Pnin Study Guide

Pnin by Vladimir Nabokov

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

Timofey Pnin is a Russian immigrant teaching Russian at a Waindell, a small college in the northeastern United States. Despite his inoffensive and quiet existence, he is regularly victimized by the thoughtlessness and even hatred of others towards him, most of all his manipulative ex-wife, Liza. He winds up losing his job at Waindell and is forced to leave the one place he was ever comfortable living.

As the story opens, Pnin is on a train, believing that he is heading toward Cremona to deliver a lecture at a lady's club. Unfortunately, he planned his trip using an outdated train schedule and is headed in the completely wrong direction. At the advice of the train's conductor, he gets off and tries to catch a bus to his destination. However, he winds up spending too much time eating and misses it. To make his situation even worse, he believes, momentarily, that he lost his bag and has a seizure, a not uncommon occurrence for him which is related to a heart condition he had since he was a young child in Russia. However, all turns out well and he manages to ride with two men who were already headed in the direction of Cremona. As he delivers his speech, he feels the same pride he felt when reciting poetry in front of hi school as a child.

Pnin is constantly moving, never able to find a place that meets his very strict requirements. The most important of these requirements is quiet; he finds it difficult to focus in a noisy environment and yet noise seems to follow him wherever he goes. He moves in with the Laurence and Joan Clement. Laurence is a professor at Waindell College who, though he does not know Pnin particularly well, nonetheless harbors a strong distaste for him. This distaste fades, however, as he gets to know Pnin and recognizes that they are not altogether different. While Pnin is staying with the Clementses, his ex-wife, Liza, visits him. She was the love of his life when they first met in Paris decades ago but she left him for a psychiatrist named Dr. Eric Wind.

When she was seven months pregnant with her only child, Victor, she pretended that she wanted to come back to Pnin—news he welcomed with enthusiasm—but discovered that it was nothing more than a ruse to have him pay for her passage to America; she had no intentions of leaving Dr. Wind. However, when she visits him now, her situation with Dr. Wind is genuinely troubled and she tells him that she plans to leave him for another man, an Englishman named George Church. However, since she has difficulty caring for Victor, she asks him to set aside a certain amount of money for him each month and he, a slave to her every wish, agrees. He winds up meeting Victor as a result and developing a friendship with him. Pnin stays with the Clementses for over a year but is forced to leave when Isabel, their daughter, returns and reclaims her old room.

Pnin goes to a gathering of Russian immigrants in a secluded area known as The Pines. It is the first time Pnin has gone, but he is familiar with several of the people there, including his good friend Chateau (who, despite is French name, is of pure Russian blood) and a woman named Roza Shpolyanski, whose family Pnin knew very well when he lived in Russia. One of her cousins, a woman named Mira, was killed in a

Nazi concentration camp during World War II, a fact with which Pnin was familiar but which he also tried to repress, for it seemed unbearable to acknowledge that the world he lives in is one where such a senseless, horrific act of violence is possible.

As the fall semester begins again at Waindell, Pnin immediately gets back into his routines. The semester actually starts out quite well for him; he has few students and, as a result, plenty of time to dedicate to his own research projects. However, unknown to him, the termination of his job is already in the works. His employment at the school was never really justified by the courses he taught: In the Cold War years, interest in Russian language, culture, and literature was at a low point. He was only able to keep his job due to the diligence of Professor Hagen, the head of the German department. Unfortunately, Hagen is offered a post at a more prestigious university and will be leaving. His successor is not at all well-disposed towards Pnin, nor are the heads of the other departments. Pnin's firing, then, is inevitable. He is forced to relay this news to Pnin after the latter throws a house-warming party: He has finally found a place that he likes to a live, a secluded, quiet house he has all to himself. He even plans to buy it, but those plans are obliterated when he discovers he will be losing his job. As it turns out, the man who will be replacing him is the narrator of the story, a man who knew Pnin back in Russia but whom Pnin, for some undisclosed reason, completely despises. As the story closes, the narrator is at the house of the head of Waindell's English department who is entertaining his guests with mean-spirited imitations of Pnin. The narrator steps outside and sees Pnin drive by and unsuccessfully tries to get his attention.

Chapter One

Chapter One Summary

Professor Timofey Pnin is on a train intending to reach a town called Cremona to deliver a lecture. Russian-born, he is a professor of his native language at an American college called Waindell College. The Russian program is small and, as such, he only has a few students, who vary in the amount of interest they have in his subject. As a teacher, Pnin is a humble man. He is content simply to teach his mother tongue and the literature written in it; he has no aspiration to get into the abstract field of linguistics, a science which is particularly popular at the time. He is also a very humorous man and, especially when he is drink, he can often be seized with uproarious bouts of laughter which, generally speaking, tend to infect all of those around him. His English, though greatly improved from the time of his arrival in the country (when he could speak only a few awkward phrases), is still not nearly sufficient to hide the fact that it is not his first language. For a speech—like the one he is on his way to give—he is utterly dependent upon a prepared text. He carries said text in his suitcase but the possibility of losing his suitcase horrifies him. He juggles his various papers, trying to find a solution which factors the relative risks of losing one of them alongside the value of the particular paper.

Pnin is more or less left to himself on the train. In his coach, there is a sleep soldier and two mothers preoccupied with their children. What Pnin does not know is that he is not, in fact, on the correct train. Pnin, like many Russians, has a fascination with the complicated maps, tables, and schedules which are used to navigate train systems. Instead of taking the train he was told to take, he decided to try to find a better route on his own. Unfortunately, the map he used was five years old and, therefore, quite obsolete. He remains ignorant of his misfortune until the conductor passes through his cabin. He is horrified when he discovers his mistake, but the conductor tells him the best way to salvage his trip and arrive at his destination as soon as possible. He gets off at the Whitechurch stop, leaves his bag with a man at the station where he will catch a bus to Cremona, and gets something to eat. When he returns he is horrified once again to discover that the bus had already come and gone. Moreover, the man at the station, perhaps because he cannot understand Pnin's imperfect English, refuses to give his bag back. The stress causes Pnin to almost breakdown into a seizure which is not an altogether uncommon occurrence for him. Ever since he was a child, his parents and doctors were concerned about the condition of his heart and he once had to spend weeks sitting in a bed with nothing to do except analyze the patterns on the wallpaper. As it turns out, his condition is nothing terribly serious or life-threatening, but it is at least inconvenient in circumstances like this.

