

In Letter 76, Usbek mourns the pitiful job the current legislators are doing in their work. He writes that these men do not realize the importance of their jobs and spend their time dealing with needless and inconsequential tasks. Usbek does, however, applaud the legislators for the way they handled the laws concerning parental authority. Usbek has noticed that in countries believes that allow parents to discipline their children, family life is more orderly. The perfect government is the topic of Letter 78. In this letter Usbek concludes that this government must take into considerations the personalities of the people with which it deals, especially when deciding on fines and punishments. The slightest amount of punishment needed to make the people obey the laws should be used in every instance; however, people of different cultures interpret punishment differently. What would be a terrible punishment in one culture would not affect a person from another culture.



Letters 66 - 78 Analysis

Throughout his letters, Usbek continues to describe the things that he finds wrong with the European culture, government and religion. Usbek believes the legislature spends its time doing insignificant and needless tasks. He dislikes the way these people go about their jobs without the seriousness and gravity that he believes they should have. Usbek also rallies against the way the bodies of those who have committed suicide are treated. He believes this treatment stems from the Europeans' desire to feel some importance in their own society. Usbek, however, believes that in the larger scheme of things, one person killing themselves will not change the entire scheme of the world. In this section, even the generally positive Rica begins to complain about the strange things that he sees going on around him. For instance, in Letter 71 Rica writes about the useless and powerless French Academy. It can be determined from his letter that Rica thinks this group is laughable.

In addition to sharing his observations about European government, Usbek also shares his opinions of the Christian religion. Usbek is very critical of this religion and the halfhearted way in which he believes Christians adhere to their beliefs. In Letter 73, for instance, Usbek indicates that he believes many Christians use their faith for their own devices. They depend on their faith when they need it, but then discard it when things are going their way. Usbek also notices that these Christian men tend to interpret the laws of Christ to their own benefit. For instance, they used to word of Christ to rationalize freeing the slaves when this action hurt the feudal lords, but seemed to neglect these same words when they determined that having slaves was beneficial to the Christians themselves.



Letters 79 - 92

Letters 79 - 92 Summary

In Letter 79, Nargum writes to Usbek about the power of the Tartars. He laments, however, that the Tartars had no writers to create a history of the conquests of this people. Nargum wonders what the Tartars have done that no one even knows about. In Letter 80, Rica ridicules the ways in which Europeans attempt to communicate with each other. Justice is the topic of Letter 81. Usbek believes that justice is the quality that keeps people from having to live in fear of each other. In Letter 82, Rica reports he is pleased with what he sees when he visits a retreat for those wounded in battle. In Letter 83, writes to Mirza how fortunate the Persian were that a law to banish the Armenians never went into effect. Usbek argues that by removing these Armenians, Persia would have lost its hardest working citizens. In this letter Usbek suggests that many religions are good for a society because the members of the less accepted religions find they must work harder to attain acceptance. Also, Usbek argues that the rivalries between different religions will cause the members of each individual religion try to outdo each other in following the precepts of their religion.

In Letter 85, Rica shares his opinion of busybodies, or people who appear to be in all places at the same time minding everyone's business but their own. In Letters 87 and 88 Usbek discusses the ideas of glory and fame. In Letter 91, Usbek writes about his opinion of public law. Usbek argues that laws determine how far the monarchy can violate justice without this violation harming their own interests. In Letter 92, Usbek writes that while it is important for individuals to treat each other justly, it is also important for nations to deal justly with one another.

Letters 79 - 92 Analysis

In Letter 79, Nargum writes a second time to Usbek. In these two letters Nargum gives the reader a glimpse into life in Russia. In this letter Nargum writes about the lifestyle of the Tartars. He laments that idea that no one in this culture ever took the time, or had the talent, to write down a history of the conquests of this people. Nargum indicates that the loss of this history is a great loss to all people.

In Letter 81, Usbek uses the literary device of personification in Letter 81. In this letter Usbek writes about justice. He writes of justice as a woman who has trouble being heard by the general public even though she raises her voice.

In Letter 83, Usbek writes about the way that religion can be a benefit to the government. He writes that these religions encourage their followers to be better people. In this way, the government is spared some work in keeping its people in line. Also Usbek indicates that multiple religions are also beneficial to a government. This is

because those who do not belong to the accepted religion must work harder to be accepted. This hard work, in turn, benefits the government.



Letters 93 - 99

Letters 93 - 99 Summary

In Letter 93, the head eunuch writes to Usbek of a woman from Visapor that he has bought for Usbek's brother. Although the eunuch writes that the woman's beauty is perfect and that it brings him joy, he adds that he is not attracted to her in the way that other men are. He reasons that this is why he is so good at choosing women and purchasing them for others. The eunuch believes the addition of this woman to the seraglio she is bound for will cause the women there to behave better. The eunuch indicates, however, that without the master of the seraglio being present the eunuchs cannot fully control the women. At this point, the eunuch begs Usbek to come back to his own seraglio. The eunuch says that by doing so, Usbek will comfort and encourage the women, and will release the servants of their terrible burden of leadership.

In Letter 95, Usbek tells Ibben about the great fickleness of fortune that those who live in France experience. Usbek is amazed by how quickly the rich can become poor and the poor can become rich. Usbek in particular writes about the tax farmers. Laws are currently forcing these men to choose between their money and their lives. In Letter 96, Rica writes about how quickly the fashions in France change. In Letter 97, Rica expounds on this idea of the changeable fashions in France. He indicates that he believes it is curious that the French prefer their own customs of dress to those of other countries since the customs of the French change so quickly he doesn't see how they keep up with what they believe is in vogue. However, in laws and rule, he notes that the French would rather copy the ideas of other countries for these important matters.

