The Rings of Saturn Study Guide

The Rings of Saturn by W. G. Sebald

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

The Rings of Saturn, by W.G. Sebald is in part a memoir, a travelogue, and a study of the effects of History, Time and the Individual as the author travels on a pilgrimage along the Suffolk coastline in the United Kingdoms. As he journeys the author encounters places and characters of interest both in the present day and from the past on his quest to understand both himself and his surroundings in their correct place in the passage of time and how they all relate to death.

A meditative work, The Rings of Saturn is curiously written as a continuing monologue with sudden diversions into historical analysis and the author's own interior dream scape as he attempts to come to terms with what he encounters around him in his environment. The author records his reactions to events and the visions or phantasms that he experiences along his journey, waving together a picture of a journey that not only took place in the physical world, but at least in part in the depths of his own psyche.

Starting from the viewing of a hospital window whilst he was incarcerated on a psychiatric wing, the author goes on to describe the time he spent on a journey a year before from the outskirts of Lowestoft in East Anglia to Ditchingham at the southern end of Suffolk, describing his journey past empty dunes and along the coastline of East Anglia. Along the way, he discovers crumbing manor houses and estates that were once the glories of the eighteenth century, populated with strange figures such as George Wyngham Le Strange, the poet Charles Swinburne, or an exiled French Vicomte (Viscount). It is through his discoveries about these people and these remarkable places that the author starts to unravel the accepted 'boring' history of the landscape, finding instead within its characters resonances with his own life and sometimes moving lessons about human nature.

Traveling over a landscape he obviously knows well and loves, the author reflects on the scenes of past battles and prosperity as he travels into his own past through meeting and thinking about his friends, Michael Hamburger and Frederick Farrar. His friends hold for him the keys it seems to a lost age and to understanding the individual's place in history.

The author's moving and intellectual account ranges widely across time and the globe as his steps travel narrowly on one route as he discovers that even the smallest place and fact can become connected to greater events or hold within them the seeds of meaning and even truth.

Chapter I

Chapter I Summary

The first chapter of The Rings of Saturn by W.G. Sebald sets the tone for the book entire, beginning with a monologue of a journey he took through the East Anglian countryside (the county of Suffolk in Great Britain) a few years before. He recalls how the open expanses were at once terrifying and freeing in their grand emptiness and equates that to the paralysing emptiness of the time he spent in a mental hospital after a nervous breakdown.

The time he spent in the hospital got him thinking about emptiness, and about his feelings of dislocation from reality, in a similar way to how he felt during his pilgrimage through the Suffolk countryside. The reason for his incarceration into hospital is, we find out, that following the death of his close friend the academic Michael Parkinson a year before the writing of this book (itself a year after his journey) the author became emotionally paralysed. He remembers the feelings of isolation and strangeness that surrounded the death of his friend echoed in another mourner, Janine Dakyns whose office had become a sea of paper. This trying to understand the world academically had, for Dakyns, itself created a secondary word of paper around her; an effort that Sebald empathises with and finds resonances with his own journey.

Considering these layers of fact and fiction, Sebald thinks about Thomas Browne, the seventeenth century doctor, philosopher, and theologian who had studied death and the boundaries between the material and the immaterial. For Thomas Browne, Sebald muses, Nature was constantly in flux and everything was bound towards its own final destruction - life was constantly changing, but everything eventually died. Thomas Browne sought to find the immutable, the eternal and the everlasting thing that was our soul: exemplified by Sebald's description of the Rembrant painting 'The Dissection' where we see modern science horribly trying to investigate death and trying to find any essential, everlasting thing.

The Chapter ends by the narrator thinking about Thomas Browne's works in relation to his own predicament and how Thomas Browne tried to find an essential formula or pattern which was essential, repeated, and necessary. This in turn, explains the inevitable death and destruction. Sebald himself is trying to do a similar thing as he thinks about all of History, Time, civilisations and even his friend Michael Parkinson dying but not being able to see an essential pattern or reason for these endings. The narrator considers the precious things found in burial and cremation urns that are frequently found throughout East Anglia: and wonders what they signify for himself and his journey.

Chapter I Analysis

Chapter One (I) of W.G. Sebald's The Rings of Saturn sets up the structure, format and style that the author uses throughout the work. In jumping from present to his own biographical past, and from there to his further past and ancient history the author is attempting to describe a journey that is taken both physically and mentally.

The physical journey that the author writes about from Somerleyton hall in Suffolk to Bungay becomes really a metaphor for his own interior journey. In a sense the author is not only talking about the sometimes strange and always interesting places and individuals he meets along his 'English Pilgrimage' but is talking about the interconnected histories, memories, and passing feelings that form a 'hyper real' journey alongside the physical one.

The author sets up this relationship between metaphor and story by likening the emptiness, openness, and degradation of the landscape around East Anglia to the desolation he could sense within himself, especially from his hospital room during his nervous breakdown at the start of the book. This desolation is hallmarked by loss (the author's loss of his friend, and similar to the loss of history as shown in the East Anglian countryside).