When he regains possession of himself, he goes back to the bus station, gets his bag (the man to whom he first gave it has returned), and is informed of a group of men with whom he can ride to Cremona. As a result of this good turn of events, Pnin is able to make it to Cremona with time to spare. After dinner, Pnin is introduced by the woman

running the seminar, Judith Clyde, who seems to give more time to discussing the next week's speaker than to introducing him. Pnin, however, is oblivious, his thoughts still somewhat muddled from his recent seizure. Many members of his family are there and he feels the same pride walking up to the podium that he did when, as a child, he recited one of Pushkin's poems in front of his entire school.

Chapter One Analysis

While reading this story, it is important for the reader to understand the significant parallels between the titular character and the author, Vladimir Nabokov. Like Pnin, Nabokov was an immigrant from Russia to the United States. He also wound up teaching Russian at the university level. (Even the names of the institutions are the same: Pnin teaches at Waindell College; Nabokov taught at Wellesley College). There are, however, also some significant differences between the two men. Pnin is hardly fluent in English, while Nabokov was one of the leading English writers of his generation. Moreover, Pnin is a simple, humble, and not terribly intellectual man (as indicated by his aversion or at least indifference towards linguistics) while Nabokov was one of the most prominent literary theorists and critics in the 20th century.

Given both these similarities and differences, it is probably most reasonable to conclude that the work is not meant to be autobiographical. This seems to be especially true when one considers the humorous nature of the book, hardly the style one might employ when seriously trying to reflect on one's life. Probably the more plausible interpretation is that Nabokov is interested in exploring one specific facet of his life, namely, his experience as an immigrant. Already, the reader has seen Pnin suffer as a result of his immigrant status; the man at the station in charge of the bags refused to give him his suitcase back.

Chapter Two

Chapter Two Summary

The daughter of Laurence Clements, a professor at Waindell College whose most popular course is about analyzing gestures, and his wife, Joan, has recently left home to live with her new husband. As such, the married couple have a room available in their house which they intend to lease. While discussing some of the people they will have over that night to meet a man named Professor Entwistle from Goldwin University, the telephone rings. Joan picks up the receiver and, after a moment of awkward, silent breathing, the man on the other end asks for a "Mrs. Fire." Joan tells him she is not her and hangs up. She tells her husband for whom the man had asked and he reminds her that she told a Mrs. Thayer just the other day that she was looking to let her room. The phone rings again and she picks it up. The misunderstanding is cleared up; Pnin, the man on the other end of the line, is interested in staying in their room and they arrange a time for him to come by and see it. Laurence, familiar, somewhat, with Pnin's strange ways, refuses to have him in their house, but, it seems, he has little authority over such decisions and Joan ignores him.

Pnin arrives about a half hour later and he sits down with Joan to discuss his background, perhaps with excessive detail. He was born in Russia but left soon after his parents died in 1917 (he was only nineteen years old) for Kiev. He wound up in Constantinople in 1919—Joan relates with glee that she was there during that time, too—to study at a university before going to France. He left France at the beginning of the "Hitler War" for America and became a professor at Waindell College. She shows him up to the room and they agree on a modest price for the room. As the room had once belonged to a young girl, Pnin, with the help of one of his students, is busy adapting the room to his own utility and personality. Joan asks if he would like to join them later that night to meet Professor Entwistle but he declines. When the small gathering is well underway, Pnin slinks down the staircase to complain about certain annoyances in the room. One of the man at the party, also a professor at Waindell, does not see Pnin come down and is caught in the middle of an unflattering attempt to impersonate him.

The next day, Pnin walks to town to begin the procedures for having all of his teeth pulled and replaced with dentures. His mouth feels strange without any teeth in it but he is incredibly pleased with the dentures; he feels like a completely new man. He even recommends that Laurence get some, promising that he will not regret it. The Clementses begin to take to their boarder, though they also discover some of his less pleasant quirks. He is, for some reason, especially fond of their washing machine and takes great pleasure in putting things in it, even things which have no business going into it, like shoes. He is technically forbidden from going near it but he frequently transgresses that prohibition. Joan, the enforcer, seems more amused than genuinely annoyed. Laurence, who was initially so averse to Pnin, begins to change his mind after he finds Pnin in his study one day. At first, he is furious over this intrusion but the mind wind up discovering a kind of intellectual affinity. Pnin teaches Laurence about Russian

gestures, useful information for Laurence's course, and even features in a video exhibiting them. Pnin shows the film to his students and one of them, Betty Bliss, remarks how similar he looks to Buddha, an honest if unflattering evaluation. Pnin has something of a crush on Betty, and she seems to reciprocate his limited feelings. His heart is really in another place, though; he was once married to a woman named Liza, who, he tells the Clementses, will be visiting in a few days.

They first met in Paris, both emigrants from Russia. Their connection was largely intellectual. She was a writer and medical student and he was an up-and-coming scholar. They were married not long after they met, but there marriage was not to last very long. While staying in Meudon, a suburb of Paris, she met a man named Dr. Eric Wind with whom she claimed to have an "organic" connection. She told Pnin that she would never see him again. As it turned out, Liza and Dr. Wind were not able to wed immediately; Dr. Wind had a wife back in South America which presented certain legal difficulties in France. Soon after Liza leaves him, Pnin decides to go to America with the help of a colleague in New York. He tells Liza and her husband of his plans and wishes them but Liza shows up at his door before he has left. She is seven months pregnant with Dr. Wind's child but begs Pnin to take her back and let her come with him to America. Ecstatic, he immediately agrees and the next few days are some of the happiest of his life. However, the affair turns sour when he discovers that it was all a manipulative ruse. Dr. Wind is on board the same ship to America. Liza has no intention of being with Pnin; she was just using him to help pay her passage to the United States.

Liza arrives on Saturday and Pnin meets her at the train station. He is happy to see her and she, seemingly, happy to see him. They go back to the house and she lies down on the bed complaining of a headache. Pnin is anxious to discover why exactly she is visiting. She explains that she has fallen out of love with Dr. Wind and, instead, has fallen in love with a man named George. She wants Pnin to put aside some of his meager salary to help pay for her child since, she quotes Dr. Wind, Pnin is really the child's "water father." She gives him all of the relevant addresses and information and leaves.