In Letter 98, Usbek writes of the silliness of what he calls Papal Bull. He refers to a man who insists that instead of debating about theology, others should read his pastoral letter. When this man is forced to defend his position, however, he indicates that he is an infallible judge because he has been enlightened by the Holy Spirit and therefore is right. Usbek, however, believes the man needs enlightenment other than that offered by the Holy Spirit.

Letters 93 - 99 Analysis

In Letter 93, the head eunuch gives the reader insight into life in the seraglio. He writes about having purchased a new woman for Usbek's brother's seraglio. By allowing these eunuch to choose the women that will become their wives, the masters of these seraglios show how deeply they trusted their eunuchs' judgment and ability to choose a likeable woman. The head eunuch, however, also writes about the way that the introduction of a new woman into a seraglio will change the politics between the women already living there.



In fact, the eunuch indicates that besides having the master of the house present, a new woman in the house is the best way to keep the other women under control. With the addition of a new wife, the other wives have to behave better and try harder to please the husband, thus resulting in a more peaceful and obedient seraglio.

Another interesting thought in this section of letters involves Rica's letters written about the fashion tastes of those living in France. Rica is highly critical of the way the French change their habits of dress often. When he speaks of these changing habits, he uses a great deal of exaggeration about the way houses must even be rebuilt to accommodate new ways of dressing. Rica also notes that these same Frenchmen, who are so unique in their dress, borrow their laws from other cultures. He thinks the practice is very foolhardy. However, to a person from France, these practices, both of lawmaking and dress, probably make perfect sense. In addition, the French would probably think things about Rica's culture strange if they were to write about their views of Persian culture. It is important to keep in mind that the writers of these letters are writing from a biased point of view, in favor of their own, familiar ways of life.



Letters 100 - 113

Letters 100 - 113 Summary

In Letter 100, Usbek records the description of the habits of Persian princes told to him by a man whom Usbek considered to be a "sensible" European. In Letter 101, Usbek writes out his feelings about the description given in Letter 100. He writes that in Europe it is said that gratitude, and not the values of obedience or submission, is what will guarantee men's loyalty. In Letter 102, Rhedi responds to one of Usbek's letters in which he wrote about the way the sciences are promoted in the West. Rhedi, however, is concerned that it is through these developing sciences that men will eventually learn enough that they will destroy themselves. In fact, Rhedi writes that he believes the Muslims are blessed because of their ignorance in the study of science.

In Letter 103, Usbek points out the irony of Rhedi's reasoning in Letter 102. Usbek writes that although Rhedi has traveled west to improve his mind, he seems to detest this learning. In the remainder of his letter Usbek tries to convince Rhedi that not all learning is dangerous. In Letter 104, Rica writes about having seen the new king of France. Rica indicates the biggest challenge to this young king will be to decide whether he should take advice from his priest, or his mistress. He indicates that although people in Persia complain their government is run by a few women, that is truly the case in the European countries.

In Letter 105, Usbek writes about the popularity of magazines in the European countries. He states that these magazines pamper to the lazy as they can read several magazines in just a few hours. In normal novels, Usbek contends, the author stretches out his material, hoping the length of the book will gain him fame. In the periodicals, however, the reader is able to come to the purpose of a story very quickly. Usbek also dislikes these periodicals because they only deal with new books, never old ones. In Letter 106, Rica writes about the University of Paris. He states this 900-year-old university is sometimes "confused." One example of this confusion that he includes in the letter involves a debate concerning what was the proper way to pronounce the letter "Q." In Letter 107, Rica attempts to school his reader on the day to day activities of a pretty woman. He compares the way she lives her life to that of someone in government who must settle arguments, direct servants, and try to look perpetually happy.

In Letter 108, Rhedi revels in what he believes is the sparse and dwindling population of the modern world. Usbek responds to Rhedi's observations about the world population in Letter 109. Usbek describes some of the circumstances, such as disease, that have caused the world's population to shrink. In Letters 110, 111, 112, and 113, Usbek writes about some of the moral reasons why the world's population has dwindled. Some of the moral issues that Usbek point out as being part of the cause of this depopulation include polygamy and divorce. Usbek indicates in his final letter on this topic that the number of priests who have taken a vow of abstinence have also helped to deflate the population.



Letters 100 - 113 Analysis

One important aspect of this novel to consider is the wide variety of topics that these writers cover in their letters. The subjects of these letters range from the activities of pretty women, to European politics, to the need for the study of arts and sciences. In this particular section of letters, Rhedi and Rica will often offer an idea or question that Usbek will fully school these two men on all that he knows about their topic or question. Notice, however, that Usbek's answers are often very biased. These answers are particularly biased when Usbek deals with questions that apply to religious beliefs. For instance, Usbek writes that he does not understand the model from which Christians copy their idea of marriage. Usbek does, however, make some very valid points about some contradictory beliefs of Christians. It is contradictory that Christians consider the sexual relations in a marriage to be holy, yet those who take vows to be chaste are also considered to be holy.



Letters 114 - 124

Letters 114 - 124 Summary

In Letter 114, Usbek writes about the reasons why Africa has become less populated. Usbek blames this depopulation on the slave trade to America. In Letter 115, Usbek writes about the Jewish population, which has been able to repopulate itself several times through the years. Usbek believes the reason the Jews have been able to regrow their population is because they believe a king will be born to their people. Usbek believes the Muslim population has not grown because they see themselves only as being on the way to their heavenly homeland. In Letter 116, Usbek writes that those countries populated by undomesticated people are sparsely populated because the people do not like to farm. Large families could not be supported only on the food provided by fishing and hunting. Usbek writes these women also often have abortions because they believe their husbands will find them unattractive in pregnancy. In Letter 117, Usbek writes moving to a new uninhabited country is bad for population. He indicates he believes these countries are uninhabited for a reason and should stay that way.