As the author turns his attention to his muse Thomas Browne, he is also letting us know what the book is really about. Thomas Browne sought for evidence of the immutable, the everlasting soul as well as looking for essential patterns and rhythms (the Quincunx), and was fascinated with the winding down, the inevitable finality of things. Equally, through the investigations in this book the author seems to be searching for an essential pattern or a truth, and everywhere seeing the winding down of history, of individuals and of civilisation.

In addition to this point, the author here develops the theme of Corruption, in the poetic and macabre remark about 'the red blotches' that were all that marked his friends' ill health. This imagery is used repeatedly and is a symbol of something corrupting, off balance, and upsetting in an otherwise healthy-looking 'business as normal' situation. The reader can draw emotional parallels between the unhealthy blotchiness or the corruption that is a sign that all things are not well and the later imagery used within the book (the sudden appearance of the maimed, the injured, and of disturbing flesh). It seems that the writer is suggesting that civilization itself is suffering from a form of corruption, a creeping darkness, 'blotchiness,' or desolation that is the hallmark of something being not right, dangerous, and indeed frightening at the heart of society itself.

Chapter II

Chapter II Summary

Chapter Two begins the author's journey proper as he boards an old diesel train in August of 1992 heading from Norwich to Lowestoft, in Suffolk.

Sebald describes travelling on the antiquated train through a landscape just as antiquated; the relics of old windmills and agriculture pile up in the landscape seen through the windows of the train as the narrator feels that he is almost travelling into a devastated landscape. It seems to him that Suffolk is at once an empty wasteland and also full of curiosities. Everywhere there is decay and the artefacts of society once rich and proud.

Sebald gets off at the stop for Somerleyton hall, and begins his pilgrimage there, to the grand mansion that was once held by many noble families of the Middle Ages, and currently owned by Lord Somerleyton, Her Majesty's Master of Horse (an honorific title and position). As he examines the mansion, the narrator recounts the history of the manor, how it was bought by a Morton Peto in 1843, who himself was a humble man who had become one of Britain's leading Industrialists, building Nelson's Column and several other landmarks across London. Peto transformed the Somerleyton Hall into a wondrous realm of glass, talked about across the empire and filled it with colonial relics: trophies from Africa and the Far East. What the author finds when he arrives is a run down, decaying hall, still with one last surviving quail obviously long since gone mad in its confines. Sebald compares this to his next stop, the town of Lowestoft that was also once, one of the richest gems of the United Kingdom's coastline until the vagaries of the economic climate bled it off wealth and opportunity. Leading us through scenes of decay and semi-poverty the author visits a hotel, eats at a dining hall and considers how far they decay of once-fine civilisation has set.

The last monologue of Chapter II considers his friend Frederick Farrar, once a resident of Lowestoft itself. Frederick Farrar was an elderly neighbour, a gardener and a close friend of the author who recounts how his friend was old enough to remember the birth of the First World War and the advent of the Second. When at preparatory school, Frederick Farrar heard 'The Last Post' sounded on a bugle as their headmaster exhorted them to war, which Frederick survived and later became a Lawyer. Frederick himself remembered Lowestoft in its waning glory years, when it appeared like a vision on the waters of the German Sea. The author recounts how Frederick was also a keen gardener, growing Roses, Irises and Violets (which were also his sister's names) and was himself found peaceably dead in and amongst his garden one day.

Chapter II Analysis

Chapter Two (II) carries on the themes and the format set out in the preceding chapter. The physical journey sets out proper, as the author travels to Somerleyton Hall. Here the author is astounded and amazed by the layers and the wealth of history that is to be found within one building - from a Medieval manor to the showcase by the Industrialist Peto, to its associations with World War Two, it's colonial past and its current state of disrepair. These different layers of history are a common technique used by the author; switching from historical fact, personal observations by himself to the individual stories of those who worked or lived there. This technique presents us with the authors own view of history and of what makes of 'fact'. The 'truths' of history are to be somewhere between historical facts and dates, the experiences of the individuals involved and the observers own personal feelings.

The entire monologue of Chapter Two is really a study of history. Everywhere the author goes, the author sees the degradation and the corruption of history; of Somerleyton Hall (which was once fabulous) gradually falling into disrepair (as exemplified by the maddened quail), and the lost fortunes of the town of Lowestoft itself. The history of places, towns and people is surrounded for the author by a creeping darkness which is threatening to overwhelm us with forgetfulness, and to drag us down into disrepair and calamity. The current state of Somerleyton and Lowestoft are used as examples for this process (the same process that Thomas Browne describes in Chapter One). This image of the author as an individual striking out into the dark, trying to understand what he sees and trying to uncover facts that have decayed and were once lost is similar to the position in which he started this whole book - as a man feeling desolate, confused and in ignorance in a mental hospital who had to reach out to find what was meaningful and true.