Joan returns later with some groceries and finds Pnin rooting through the kitchen for a soda. She offers him some hot tea instead, but he declines. She bids him to look through some magazines with her and methodically explains each picture to him—a lot of it is not immediately clear to his Russian sensibilities—but he is preoccupied with Liza's recent visits. He breaks down into sobs and, when she concludes aloud that Liza is not coming back to him, he pitifully exclaims that he has "nofing left, nofing, nofing!" (61)

Chapter Two Analysis

One curious feature of the book is Nabokov's use of names. Some of the names almost seem more fit for cartoon characters than real people, like Betty Bliss, the object of Pnin's mild affections. Nabokov also seems to be engaged in a bit of wordplay in this chapter. When Pnin calls the Clementses he mistakenly asks for "Mrs. Fire." The

narrator later explains how Liza left him for "Dr. Wind." While on the ship to America, the same Dr. Wind cryptically says that he is only his child's "earth father" while Pnin is its "water father." Thus, Nabokov manages to slip in all of the four traditional elements—fire, wind, earth, and water—but the purpose of doing so is not at all clear. There is not an obvious connection among the usages; indeed, Mrs. Thayer—"Mrs. Fire"—is not even really part of the story, but merely mentioned in passing. It is possible Nabokov is just having a bit of fun.

The book has been mainly humorous so far but the end of the chapter also begins to develop a sad aspect. Pnin is clearly devastated by the loss of his wife, even though she seems to be a thoroughly manipulative and thoughtless person. In fact, her exploitation of him, and his docile compliance with it, only makes the situation that much more tragic, for Pnin is completely a slave to his love for her. Nabokov has so far done a good job of portraying Pnin's hopeless situation, even in the narration of small events like how Pnin slips while helping Liza into a taxi cab. The narrator says, afterwards, that "everything had happened before, in this exact sequence" (53): Pnin's misfortune is a fixture of his existence.

The narrative style is worthy of some consideration. Who exactly the narrator is meant to be is not clear. It is natural to assume that it is just Nabokov speaking directly, but the narrator of a story, even if it is the author speaking through him, is always as constructed as the rest of a story. Indeed, the narrator is at least somewhat fictionalized as he passingly notes that his relation to a minor character in the story, the Russian lady at the American consulate whom the narrator remarks is "a relative of mine" (47). Moreover, the narrator is not an impartial observer of the story, for he often remarks on how he feels about Pnin, as on page 44 where he express his sympathy for "poor Pnin, poor albino porcupine!" The narrator's knowledge seems to prevent him from being a real character in the book's world, as he has access both to moments where Pnin is by himself and to scenes where Pnin is altogether absent. The only plausible conclusion is that Nabokov is not interested in creating a rigorously coherent narrator, but is just happy to slip himself in and out of the story freely.

Chapter Three

Chapter Three Summary

Pnin, at least up until now, has been a constant mover. He finds something deficient in every new place he lives, mainly related to noise (he is desperate for a quiet spot) and usually stays no longer than a semester. Thus, it is peculiar that he has managed to stay for an entire year with Clementses and shows no desire or intention of leaving. One day, Pnin finds the house completely to himself, Joan and Laurence have both gone to visit their daughter, Isabel, in the anonymous "Western state" that she now calls home. As he leaves the house to go to university, he recalls that he has received a request from the library to bring back an obscure book he checked out, "The Soviet Gold Fund of Literature Volume 18." Evidently, another patron is interested in reading it, the cause of some frustration for Pnin who wishes to hold onto it.

Though Pnin's teaching responsibilities are meant to be narrowly confined to teaching the Russian language in all of its technical aspects, he occasionally treats his class with some tangent into Russian history or literature. On this day in particular, he brings up the subject of one of Pushkin's poems which lamented the uncertainty of one death, how it could come at any time and in any form. The profundity of his tangent is shattered into laughter when he leans on a chair and falls over when it snaps under his weight.

After class is over, Pnin heads to his office in the humanities building. His office was recently relocated, at the expense of his annoyance, to accommodate a newly arrived Austrian professor. At noon, he decides to track down Oleg Komarov, another Russian professor at the college who teaches in the Fine Arts Department. Komarov is almost a stereotype of a Russian and takes a perhaps excessive amount of pride in his national heritage, a pride he does not hesitate to share with Pnin. The two did not really get along, but the occasional encounter was inevitable. In this case, Pnin seeks him out intentionally: He wants to know whether he is the one who has requested his library book. Komarov looks over the book with boredom and says, confidently, that he is not.

Pnin admits defeat and heads to the library to turn the book in. He hands it to the librarian, Mrs. Thayer (the same librarian he refers to as "Mrs. Fire") and asks if she can tell him who requested it. As it turns out, the name of the person who requested it is none other than Timofey Pnin. Pnin investigates the paperwork and discovers that there was an error somewhere in the process; volume numbers and dates are all wrong. He is unwilling to take any responsibility for this error, though she points out that he seemed to write down some incorrect information. He leaves to head to his normal reading spot and picks up a newsletter circulated by Russian immigrants. The articles in the newsletter are mainly composed of poorly written and often quite petty debates, but Pnin derives some satisfaction from reading them anyway. He then turns to the more serious work he has to do, namely research for a brief history of Russian culture. He takes down some notes on an index card and occupies himself for some time. On his

way out, he decides to check the dictionary to see how the word "interested" is properly pronounced. In the course of this investigation, he manages to lose his index card among the thousands of pages in the dictionary and nearly resigns himself to its loss until a librarian comes by, holds the book upside down, and shakes the card free.

Pnin heads back home, has dinner, and drinks some wine while he debates how he will spend the evening. He knows that some acquaintances of his are having a music and movie night and decides that he will go and immediately go to sleep when he returns. The first few movies bore him but the second, a documentary about life in Russia, interests him, even bringing him to tears (though, why it does so is not explained). He goes home and falls asleep, his dreams patching together the various things and people he saw during the day. Meanwhile, Joan and Laurence have just returned and Isabel is with them, ready to reclaim her old room.

Chapter Three Analysis

This chapter is largely just a narration of what is probably a very average, normal day for Pnin. His life is incredibly simple, illustrated by the fact that the major conflict of the day (at least until Isabel's unexpected arrival in the middle of the night) is a request from the library for him to return some obscure collection of Russian literature. Pnin is a man of very precise routine. He does almost everything in the exact same way everyday at the exact same times. This is why it is such a difficult decision whether or not to go to the movie night; it is not what he usually does on Tuesday nights. He manages to go only by making a deal with himself to sleep immediately after it is over, a goal he seems to achieve prematurely by falling asleep during the film.