In Letter 119, Usbek writes again to Mehemet Ali. In this letter Usbek indicates he believes all of the rituals intended to pacify the gods are useless. He writes that he believes this is so because twice the Muslims have been struck down by God despite all rituals being followed. In Letter 120, Rica writes about the difficulty of presenting heaven as a pleasing place to be for all those who live virtuously. He indicates there are some descriptions of heaven that would keep anyone from wanting to go there. For instance, Rica tells a story about a woman prepared to burn herself to death after the death of her husband. When she learns she will spend eternity with this very man she feels she just escaped from, the woman decides she'd rather stay alive, on earth.

In Letter 121, Rica writes the Usbek that the ambassador of the Grand Mogul of Persia has been forced to leave the country. In Letter 122, Rica writes of the death of the king of Sweden. As a result, the prime minister was arrested and charged with slander. This news leads to a discussion of the relationship between a prince, or king, and his minister. In Letter 124, Rica writes about the group of people whom he calls newsmongers. These people, Rica states, are of no use to any country even though they claim to talk about important projects and topics. These people not only seem to know every detail of each public person's life, they also try to predict what these people might do in the future. Rica includes in his writing a couple of letters written by one of these newsmongers as an example of their way of thinking.

Letters 114 - 124 Analysis

In contrast to other sections of this novel, this section of letters contains a majority of letters written about one specific topic. A large portion of these letters to Rica from



Usbek explaining why the world is becoming so unpopulated. Some of Usbek's reasoning concerning the depopulation of the world is reasonable. These reasonable ideas include slave trade from Africa that removed people from that country. Usbek also indicates that the American population to which these Africans were added never grew because the slaves were given such dangerous jobs that they were killed off at a rate equal to that rate that slaves were being imported. Usbek also has some unusual ideas about why population has decreased. He notes that the population has decreased because people try to populate in formerly uninhabited countries. Usbek reasons that these countries are unpopulated and should stay that way because they are unhealthy for people to live in, thus causing people to be killed off.



Letters 125 - 138

Letters 125 - 138 Summary

In Letter 125, Rhedi writes about the origin of republics. He indicates that the republic is the result of a people's desire for liberty. In Letter 126, Rica describes a man he met in a coffee house. Although this man had great wealth, he told others he wished he had land. Another man who had land wished he had spendable money. A few days later he meets another man who had suddenly and surprisingly lost the riches that he believed that he had. Another man is grieving because a man who owed him money has actually paid him back. Rica continues to describe the ill-fated people he observes. Finally, he meets a philosopher who secretly tells Rica he has found a spot on the sun which will result in the death of all humans.

In Letters 127 through 131, Rica talks about his experiences when he visits a Catholic library. In Letter 127, the man who introduces Rica to the library is not very friendly and does not give Rica much information. In Letter 128, however, his guide the next day is more friendly. This curator tells Rica that the books filled with thoughts about scripture do not answer all questions about scripture because they are written from the viewpoint of the writers, not the general public. In Letter 129, Rica is shown books by the grammarians, glossarists, exegetes and orators. He is also shown books on metaphysics, medicine and science. It is not until the monk tells Rica that the books on astrological prediction are pitiful and abominable that Rica interrupts the monk. It is astrological prediction that forms the basis of Persian life. Rica argues that astrological prediction is as dependable as those predictions based on math or algebra. In Chapter 130, Rica's monk shows him books written about history. In Letter 131, Rica writes about the books of poetry that he is shown. The monk also shows Rica some modern novels. Rica tells the monk that the novels of Persia would shock him more than those found in Europe.

In Letter 133, Rica shares what he considers to be a good example of marital love. In his story, he tells of a queen who agreed to abdicate if her husband were elected king. He tells another story of a queen who also abdicated to study philosophy. Rica believes both these women to be noble. When others wanted only to gain physical possessions, the one princess wanted knowledge. The other, although she had power others dreamed of, gave this power away to her husband. In Letter 135, Rica tells Usbek about an experience he had when he met a lady of the court. This lady had wanted to meet Rica because he was from Persia. She asked many questions about the culture of Persia and the people there. Rica reports the woman did not seem to like the idea of the woman's life in a seraglio. Finally, the woman asks Rica for a translation of some Persian literature. At her request, Rica sends her a story of a woman in a seraglio who tells her husband she no longer wants to live with him. Her husband kills her and she is transported to heaven where she enjoys constant pleasure. The woman also gets revenge on the husband who killed her by sending a double to take his place in his own seraglio.



In Letter 136, Rica shares with Usbek a letter he received from a scholar who had suddenly inherited money from a deceased relative. In Letter 137 Rica responds to a Jewish doctor considering the carrying of items thought to have powers to protect the wearer. In his letter Rica tells the doctor about all of the religious paraphernalia that he wears on his person on a daily basis. Rica writes, however, that the greatest thing to carry with one is reason. He believes that those who do not use their reason, but instead try to find some piece of magic to explain their circumstances are blind to the world around them. Rica includes with his letter a letter from a country physician who began prescribing works of literature to people for their illnesses because one patient fell asleep after reading a particular book.

Letters 125 - 138 Analysis

The variety of topics returns to the letters in this section of the novel. The letter writers cover topics that include the history of republics, examples of marital love and the varying ideas of wealth and prosperity. For instance, in Letter 26 each person noted in this letter is thinking that if he had something another man had, then he would be wealthy. This letter shows that each man has his own idea of what wealth is, and generally this idea of wealth does not include what that man already has in his possession.

In this section of letters, Rica writes about the experiences he has while touring a library in a Catholic monastery. Rica and the monks who introduce him to the library talk about the uses each piece of literature has in their own unique culture. For instance, the monk believes the books on astrological predication to be foolish. Rica, on the other hand, indicates that it is by using these books that the people of Persia make decisions and plan their future.



Letters 139 -150

Letters 139 -150 Summary

In Letter 139, the head eunuch at the seraglio writes to Usbek. He tells Usbek that his wives are acting terribly. Zelis allowed her veil to fall and her face to be uncovered in public. Zachi was found in bed with a slave. A strange young man was seen in the garden but escaped. The head eunuch asks Usbek permission to handle the seraglio as he needs to. In Letter 140 Usbek gives the head eunuch permission to handle the seraglio as he sees fit. Narsit writes Letter 141 to inform Usbek that the head eunuch has died. Narsit tells Usbek a letter was received from Usbek but has not been opened or read. In Letter 142 Usbek tells Narsit what a mistake he made by not opening the letter. He orders Narsit to open the letter and follow the instructions in it as soon as possible.

Solim, another of Usbek's black slaves writes to Usbek about what is happening in the seraglio in Letter 143. Solim tells Usbek that Solim was the eunuch whom the head eunuch had called for and taken into confidence when the head eunuch was on his death bed. Solim is not aware if Usbek knows the way his wives have been acting, but feels he should inform Usbek of their recent actions. Roxane is the only wife who has been acting as she should, Solim writes. Solim also refers to an instance where the wives went to spend time in the country, then had men snuck into the house where they were staying.

In Letter 144, Narsit writes to Usbek that he allowed Roxane and Zelis to spend time in the country. Narsit attempts to convince Usbek that there is nothing wrong happening in the seraglio. Narsit tells Usbek that his last letter was lost in the mail. He asks Usbek to write again. Usbek gives Solim permission in Letter 145 to carry out revenge in the seraglio as he sees fit. Usbek writes Letter 146 to his wives commanding them to do as Solim, the one he has deemed as their judge, tells them. In Letter 147 Usbek writes of his fears concerning what is happening in his seraglio to Nessir.

Letter 148 contains correspondence from Roxane to Usbek. In this letter Roxane tells Usbek that the women are being treated terribly at the seraglio. Roxane tells Usbek she believes this terrible treatment will end when her life ends. In Letter 149 Solim tells Usbek that he caught Roxane in the arms of another man. The eunuchs killed the man but not before he had a chance to stab Solim twice. Roxane writes to Usbek in Letter 150. She tells Usbek that she has killed the guards who killed her lover. She has also taken poison and will soon die. Roxane tells Usbek that she never loved him, she actually loathed him.



Letters 139 -150 Analysis

In this section, Usbek learns what has been causing the trouble in his seraglio. Usbek along with the slaves and eunuchs all believed Roxane to be completely virtuous and the only wife who had been faithful to Usbek. In reality, however, Roxane has everyone around her fooled. She actually hated Usbek. This is the reason that she fought so hard to retain her virginity when she and Usbek were first married. In her final letter to Usbek, Roxane seems to hope Usbek will in some way respect her for the way she has outsmarted him. In her attempts to get revenge from the men who killed her lover, Roxane has killed these men. She has also taken poison and will soon die herself. She leaves Usbek no opportunity to punish her for her crimes.



Supplementary Letters

Supplementary Letters Summary

Letter 15, the first supplementary letter, is written from the head eunuch to Jaron, a black eunuch who has traveled with Usbek to Europe. In this letter, the eunuch describes the feelings of friendship and fatherly love he has for the young black eunuch. The head eunuch prays for guidance for the young man as he travels through the land of infidels. He hopes Usbek will allow the young man to make a trip to Mecca upon his return so the he will be cleansed of the influence of the Christians that he meets. In the second supplementary letter, Jaron informs the head eunuch that Usbek is sending him back to Persia to help control the women in the seraglio.

In Letter 77, the third supplementary letter, Ibben attempts to console Usbek by telling Usbek he should see his misfortunes as warnings instead of punishments. In Letter 91, Supplementary Letter 4, Usbek writes to Rustan that the Persian government has sent a pitiful excuse of an ambassador from Persia to France. This man has made such a mockery of Persia that Usbek writes that both the Persian public as well as the people of France are ashamed as a result of his actions. In Letter 144, Supplementary Letter 7, Rica writes his praise of men who are modest and do not try to make themselves of higher importance than they actually are.

In Supplementary Letter 9, Zachi writes to Usbek detailing the bad treatment she has been receiving in the seraglio. One of her guards has not only punished her, but has told her this punishment was commanded by Usbek. Supplementary Letter 10 is written by Zelis to Usbek. Zelis also complains to Usbek concerning the orders he has given the guards to punish the women as they see fit. Zelis accuses Usbek of being a tyrant and tells him she can no longer love him. In Supplementary Letter 11, the final supplementary letter, the slave Solim expresses a sense of joy as he tells Usbek of the plans that he has made to punish the guilty women in the seraglio. In fact, Solim tells Usbek that he wishes Usbek were at the seraglio so that he could see the blood that he was about to shed at the seraglio.

Supplementary Letters Analysis

This final section of 11 letters is referred to as "Supplementary Letters." Throughout the text, the reader may have noticed certain references to Supplementary Letters. These letters can be found in this final section. Along with the references scattered throughout the text, there are also clear indications of where these supplementary letters fall in the lineup of the regular letters.