Nabokov's narration of Pnin's dream is particularly effective. Pnin's dream has no grand significance or prophecy; rather, it is just a strange, incomprehensible synthesis of everything he did that day: the bicycle statue, the movies, Dr. Falternfels, Komarov, and many others. The dream is certainly meant to be funny—as the entire story is—but it would also be correct to say that it is realistic, for its absurdity and incoherence is something familiar to everyone.

Chapter Four

Chapter Four Summary

Victor, Dr. Eric Wind and Liza's son, uses fantasies about being the son of some great, though distant, king in order to escape the boredom of his everyday life at St. Bart's school. Liza has left Dr. Wind and is preparing to marry the Englishman she had mentioned already to Pnin, facts which inconveniently intrude upon Victor's much more exciting life of fantasy. Victor is a peculiar child who troubles his parents somewhat, though not on account on any troublesome behavior, but rather because he is exceptionally untroublesome. For a teenage boy he is strangely restrained and responsible and shows none of the signs of Freudian neurosis that both of his psychoanalytic parents are constantly on the lookout for. Even while he is still young, he shows a great amount of artistic talent, though once again, what perhaps should be a source of comfort and pride for his parents is, in his unique circumstances, an occasion for concern. His mother and father view the world in a narrowly scientific way and, as such, look for a genetic precedent for everything in their child; the fact that all of their artistic ancestors turned out to be quite abnormal make it seem inevitable that young Victor would one day follow suit.

Liza had decided to send Victor to St. Bart's because it represented, as she saw it anyway, a satisfactory compromise between the cutting-edge insights of modern psychology and the familiar, comforting, if somewhat pedestrian atmosphere of the Greek Catholic Church which she recalled fondly from her childhood. St. Bartholomew's is run by an Episcopal clergyman who possesses an impressive ability to deal gently with any children, no matter how ill-tempered they might be. Though Victor, an artist, relies most upon his vision, his familiarity with St. Bart's is primarily through his ears and noses: the reek of incense, the clanging of bells, the cries of children playing at recess —all of these become staples of his new life at school. Though he seems to get little out of his education, the exception to this rule is his art teacher, a man named Lake. Lake is an unconventional teacher, kept on by the staff, the narrator supposes, only because there is something distinguished about having a "freak" around. He views of the history of art impartially and objectively, ever ready to reject some great canonical painter who, he judges, is not worth the reputation he has earned. He is particularly influential on Victor and encourages him to exercise and expand his artistic abilities which constantly exceed what might be expected of a fourteen year old boy.

Victor goes to visit Pnin during one of his school breaks. He had not even known of Pnin's existence until his parents' marriage had dissolved; Liza, it seemed, decided to tell him only because it was necessary to explain what his new source of income was. To prepare for Victor's visit, Pnin goes shopping for a few things that, he imagines, a child would like: a soccer (or, as Pnin says, a "football," causing no slight confusion with the storekeep) and a novel by Jack London. Victor and Pnin had already been corresponding and Victor found Pnin to be quite an impressive man and looked forward to meeting him. Pnin picks Victor up from the train station and takes him to dinner.

Conversation is somewhat strained, particularly after Pnin's attempt to impress Victor with his gift of a soccer ball fails—Victor is more the intellectual type and less the athletic type, as it turns out. They go back to Victor's new home, a rented room in a house owned by the Sheppard brothers, and Pnin gives Victor his second gift, the Jack London novel. This gift is received rather well, but only because Victor mistakes it for a Dostoevsky novel. Night comes and they go to sleep.

Chapter Four Analysis

This chapter helps develop Liza as a rather unsympathetic and unlikable character in the story. She has already been depicted as a terrible girlfriend and wife in her manipulative interactions with Pnin, but it might have been inferred that at least she was a duteous parent. After all, she did appear to go to some trouble to obtain a good education for her child, even if it was largely as Pnin's expense. However, Liza's interest in her child seems to be almost coldly clinical. He is kind of research specimen to her and, as such, disturbs her by how much he seems not to conform with her expectations of a "normal" teenager. Nabokov here might be making a subtle satire of science, for he implicitly puts it at odds with true genius, which he defines as non-conformity (cf. 89). Non-conformity is almost horrifying to the rigorous, structured worldview of people like Liza and Dr. Wind, for what is unexpected cannot be predicted by their methods. They want a world in which everything is explicable and an artistic mind like Victor's is the greatest threat to such a world. It does not seem that Pnin understands Victor a great deal more than his parents do, understandable, perhaps, given that he had never met him prior to the visit narrated in this chapter; however, Pnin seems to capture the child's affections by at least showing some moderate amount of concern for him, even if the concern is misguided.

Chapter Five

Chapter Five Summary

Pnin is headed to a cabin in an area called The Pines to meet with some friends and acquaintances. Evidently, such a gathering is common among Russian immigrants, though it is Pnin's first such visit (though, the narrator notes that he himself had gone before). Pnin was given incredibly detailed and specific directions to the cabin but, unfortunately, decided to go forgo them in favor of the advice of a local. As a result, he gets quite lost and arrives at the destination only after much circling and frustration.

The gathering is hosted by a man named Alexandr Petrovich Kukolnikov, who usually goes just by "Al Cook." He, like Pnin, moved to America after the Bolshevik revolution, though he has been in America much longer; he did not, like Pnin, dawdle for several years in Europe. Cook's wife is a thoroughly American woman named Susan Marshall. They had no children, for Susan was rendered infertile by some unspecified surgical complication. Most of the men in attendance at that party are well into their sixties or older, making Pnin, along with the deceptively named professor Chateau (who was actually completely Russian), a relative youngster. The women are generally closer to Pnin's age, most in their forties. Pnin knows Professor Chateau from long ago when they both studied at the University of Prague. Also in attendance are Bolotov and his wife, Varvara (whom the narrator recalls with fondness), and the Shpolyanskis, among many others. Pnin winds up getting into argument with Bolotov over the dating in Anna Karenina. Bolotov claims that it is ambiguous, and intentionally so, a kind of reflection of and precursor to the popular physical theory of relativity. Pnin, however, is so well acquainted with the novel that he tells Bolotov the precise date and time of the book's beginning, convincingly refuting his reputation. The non-academics nearby—which is everyone except Bolotov and Pnin—are naturally quite uninterested in the discussion and Valvara Bolotov quickly changes the subject.