These letters cover similar topics as the other letters included in the novel. Included in these letters are correspondences between the head eunuch and a black slave who has accompanied Usbek to Europe. In this letter the head eunuch writes of his feelings of



compassion and friendship between himself and the young eunuch. Also included in these letters are letters from two of Usbek's wives. Both of these women are angry because Usbek has allowed the guards to treat them so badly. Each claims that they no longer love their husband. The final letter, written by Solim to Usbek, refers to the blood that is about to be shed in the seraglio. The reader should remember that Solim is the black slave to whom Usbek has put in charge of getting his revenge on the guilty parties at the seraglio.

It is important to note that although Usbek's wives believe he is being cruel, he is actually trying to take charge of his home from thousands of miles away. He acts only on what he hears from others. Since he is in exile and cannot go to the seraglio himself, he must act through the hands of his slaves. It appears that although the wives believe Usbek has become a tyrant and has no pity for them in his heart, Usbek does appear in general to be a very intelligent and fair person. Note that in Letter 77 although Usbek is highly upset by the actions of the man the Persian ministers have sent to France, he does not want the man to be punished. He believes the fault lies with the ministers' poor choice, not the man who was sent. This example shows that Usbek has a clear idea of where to lie blame and who to punish.



Characters

Usbek appears in Various Letters

Usbek is the central character in *The Persian Letters*. He is a Muslim from Ispahan, Persia. Usbek has at least five wives who live in concealment at a seraglio. Usbek travels out of Persia into the European countries under the guise of seeking knowledge. In reality, Usbek is exiled from Persia because he discovers some sort of failing in the government of Persia. When he alerts others to this failing, however, he finds he has made many enemies. Usbek leaves his home country because he is in fear of losing his life. Only his friend Rustan knows the real reason that Usbek left Persia.

Usbek has difficulty enjoying his trip to Europe because he is concerned about the welfare of his wives. Usbek notes several times in his writing that he is experiencing depression and no longer desires to stay in exile out of his home country. Usbek is even more worried about his wives when his head black eunuch begins to tell him stories of the terrible things that his wives are doing during his absence. Usbek's deep love for his wives keeps him from allowing the eunuch to punish the women as he wishes. Instead, Usbek writes to his wives begging them to act as they should. Usbek believes his wives are virtuous and thinks that they can correct their behavior if they wish. This action shows Usbek's deep love for his wives and his blind belief in their virtue.

Since Usbek is a Muslim, he is deeply struck by the differences in Persian culture and European culture. Usbek believes that Christians are not serious about their beliefs. He sees them as interpreting the commands of Christ in ways that will best benefit them. In fact, in Letter 55, Usbek tells one monk that if Persian leaders had people in their court who followed their commands as the Christians followed God's commands, they would be killed.

Roxane appears in Various Letters

Roxane is the newest of Usbek's five wives. In Letter 24, Usbek writes to Roxane his memories of how strictly she guarded her virginity. Usbek believed Roxane confused him with the men with whom she was not supposed to have relations. In the final letter of the book, however, Roxane tells Usbek that any unwillingness on her part was not caused by her modesty but instead by the dislike that she had for Usbek. Although it is believed until the end of the book the Roxane is the only virtuous woman in the seraglio, it turns out that she is instead the one who has been causing all of the problems. In fact, in his letter to Usbek, Narsit indicates that Roxane is the only woman in the seraglio who has been behaving as she should. When she is caught with a lover, this man is killed by the eunuchs. In revenge, Roxane kills the eunuchs who murdered her lover, then takes poison, and kills herself.



Rica appears in Various Letters

Rica is the man who travels with Usbek out of the country of Persia. The two plan to travel to Paris. Unlike Usbek, Rica truly enjoys his trip out of Persia and the experiences he has in Europe. When Usbek suggests the two return to Persia, Rica discourages the idea. Rica's letters show how much he is enjoying learning about the European culture. His letters deal with the personalities and habits of those he meets during his journey. Rica is the most active writer in this book. He is the author of nearly 50 of the letters included in the novel.

Zelis appears in Various Letters

Zelis is one of Usbek's five wives. Zelis is suspected to be the main troublemaker at the seraglio. According to the head eunuch, Zelis allowed her veil to fall from her face on her way to the mosque. Usbek also suspects that a letter that was found in the seraglio to one of his wives was intended for Zelis. As a result Usbek commands his servants to watch Zelis like a lynx. In a letter to her husband, Zelis tells Usbek he is growing cruel and tyrannical when he commands the guards of the seraglio punish the women as they see fit. In this same letter, she claims she is able to love Usbek no longer because of the punishment she is receiving.

Zachi appears in Various Letters

Zachi is one of the five known wives of Usbek. While Usbek is gone on his trip to Europe, Zachi is caught in bed with a white eunuch, one of her slaves. At one point in one of her letters, Zachi begs Usbek to come back either to love her again or so that she can die at his feet. She writes to Usbek that she believed that the knowledge that she was loved by Usbek gave her precedence in the seraglio.

Zephis appears in Various Letters

Zephis is a wife of Usbek. She is one of the first to begin to complain about the treatment that she is receiving from the eunuchs in Usbek's absence. She first complains that one of the eunuchs is trying to take her personal slave away from her.

Fatmé appears in Letter 7

Fatmé is one of Usbek's wives. She writes only one letter which is authored to her husband. In this letter she tells Usbek how much she misses him. She tells Usbek that even though he is not present, she still keeps up her appearance just as she did when he was with her on a daily basis.



Head Black Eunuch appears in Various Letters

The Head Black Eunuch is the main eunuch in charge of Usbek's seraglio while Usbek is away on his trip to Europe. He was kidnapped from Africa at the age of 15. At this point, he was castrated and put to work in a seraglio containing more than 20 women. He learned the ins and outs of the seraglio under a chief eunuch who ran his seraglio tightly. Although the Head Black Eunuch believes he knows how to properly control the women in Usbek's seraglio, he is not allowed to do so because of his master's kind heart. Before the eunuch can receive the permission from Usbek that he desires to take charge of the seraglio, he dies and another head eunuch must be chosen to take his place.

Jaron appears in Various Letters

Jaron is a black eunuch who has traveled with Usbek and his group to Europe. In a letter to Jaron, the head eunuch describes their relationship as a father and son relationship. Jaron trained under the head eunuch. Although he would prefer to stay with Usbek in Europe, he is prepared to do the job he has been trained to do when Usbek decides to send him back to the seraglio.

Narsit appears in Various Letters

Narsit is a black slave who writes a letter to Usbek informing him that the head eunuch is dead. He asks Usbek to reply who he wishes to take control of the seraglio. Although Narsit has received a letter from Usbek addressed to the head eunuch, he has not opened it. Usbek calls Narsit stupid for not having opened or read this letter.

Solim appears in Various Letters

Solim is the black slave who feels joy when he finally decides to punish the women in the seraglio as he feels is needed. Solim writes to Usbek telling him that he was with the head eunuch when he died. He states that the head eunuch instructed Solim to tell Usbek what was happening in the seraglio. Solim tells Usbek all of the things that he has observed. Solim also tells Usbek that Narsit, the oldest black slave, is not intelligent enough to govern the seraglio properly. For these reasons, Usbek determines that Solim should take over as head eunuch at the seraglio.

Rustan appears in Various Letters

Rustan lives in Ispahan, Usbek's home city. He acts as Usbek's "eyes and ears" to tell him what the people of Ispahan are saying about Usbek and his trip.



Zelide appears in Various Letters

Zelide is a female slave to both Zephis and Zelis. She marries the eunuch Cosrou.



Objects/Places

Seraglio appears in Various Letters

The seraglio is the palace where Usbek lived with his wives before he went on his trip.

Ispahan appears in Various Letters

Ispahan is the Persian city where Usbek lived before his travels. It is in this city where his seraglio is located.

Qur'an appears in Various Letters

The Qur'an is the Muslim equivalent of the Christian Bible. This book contains their holy scriptures.

Troglodytes appears in Letters 11 - 14

Usbek writes a story about this fictional people to Mirza in order to illustrate a saying that he uses often about justice.

Tradition of the Doctors appears in Letter 17

The Tradition of the Doctors is material that Mehemet Ali suggests that Usbek read. He refers to this material as one of the pure sources of intelligence.

Constitution appears in Letter 22

This is a document given to the king France by the pope telling the king what the people should believe. This document begins a revolt led by women that divides the kingdom.

Little Wooden Beads appears in Letter 27

Rica refers to the Catholic rosary by calling it little wooden beads.

Fresh Water appears in Letter 29

Fresh water is the commodity that Rhedi writes that he misses most during his visit to Venice.



Wine appears in Letter 31

It is about this alcoholic drink that Usbek writes in Letter 31. Usbek concludes from the circumstances surrounding wine that laws do not keep people from participating in forbidden actions, they only seem to encourage these actions.

Polygamy Triumphant appears in Letter 33

A book which Usbek refers to that indicates that Christians were intended to be polygamous just as Muslims were.

Coffee appears in Letter 34

Usbek writes to Rhedi about this common drink in Venice that causes men there to believe they are smarter than they actually are.

Notre Dame appears in Letter 59

Notre Dame is a Christian church that Usbek visits while he is in Europe.

Clock appears in Letter 65

It is in this timepiece that the Zoroastrian hides a file so that his sister can escape from her eunuch husband.

The Duel appears in Letter 88

Usbek writes about the shortcomings of the duel, which was at one time a popular way to solve arguments and fight for one's honor in the country of France.

Periodical appears in Letter 105

Usbek describes these magazines as pampering the lazy because they can be read so quickly.

Works on Astrological Prediction appears in Letter 129

Rica writes that he defended the use of this book as the basis of the Muslim faith while touring the library of a Catholic convent.



Mecca appears in Letter 15 (Supplementary Letter 1)

It is to this place, which is considered the most holy place in the Muslim religion, that the head black eunuch hopes Usbek will take Jaron so they can cleanse themselves when they return from Europe.



Themes

Life in the Seraglio

One of the themes that develops in this novel is the very sheltered lives that Usbek's wives lived in the seraglio. It is indicated that these women were guarded from male contact until they met their husband. They were kept confined in a home, referred to as a seraglio, and guarded by eunuchs. These eunuchs were men who had been castrated, usually at a young age. Because they were castrated, these men had no sexual interest in women. Therefore, the women's husbands could trust these men to guard their wives without becoming sexually involved with them. These ladies are never allowed outside their homes without being completely covered, including a veil over their face, and without a eunuch guard. Information in the letters indicates that if other men were even to get too close to a vehicle carrying one of these ladies, the eunuchs had free reign to kill them. Persian rule requires so strictly that the ladies not be seen in public that even when a boat carrying the women begins to sink, they are not let out of their containers for fear someone might see them. Apparently, it would be better the ladies drown to death than be seen by another man. Most girls are sequestered in the seraglio when they reach the age of ten years old. Some, however, are allowed their freedom until they are actually married. In the case of Usbek's wife Zelis, however, she wants to bring her daughter into the seraglio at the age of seven.

Religion

Religion is a very important theme in these letters. The main reason there is so much interest shown in religion is because the religions of the Persians and the Europeans are so different. The Persians are Muslims. They believe that the Christians, the people they encounter in the west, are infidels. Usbek is slightly more tolerant of the Christian religion than some of the other writers. He sees the bickering over doctrine as being secondary to the idea of the God who is actually being served. The general feeling held by the Muslims about Christians can be summed up in Letter 22 where Rica describes himself as fretting and fuming like a Christian.