Pnin decides to go for a swim in the lake, one of the chief attractions of the excursion. There he finds his old friend Chateau. They embrace and commiserate over the annoyances of life as a teacher. Pnin puts on his bathing suit for a brief lake while Chateau, who evidently is not a swimmer, decides to just sit by the lake and converse. Pnin meets an artist named Gramineev who is too detained painting a landscape to be incredibly social, at least at the moment. Pnin laments that Victor could not be there, for he suspects that he would like to meet an artist of Gramineev's status; Chateau, evidently unimpressed by Gramineev's talents, tells him that Victor is not missing much.

The group eats dinner—traditional Russian fare—and then play a game of croquet. As it turns out, Pnin is actually quite a skilled player and dominates the competition. At one point, he completely sinks his opponents' chances by taking advantage of a little-known, and disputed, rule that allows him to rocket the opponents' ball by hitting it with his own. Afterwards, he talks with Roza Shpolyanski, whose family Pnin is fairly acquainted with. One of her cousins, Mira Belochkin, was killed in a concentration camp during World

War II, a memory which Pnin tries very difficult to keep repressed; the idea that he is living in a world where such a kind-hearted woman could be exterminated like that is almost unbearable. After tea, the gathering starts to dissipate and people start to head home.

Chapter Five Analysis

In this chapter, the narrator introduces himself more forcefully into the story than he had before. Previously, he gave only the slightest hints that he was an actual person in the story, though his knowledge of everything that Pnin does is still inexplicable. In this chapter, he mentions actually knowing the same people that Pnin meets, expresses his opinions about them, and so forth. One fact about the narrator this discloses, or at least strongly suggests, is that he is, like Pnin, a Russian immigrant, as the meeting at "Cook's Castles" is almost uniformly attended by Russians. This fact may not be surprising given that Nabokov, the author, was a Russian immigrant, but the reader must be careful not to always assume the narrator and author are the same.

Chapter Six

Chapter Six Summary

The Fall Semester starts at Waindell University in much the same way as it has started every year that Pnin has taught there. Students make the same irrelevant and uninsightful marginalia, pranksters vandalized statues in the humanities building, the butterflies, preparing for migration south, flutter around. This year however has a dark undertone, so far unknown to Pnin. His position has, for many years, not attracted a great number of students. America, in the midst of the Cold War, is not particularly interested in learning the Russian language or reading Russian literature. He does not yet have tenure and, as such, his position exists solely by virtue of being attached to the German department, headed by his friend, Professor Hagen. Hagen, however, has just accepted a new post at a university named Seabord, evidently a much more prestigious institution than Waindell, and will no longer be there to protect him. His replacement with be Dr. Falternfels, an Austrian who is none too fond of Pnin. Hagen is reluctant to let his friend fall to the wayside and, therefore, tries to appeal to other language departments, like the English and French departments. Unfortunately, both of those departments are also filled with people inexplicably opposed to Pnin.

Pnin, laboring in ignorance of his unfortunate situation, is actually off to quite a good start with the semester. He finds that he has pleasantly few students, a dubious luxury which has the benefit of allowing him plenty of time for his own, independent research. He has also found what he thinks is a permanent housing solution. He is renting a house from a relative of his old landlords, the Sheppards. The house is relatively secluded and he has no roommates, which means he is finally free from the "sonic" distractions which have annoyed him throughout his life. In celebration of his new lodgings, he decides to have a housewarming party and invites several of his friends, including Hagen, the Clementses, Betty Bliss (his former student), and the Thayers. He tries to invite several others, but, for various reasons, they decline.

On the day of the party, he starts hours ahead of time preparing food and drinks. He has an assortment of alcoholic beverages and fancy hour dourves which he prepares by himself until Betty Bliss arrives and assists him. He notes, with a twinge of sadness, that she has become engaged and shows off her ring indicating as much. He recalls how he might have once courted her, but recollects that nothing really would ever have come out of it. The rest of the guests arrive and the party begins. After a few hours of drinking, people become a bit more lively than might otherwise be. The party is largely a success and, as the night winds on, guests start to trickle out. Hagen, who noted that Pnin had mentioned he was considering buying the house, decides to stay behind. He tells Pnin the unfortunate probability that he will lose his job and mentions who his replacement will be—a man Pnin says he completely refuses to work under. Hagen has no real solution to Pnin's problem; he tried to get him a job at Seabord, but evidently their Slavic language department is already quite full. Hagen leaves, apologetic for bringing a sour end to an otherwise joyous night. Pnin immediately gets to work washing dishes when

he leaves. He drops a nutcracker onto a pile of dishes and hears the sound of glass breaking. He worries that the casualty was a rather ornate and beautiful bowl sent to him by Victor, but is realized to discover that it was some relatively valueless goblet.

Chapter Six Analysis

The beginning of this chapter is a rather dull depiction of academic life. It seems as if it is almost metaphysically impossible for anything new to happen. Even what might seem like exceptional events, like students vandalizing a statue in the humanities building, are depicted as if they have a season regularity. Pnin seems to like this kind of regularity, as he is himself a man of strict, almost obsessive routine, but one must wonder if Nabokov is not trying to emphasize a certain amount of dullness in the academic life, a setting with which he was himself intimately familiar. Certainly, his picture of academia is not a pleasant one. There seems to be little interest in studies—a fact which is most obviously pronounced in Blorenge's case, who is head of the French Literature department despite not being familiar with French and hating literature—but is rather run by petty, arbitrary politics. Indeed, Pnin is the victim of this arbitrariness, for he seems to have aroused the hatred of several people in the department despite his rather unimposing personality and modest ambitions.

Chapter Seven

Chapter Seven Summary

The narrator explains his connection with Pnin. He is about the same age as Pnin and lived, evidently, in the same town, or at least a nearby town. His first meeting was occasioned by an unfortunate fleck of coal getting stuck in his eye when he was eleven years old. His parents took him to an opthamologist, Dr. Pnin, Timofey's Pnin's father. After the coal was removed, he recalls meeting Timofey for the first time, an exuberant young boy who apparently was quite skilled in algebra. The next time he saw him was in a school play, in which, he recalls, Pnin gave a rather stirring performance. When the Bolshevik Revolution broke out both wound up fleeing but met again in Europe. The narrator there become quite familiar with Pnin's lover and future wife, Liza. Liza was actually quite in love with the narrator and frequently sent him samples of her poetry. The narrator, however, was rather unimpressed with it and told her as much. Rejected, she wound up marrying Pnin. He also frequently saw Pnin while he was in Europe, but Pnin denied ever knowing him in Russia, a sign either of a flawed memory or willful repression of his childhood.