In Letter 3, Usbek writes his cousin, who is a Muslim dervish, to ask his opinion of Christians. Usbek's main inquiry is whether or not Christians will be condemned to hell on the Day of Judgment. This question shows the reader that although Usbek does not believe the same way as the Christians, he is willing to accept the idea that they may be serving the same God that he does. In Letter 73, however, Usbek shows that he is watching the Christians closely. In this particular letter he indicates that the Christians do not seem to believe in their proclaimed religion as strongly as the Muslims do. In Letter 95, Usbek seems to be showing some doubt in religious belief completely. He writes that he wonders if the holy books are not just the words of God interspersed with the ideas of man. Although Usbek writes this about his own personal experience, some



might believe this comment indicates he has been taken in by the western way of thinking about religion, his heart still remains true to Ali.

Cultural Partiality

One must keep in mind while reading this book that it is very much a book about culture. Usbek leaves the Orient unwillingly. Although he tells others that he is taking his trip to gain knowledge, he is actually doing so to escape from his enemies. Although he has been burned by his own people, Usbek is still very partial to his own people and their way of doing things. As he travels through Europe, everything that he sees, thinks, and writes about is compared to the background of the way it was done in Persia. To some extent Rica also compares a great many of his experiences to the way life was like in Persia. In many instances, the reader will note that the writer of a letter will make comparison of some European trait to a similar trait in Persia. For example, in Letter 88 Usbek writes that philosophers in the Orient were greater than those in any other part of the world. This example brings forth an important truth to note in each of the comparisons of Europe's traits and customs to those of Persia. In every instance, these biased letter writers indicate that the ways of Persia are better than those in Europe. According to these writers, the women in Persia are prettier, the government better, fashion more sensible, and children more obedient than those in Europe.

Style

Point of View

This novel is written from the first-person point of view. However, it is not written from the first-person point of view of just one person. Its unique style as a collection of letters allows the novel to be written from the unique point of view of each letter writer. From the head eunuch, the reader learns about the duties of a eunuch who is in charge of large seraglio and the trials that this servant faces. A black slave shares his terror that he will be forced to have surgery that will make him a respected eunuch, but will also cause him to lose his interest in sex. Usbek's wives share their misery and lack of understanding when Usbek leaves for his European trip. These same wives also later share their displeasure when Usbek commands the eunuch take charge of the seraglio and punish those deserving of punishment. Similarly, it is in Roxane's letter to Usbek that the reader learns of Roxane's true feelings toward Usbek.

In Usbek and Rica's letters, the reader learns much about European culture, seen through the eyes of Persians. Even these two men share differing views of the unusual culture of the Europeans. Rica seems to be enthralled with European culture. Usbek, however, does not seem to be as happy with the people he encounters in Europe. He is very critical of the culture and beliefs of these people. Usbek also expresses in his letters a desire to return to Persia. He writes that he is falling into bad health and a deep depression as a result of his travels.

Presenting this work as a series of letters works well as it does allow individual characters to express their own views of what is happening to them. Had de Montesquieu attempted to present this story as a traditional novel, there would have been so much physical distance between each of the characters that it would have been difficult to hold the story together. By allowing each character to tell their own story through letters, the reader gets an idea of the whole picture of the results that Usbek's trip to Europe had on the people around him.

Setting

There are two main settings for this novel. These setting include the seraglio where Usbek's wives live and the European countries where Usbek travels. The seraglio where Usbek's wives live is located in Ispahan, Persia. According to Persian law, Usbek's wives are not allowed out of seraglio often, so much of the action detailed from the wives and eunuchs occurs in the seraglio. There is, however, one mention of a trip to the mosque. Also, the ladies are transported to a country house where they are allowed to spend some time. Since Usbek is traveling, he sends his letters from various locations. These locations include Paris, France; and Venice, Italy.



Notice also that these letters are each dated at the conclusion of each of the letters. As is indicated in the preface of the book, these dates follow the Muslim calendar. The inclusion of these dates is important because they show how much time passes between each letter. In today's society it is hard to remember how long it took mail to get from one place to another in the 1700s. The letters begin in the year of 1711. The final letter written from Roxane to Usbek is dated in the year of 1720. These dates indicate that the 150 letters included in this novel were written during a time span of nearly nine years.

Language and Meaning

This novel is presented as a series of letters. An introductory line tells the reader who the letter is written by and who it is written to. Often information indicating which city the recipient is located in is also included in this introductory line. At the conclusion of each letter, the author indicates the date on which the letter was written and the location from which they are writing. This basic information orients the reader on how much time has passed between letters and where each writer is currently living. In addition to the main letters, there is a group of 11 Supplementary Letters included at the end of the novel. Although it is uncertain why de Montesquieu might have separated these letters out, he includes distinct references to the places where these Supplementary Letters should fall in the chronology of the main letters.

Although the main story of this novel is Usbek's exile from Persia and his travels in Europe, another story line almost outshines this main story. This developing story involves the drama at the seraglio. The longer Usbek is away from his home, the more disobedient and wayward his wives become. This story climaxes at the end of the novel as Roxane admits to Usbek that it is she who has caused all of the trouble within the seraglio.

Structure

The language of these letters is very stiff and formal. The text includes many long words and long sentences. Although there are several different authors who contribute to the novel, there is very little difference in their writing style. Therefore, the reader must rely heavily upon the content of the letters and the name of the writer as indicated at the beginning of each letter to determine who is doing the writing.

Reading this novel can be a little slow because of the long and complex sentences. The writers also include references in their letters to things, people and activities foreign to Christian readers. Stopping to research the significance of each of these references can also make the reading progress even more slow. Since the information is presented in the form of letters, the writers often write about things that seem to have no relation to the main object of the novel. However, these letters do give the reader an idea of what life was like not only in a Persian seraglio but also in Europe. Keep in mind, however,

that the views of Europe and the European culture are defined through the eyes of Muslims.



Quotes

"Rica and I are perhaps the first Persians whom the appetite for learning has prompted to leave the land of their birth, and forsake the charms of a peaceful life in favor of the arduous quest for wisdom" (Letter 1, pg. 41.)

"You are the subject of every conversation in Ispahan; people talk of nothing but your departure: there are those who attribute it to frivolity, others to some sorrow; only your friends defend you but no one believes them; no one can understand how you could leave your wives, your parents, your friends, your homeland, to travel into lands unknown to Persians" (Letter 5, pg. 45.)

"I went to the king; I told him of my desire to instruct myself in the sciences of the West; I insinuated that my travels could be advantageous to him; my request found favour in his eyes; I departed, and deprived my enemies of a victim" (Letter 8, pg. 49.)

"I have often heard you say that man was born to be virtuous, and that justice is a quality as natural to him as existence itself" (Letter 10, pg. 53.)

"'Be off with you, you unjust men,' he told them, 'your souls are sick with a poison deadlier than that for which you seek a cure: you are not worthy of occupying a place on this earth, because you are devoid of humanity, and know nothing of the rules of fairness; I believe I would offend the gods, who are punishing you, if I opposed the justice of their anger'" (Letter 11, pg. 56.)

"Such was the battle between injustice and virtue; those cowards, who sought only plunder, were not even ashamed to flee; they were defeated by the virtue of the Troglodytes, without being influenced by it" (Letter 13, pg. 60.)

"I am in the midst of an ungodly people; allow me to purify myself with you; permit me to turn my face towards the holy places that you inhabit; single me out from wrongdoers, just as at dawn you can see clearly the streak of bright light against the blackness; help me with your counsel; watch over my soul; intoxicate it with the spirit of the prophets and nourish it with the science of paradise; and allow me to lay its wounds at your feet" (Letter 15, pg. 62.)

"Unhappy man! Constantly perplexed about the things of this world, you have never gazed fixedly upon those of heaven; you revere the status of the mullah, but do not dare embrace or follow it" (Letter 17, pg. 64.)

"Here, Rustan, you have an accurate picture of this empire which, in less than two centuries' time, will provide some conqueror with a theatre for his triumphs" (Letter 18, pg. 67.)

"I can consequently assure you that no kingdom has ever existed with as many civil wars as occur in the kingdom of Christ" (Letter 27, pg. 81.)



"As you can see, my dear Ibben, I've acquired one of the tastes of this nation, whose people enjoy supporting extraordinary opinions, and reducing everything to a paradox" (Letter 36, pg. 93.)

"I would like to banish funerals: we should weep for men at their birth, not at their death" (Letter 38, pg. 95.)

"It seems to me, Usbek, that we never judge anything without secretly considering it in relation to our own self. I am not surprised that black men depict the devil as brilliantly white, and their own gods as coal-black, that the Venus of certain peoples has breasts that hang down to her thighs, and, in short, that all idolaters have depicted their gods with human faces, and have endowed them with their own propensities" (Letter 57, pg. 124.)

"In Persia, all characters are identical because they are forced; we never see people as they are, but as they are constrained to be; in that enslavement of the heart and mind you hear nothing but the voice of fear, which speaks only one language, and not the voice of nature, which expresses itself in such different ways and assumes such different forms" (Letter 61, pg.129.)

"There still exist peoples on the earth among whom a fairly well-educated monkey could live and be respected; he would be more or less on an equal footing with the other inhabitants; no one would think his mind unusual, or his character strange; he would be like anybody else, and would even stand out on account of his kindness" (Letter 103, pg. 193.)

"I breathe the air of an alien country; wholly aware of all that torments me, and wholly deaf to all that interests me; prey to an oppressive melancholy, I am sinking into a hideous depression; I feel I am destroying myself, and that I only find myself again whenever a dark jealousy flares up within me, begetting fear, suspicions, loathing, and regrets" (Letter 147, pg. 275.)

"But whatever the reason that made me leave my homeland, and although I owe my life to my departure, I cannot, Nessir, remain in this dreadful exile any longer" (Letter 147, pg. 276.)

"How could you suppose me so credulous as to believe that the sole purpose for my existence was to adore your caprices?" (Letter 150, pg. 280.)



Topics for Discussion

The Persian Letters gives the Muslim viewpoint of the Christian lifestyle. Pretend you are visiting a Persian seraglio such as the one described in this novel. Write a letter about the things that go on in this seraglio from your own viewpoint. Include your opinion of the treatment of the women and the creation of the eunuchs.

Compare/contrast the Muslim and Christian religions as presented in this novel.

Discuss the role of the eunuch in the seraglio. Why are these men more respected than other slaves?

Using the dates and locations included in each letter, sketch out a timeline of Usbek's journey from Persia.

Discuss the irony of Roxane's virtuous appearance. How does this idea that things aren't as they appear fit into the novel?

Describe the lifestyle of the women in the seraglio. Compare this lifestyle with that of the women who Usbek and Rica meet in Europe.

Consider Usbek's story about the Troglodytes. What does he hope to teach Rica by sharing this story about virtue versus law? Explain your answer.

In many works of this nature, the writer is hoping to make a statement about the condition of the government and situation in the writer's world. Research the time period during which de Montesquieu wrote this novel. Can you find any parallels between the circumstances of the novel and de Montesquieu's own life? Provide specific examples.