As it turns out, the narrator is the man who will be replacing Pnin at Waindell. As part of his contract with the college, he obtains permission to hire on whomever he wants as an assistant. He extends a rather generous offer to Pnin who, however, declines it. The narrator gets together with Jack Cockerell, the head of the English department who was among several members of the faculty who rejected the idea of keeping Pnin at the college. Cockerell entertains his guest with a rather lengthy, mean-spirited impression of Pnin. The narrator at first enjoys it, but his conscience interrupts his amusement and makes him reconsider whether Pnin deserves such treatment. He goes outside with Cockerell's dog and sees Pnin drive by. He tries to get his attention, but Pnin does not notice him and drives by.

Chapter Seven Analysis

One of the most important developments in this final chapter is the revelation of the narrator as an actual character in the story, though it does little to shed any light on the actual content of the story and it certainly does not explain how the narrator knows so much about Pnin. In any case, it is a revelation which has been steadily building throughout the book; the narrator, in the first chapter, appears to be nothing more than an ordinary, impersonal, third-person narrator but gradually inserts himself into the story, at first parenthetically and finally openly.

The chapter also emphasizes one of the main themes of the book, namely, Pnin's completely unreasonable mistreatment by his colleagues. Throughout the book, Pnin has been depicted as a kind, sympathetic, eccentric, and perhaps somewhat absent-minded professor (despite Nabokov's attempt to deny it). There is nothing in his being

which should be offensive to anyone, at least nothing that should evoke anything more than minor annoyance. Yet, he seems to be almost universally hated by everyone in the department, an inexplicable fact which winds up costing him his job. One might think there is a kind of thematic parallel between Pnin's mistreatment—viciously summarized in Cockerell's mean imitations of him—and the execution of his acquaintance, Mira Belochkin, in a concentration camp. Of course, losing one's job can hardly compare to a brutal, state-sponsored murder, but there is a certain resemblance insofar as both involve a harmless, utterly undeserving victim.

Characters

Timofey Pnin

Timofey Pnin was born in Russia in 1898. His parents both died shortly after the Bolshevik Revolution began and he fled the country when he was nineteen years old. He first went to Turkey, where he earned a degree in Constantinople, and then relocated to Paris. While there, he met his future wife, Liza, a fellow Russian emigrant and an aspiring psychotherapist. The two fall in love and get married but it does not last long. She leaves him for another psychiatrist, Dr. Eric Wind, and then cruelly exploits Pnin to cheaply accompany him back to America, though she has no intention of leaving Dr. Wind. He never has another relationship after Liza leaves him and seems to have a permanent hole in his heart as a result. He is subject to her every wish, even when the wishes are utterly unreasonable. He teaches Russian at Waindell College.

Pnin is somewhat absent-minded, eccentric man. His tenuous grasp of the English language and thick Russian accent often make communication difficult. He is utterly a creature of routine and each day is nearly identical to the last. Though a professor, he does not seem to have grand intellectual aspirations, at least not for the schools of thought which are becoming prominent during the time of the story, such as the new science of linguistics. He is working on an overview of Russian culture, though progress seems to be slow and there is no indication that it is something he ever will actually finish.

Liza Wind

Liza Wind, formerly Liza Bogolepov and then Liza Pnin, is Timofey Pnin's ex-wife. Both Russian emigrants after the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, the two wind up meeting in Paris in 1925. Their connection, at least initially, seems to be largely intellectual. Pnin is an up-and-coming scholar of Russian literature and culture while Liza is a medical student focusing on psychotherapy with a side interest in poetry. Liza is a flighty woman who is unable to keep any kind of commitment to the men she marries. Even while she is dating Pnin, she entertains a secret romance with the story's narrator but, when the latter turns her down, she decides to marry Pnin. Pnin does not keep her interest for long, though, and she winds up leaving him for a fellow psychiatrist named Dr. Eric Wind whom, she claims, understands her on an "organic" level.

When she is seven months pregnant with Dr. Wind's child, she arrives at Pnin's apartment and begs to be taken back. She decides to go with him to America but, as he discovers on the voyage across the Atlantic, she was lying; it was merely a ruse for her to cheaply go to America and Dr. Wind is on board with them. Liza does not seem to have the same intuitions or feelings that one might expect from a parent. She approaches her child like a psychiatric patient and is disappointed to see how unlike he is to other children. She does not seem to rejoice at all in the fact that his non-

conformity is the result of his considerable intellectual and artistic abilities. Liza winds up leaving Dr. Wind to marry an English man named George Church who, in turn, she leaves after some time and marries an Italian man.

Dr. Eric Wind

Dr. Eric Wind is a psychiatrist and Liza's second husband. He is Victor's father.

Joan Clement

Joan Clement is the wife of Laurence Clement, a member of the faculty at Waindell College. Pnin lives with her and Laurence for over a year and they develop a rather close friendship.

Professor Hagen

Professor Hagen is the head of the Waindell College German department. He tries to save Pnin's job but there is too much prejudice in the department against Pnin.

The Narrator

The story's narrator is the Russian teacher who replaces Pnin. He offers Pnin a job as his assistant, but his offer is refused.

Victor Wind

Victor Wind is the son of Liza and Dr. Eric Wind. He is a talented artist, even at a very young age. He and Pnin develop somewhat close relationship.

Mira Belochkin

Mira Belochkin is a friend of Pnin who died in a concentration camp during World War II.

Jack Cockerell

Jack Cockerell is the head of the Waindell College English department. He despises Pnin, for reasons undisclosed and, perhaps, nonexistent.

Betty Bliss

Betty Bliss is one of Pnin's students in Russian. She is not particularly bright, but the two have a moderate attraction. Nothing comes of it and she winds up getting engaged to someone else.

Objects/Places

Waindell College

Waindell College is where Pnin teaches Russian.

Cremona

As the story opens, Pnin is trying to get to Cremona to deliver a lecture on Russian culture to a lady's club.

Russia

Pnin, like many characters in the story, including the narrator, is from Russia, but left after the Bolshevik Revolution.

Bolshevik Revolution

The Bolshevik Revolution was the communist takeover of Russia in 1917. It was followed by bloody civil war.

Constantinople

Pnin went to university and earned his degree at the University of Constantinople.

Paris

After studying in Constantinople, Pnin went to Paris where he met Liza.

Soviet Gold Fund of Literature, Volume 18

Soviet Gold Fund of Literature, Volume 18 is the book which Pnin thinks he is forced to return to Waindell's library. As it turns out, there was a clerical error and he is allowed to keep it.

The Pines

The Pines is a secluded, rural area where Pnin goes to for a gathering of fellow Russian immigrants.

Victor's Dish

Victor sends Pnin a dish as a gift. Pnin's guest remark how valuable it must be. He thinks he breaks it when he is washing dishes but is relieved to discover it was just one of his glasses.

St. Petersburg

Pnin and the narrator first met when both lived in St. Petersburg.

Themes

The Immigrant Experience

Pnin, along with many other characters in the book, is a Russian immigrant. The story takes place mainly in the years during and after World War II and, as such, public feeling was already militating strongly against the Soviets and, therefore, also against the Russians living in America, despite the fact that many of them had not been in their home country since they were young children. Pnin does not seem to be able to relate very well with non-Russians and, indeed, many people seem to positively hate him, though the reasons for this hatred are not clear. Pnin has not mastered, nor will he ever master, the English language, a fact which is only compounded by his thick Russian accent. His difficulty in communicating makes life troublesome for him at several points. For example, in the first chapter when he trying to get to Cremona he is unable to retrieve his suitcase because the attendant, presumably judging from Pnin's accent, does not trust him. Several times throughout the book other characters cannot understand what he is saying. This is probably a somewhat significant point for Nabokov as he found himself on the other side of the linguistic issue as an immigrant. Nabokov, of course, was a master of the English language (Pnin was written originally in English; it is not a translation), but he was probably all too familiar with how much of a barrier it could be for a person, like Pnin, who only spoke it poorly. The novel could be considered, at least in part, a personal exploration of that side of the immigrant experience.

Undeserved Hatred

While certainly a humorous story, the most dominant emotion throughout the story is, or at least ought to be, pity. Pnin is certainly a strange and eccentric man, but there is nothing in his personality that should be offensive in any way to the people he meets. A person might get justifiably irritated by this or that idiosyncrasy, like his extreme sensitivity to noise and willingness to complain about it. However, such things are trifling, and trifling annoyances cannot be the substance of genuine hatred. Yet, a great many characters in the story do seem to genuinely despise him, most of all those who do not know him well. When Hagen tries to appeal to various people in the department in order to save Pnin's job, for example, it is their hatred of them which causes them to refuse. He does not even ask the new head of the German department, Dr. Falternfels, because he already knows how he feels about him.

It is difficult not to see some parallel between how Pnin is treated and the case of Mira Belochkin, Pnin's acquaintance who died in a concentration camp. Of course, there is no need to compare being fired from a job as a professor of Russian and being executed in a state-sponsored death camp. Yet, in one way, there is a certain similarity: Both are hated despite having nothing at all offensive about their being. Pnin is hated, perhaps, because of his Russian heritage or people may think he is stupid because of

his poor grasp of the English language. These, of course, are not really reasons so much as prejudices, prejudices of the same kind held by Hitler and the Nazis, though prejudices which fortunately do not have command of an entire nation.

Science Insufficient for Understanding the World

Though not a major theme of the novel, Nabokov does on several occasions poke fun at science. It is important to understand the exact intellectual climate of the 1950s, the period during which this book was written. Most academic studies, including those generally non-scientific fields, like the humanities, had largely surrendered to a desire to imitate the so-called hard sciences, that is, sciences with had mathematical precision like physics. For example, the study of language and literature came to be dominated by the study of linguistics, a much more theoretical and supposedly objective method. Pnin himself appears not to be terribly influenced by this movement—whether it is because he is intellectually opposed to it, old-fashioned, or just a simple mind—as the narrator remarks in the first chapter that Pnin had not been tempted by the new linguistic theories which were abounding.

The early 20th century also saw the increasing prominence of psychology, another science which had remodeled itself on the paradigm of the hard sciences. Nabokov lampoons these scientific psychologists in the characters of Liza and Dr. Eric Wind. They cannot appreciate their child for what he is: Immensely talented yet they are troubled because he does not behave in the way a child ought to according to their psychological theories. He exhibits none of the Freudian neuroses a child is supposed to have—to have sex with his mother and kill his father—but rather is disturbingly well-behaved. His artistic ability, normally a source of pride for a parent, is instead a source of genetic terror, for they fear it will come along with some kind of mental stability. Genius, Nabokov says, is non-conformity but non-conformity violates the ordered structure science places upon the world. Science then, one might conclude, is not enough to understand the world.

Style

Point of View

In the opening chapters of the book, it is easy to assume that the story's narrator is the rather conventional and intentionally uninteresting third-person narrative. He does not seem to have any personal stake or involvement in the story. This interpretation is strengthened by the fact that the narrator seems to be, if not omniscient, at least knowledgeable about much more than an actual person would. For example, he has privileged perspective into Pnin's thoughts, what Pnin is doing while he is alone, what people are doing when Pnin is not around, and so on. There does not seem to be any plausible way to construe him as an actual character in the story, and, thus, one might conclude that when the narrator occasionally interjects his own opinions or reflections that it is just Nabokov, as author, who is speaking.

In the course of the book, however, this reading is first weakened and then totally undermined. Gradually, the narrator, at first parenthetically, begins to give his existence a reality. He may mention, for example, his relationship to some briefly mentioned character in the story or mention how he himself has gone to The Pines before. Yet, his true identity is not completely disclosed until the final chapter when it is revealed that the narrator knew Pnin and actually is the Russian professor who will be replacing him. This kind of flaunting of literary convention should not be surprising from Nabokov, who was both a scholar of traditional forms of literature and experimenter with new forms.

Setting

Basically the entire story is set in Waindell, a small college town in the northeastern United States which is the site of the college Pnin teaches at, Waindell College. It is a fictional college, though one is tempted to see a similarity between it and Wellesley College, the institution at which Nabokov taught in real life. Indeed, Pnin's life, in many ways, mirrors Nabokov's own life. Both were Russian immigrants, both were professors, and both were interested in literature. At the very least, it is probably the "Pnin" is meant to be an exploration of certain issues involved in the immigrant experience, perhaps especially those which Nabokov himself did not deal with directly, like the language barrier which is a daily obstacle for Pnin.

As important as the story's actual setting are the places which form the background to it, namely, Russia and Europe. Pnin, like many other characters in the story (like the narrator) and like Nabokov himself, fled Russia following the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 and the bloody civil war which engulfed the nation afterward. The political changes in the Soviet Union are an important, though implicit, part of the background for the story. Pnin seems to obviously be opposed to the communist takeover; after all, he did leave the country and has no intention to return. His exact ideology is unclear; all that is said is that he is opposite of the rather muddled politics of his colleague, Komarov.

Language and Meaning

One fact a reader might not be aware of while reading the story is that Pnin was actually written originally in English. Nabokov wrote many works in Russian, but his later works, such as this one, were written exclusively in English, reflecting Nabokov's assimilation into American literary circles and, perhaps, his acknowledgment of a larger English-speaking audience.

Nabokov, who spoke English even while growing up in Russia, shows no real signs that it is not his first language, though at times there are some slightly awkward phrases. For example, at the beginning of Chapter Three he writes: "During the eight years Pnin had taught at Waindell College he had changed his lodgings—for one reason or another, mainly sonic—about every semester" (62). The use of the word "sonic" is not a natural way of speaking, though the reader must keep the possibility alive that Nabokov was intentionally writing in an awkward way, a stylistic choice which would not be altogether inappropriate for a story about a man who speaks only broken English.

Nabokov does seem to enjoy engaging in occasional wordplay and often there seems to be no point to it other than to have fun. For example, in the second chapter, Pnin accidentally pronounces the name "Thayer" as "Fire." Later, Liza leaves him for Dr. Wind. When he meets Dr. Wind on the boat to America, Dr. Wind says that he is only Victor's "earth father" while Pnin is his "water father." Thus, in the span of one chapter, Nabokov manages to slip in each of the four traditional elements—fire, wind or air, earth, and water. It is difficult to imagine that this is merely a coincidence (especially given how contrived a name like Dr. Wind is) but it is equally difficult to venture a good explanation for why he would do it. The characters are not linked in any obvious way, and "earth" and "wind" are used in reference to the same character. The most likely explanation is that Nabokov was simply having a spot of fun.

Structure

The book is divided into seven different chapters. The first six are of approximately equal length; the seventh is by far the shortest in the book, about half the size—eighteen pages—of some of the other, larger chapters. Each chapter is divided into different numbered sections which neatly divide the chapter into different episodes. The book seems to straddle the line between being a collection of connected short stories and a novel. There is certainly overlap between the chapters, but it is difficult to identify any overarching plot. The conclusion of the book, which results in Pnin being fired from Waindell College, is not even really hinted at until the chapter in which it happens, Chapter Six. The story of Liza and Victor seem to be more like minor subplots than anything and nothing significant seems to happen with either character after Chapter Four. At most, the individual chapters are connected insofar as they develop Pnin's personality, something which is crucial to understand in order to make sense of the book's major thematic point, namely, the topic of prejudicial hatred.

Chapter One, naturally, introduces Pnin and provides his background. The plot of the chapter is Pnin's hapless attempts to reach Cremona in one piece, a goal which he manages to actually achieve, though not without quite a bit of frustration. Chapters Two and Three are set during the period in which Pnin lives with Clementses, ending when their divorced daughter returns and reclaims her room. Chapter Three is a kind of glimpse into Pnin's very ordinary and routine daily life. Chapter Four is about Victor and the relationship Pnin develops with him. Chapter Five narrates Pnin's trip to The Pines and the fellow immigrants he interacts with there. Chapter Six is about Pnin's firing and the housewarming party he throws. In Chapter Seven the narrator reveals himself as the instructor who will be taking over Pnin's job and all of the consequences that follow as a result of it.

Quotes

". . . nor did Pnin, as a teacher, ever presume to approach the loft halls of modern scientific linguistics, that ascetic fraternity of phonemes, that temple wherein young people are taught not the language itself, but the method of teaching others to teach that method; which method, like a waterfall splashing from rock to rock, ceases to be a medium of rational navigation but perhaps in some fabulous future may become instrumental in evolving esoteric dialects—Basic Basque and so forth—spoken only by certain elaborate machines." (10)

"Some people—and I am one of them—hate happy ends. We feel cheated. Harm is the norm. Doom should not jam. The avalanche stopping its tracks a few feet above the cowering villages not only unnaturally but unethically." (25-26)

"Marriage hardly changed their manner of life except that she moved into Pnin's dingy apartment. He went on with his Slavic studies, she with her psychodramatics and her lyrical ovipositing, laying all over the place like an Easter rabbit . . ." (45)

"He helped her [Liza] into a taxi, her bright diaphanous scarf caught on something, and Pnin slipped on the pavement, and the taximan said "Easy," and took her bag from him, and everything had happened before, in this exact sequence." (53)

"During the eight years Pnin had taught at Waindell College he had changed his lodgings—for one reason or another, mainly sonic—about every semester." (62)

"Only another Russian could understand the reactionary and Sovietophile blend presented by the pseudo-colorful Komarovs, for whom an ideal Russia consisted of the Red Army, an anointed monarch, collective farms, anthroposophy, the Russian Church and the Hydro-Electric dam." (71)

"Both and Eric and Liza Wind were morbidly concerned with heredity, and instead of delighting in Victor's artistic genius, they used to worry gloomily about its genetic cause." (89)

"In an archway of the bus station a totally bald man with a brownish complexion, wearing dark glasses and carrying a black brief case, was bending in amiable interrogatory welcome over the thin-necked little boy, who, however, kept shaking his head and pointing to his mother, who was waiting for her luggage to emerge from the Greyhound's belly. Shyly and gaily Victor interrupted the quid pro quo." (103)

"This was the first time Pnin was coming to The Pines but I had been there before." (117)

"In order to exist rationally, Pnin had taught himself, during the last ten years, never to remember Mira Belochkin—not because, in itself, the evocation of a youthful love affair, banal and brief, threatened his peace of mind (alas, recollections of his marriage to Liza

were imperious enough to crowd out any former romance), but because, if one were quite sincere with oneself, no conscience, and hence no consciousness, could be expected to subsist in a world where such things as Mira's death were possible." (135)

"'. . . The world wants a machine, not a Timofey.'" (161)

"'I am not handsome, I am not interesting, I am not talented. I am not even rich. But, Lise, I offer you everything I have, to the last blood corpuscle, to the last tear, everything. . . .'" (183)

Topics for Discussion

Explain the significance of Pnin's lack of interest in linguistics.

Why does Laurence Clements initially hate Pnin? What is the significance of the fact that he changes his mind?

What is the significance of the story about Mira Belochkin, the woman who died in a concentration camp?

Describe the style of narration employed in this story and its purpose.

Why does Pnin deny knowing the narrator after they both leave St. Petersburg?

How does Pnin's status as a Russian immigrant affect his life in America?

Why does Pnin dislike the narrator so much?