The last monologue of Chapter Two concerns itself with the author's friend, Frederick Farrar. The author reflects on this man as one of the surviving links to a darkening past (the glories of Lowestoft as was).

Chapter III

Chapter III Summary

Chapter Three of The Rings of Saturn allows the reader to accompany the author as he walks on the coastal footpath out of Lowestoft and follows the dunes and cliff's edge that leads to the shore. Here he finds rows of tents of individualistic fishermen, each not communicating with their neighbour, and gazing out into the depths of the sea. The author thinks about this act, and the facts that have brought them here; the once miraculous Herring catches that gave the surrounds and the city of Lowestoft its fortune.

The author recounts how, years of industrial pollution have now tainted the waters around the east Anglian countryside, and finds in this a metaphor for the 'darkening' and decay of civilisation. He muses on the Herring fish, and how he was forced to watch an instructional film whilst at school about the vast catches that once were hauled here, and gave so much of a glut that thousands of tonnes of the fish were once allowed to rot on the beach as they could not be processed quickly enough by the fishermen. The Herring is seen as a remarkable animal, not only for its numbers in the spawning season, but the very intricate nature of its internal bones and cartilages. It also has the strange effect of appearing to become phosphorescent after death (it appears to shimmer or glow for a few hours after death before that glow fades). This remarkable quality faqscinates the author, and in turn he recounts how two scientists tried to mimic this effect in an attempt to light all of London with a natural phosphorescence; which is an attempt that failed.

The narrator thinks about these effects of glow and darkening as he recounts the story of Lord Wyndham Le Strange, an elderly eccentric who once liberated the concentration camp of Belsen at the end of the Second World War. Living in Suffolk Le Strange turned into a recluse, reportedly never leaving his manor house and finally, as his clothes wore out wearing older and older frock coats and taking to living in a set of caves and tunnels that he had built underground on his land. He gave his entire property away to his housekeeper on the proviso that, strangely, she feed him his meals but never, ever speak to him, This she did and she later inherited the money, and then moved in with her sister later in life.

Carrying on in his journey, the author encounters a placid cow and retells the story of the driving out of the demon Legion from the Gospel of Mark in the Bible; where apparently the evil spirit was pushed into a herd of swine who immediately plunged over a cliff and died. This threat of death and the danger of the drop of the cliff stays with the author as he sees, far below him a couple making love. To the author it appears almost like a mutant, pale creature and he is repulsed.

At the closing of Chapter III, Sebald recounts the similarities between his predicament and that of a short story of Louis Borges, called Tlon, Uqbar and Orbis Tertius which describes a conspiracy by historians and academics to create a whole other world of

history by supplanting it within encyclopedias and dictionaries. The author wonders whether the past and reality itself is a little like that attempt in the story, of creating a fictional world to replace the one that is really there and how we as audience, would ever tell the difference.

Chapter III Analysis

In Chapter Three, as the author carries on his walk he travels the coastline of East Anglia and comes across a line of encamped fishermen. This act of the fishermen itself becomes symbolic for what is happening in the authors own mind; the standing on the edges of a vast sea of the unknown, of history or his own interior landscape (both are equally as mysterious as each other). The reader can draw comparisons between the act of the observer and the fishermen; the way that they they are casting out their hopes for a catch, and both are isolated before Time itself.

His act of walking along the coastline is metaphorical for the edges of the things that he is travelling in his observations. His interior psyche (as depicted by his dream of walking the mountains) is also a vast, unknown sea that he feels that he is near like the sea around him.

The diversion into the Herring trade and the Herring itself can be seen as a metaphor for the human individual itself. The Herring trade has suffered corruption, was once productive and fruitful, but has now suffered setbacks similar to what the author sees as happening to Civilisation itself. The author too finds similarities in the Herring fish and the unusual predicament of the individual within History. It is a complex creature and not all of its internal working are understood (similar to the fact that we do not know all of the internal, psychological workings of any individual). Yet, the Herring also exhibits a form or type of phosphorescence: a residual, magical glow that is exhibited after death for a short while. This curious facility is similar to the numinous, ethereal qualities of the human, whose feelings, emotions and works seem to have beauty, grandeur and at least some importance after death but we cannot quite fathom what that meaning is, or why we are drawn to it.

The strange case of the local recluse Lord Wyndham Le Strange can be seen as an example of the ethereal fascination: this individual became corrupted in a sense (he grew strange and reclusive, abnormal) through his life, and yet we are drawn to his actions and his legacy.

The final study in Chapter Three recounts the authors thoughts on the fictional Luis Borges story of Tlon. This story depicts a fictional country and a world that is slowly supplanting our own by the use of historical manipulation (references to Uqbar and Tlon are inserted into Encyclopedias by a secret society within the story).

This is analogous to the authors own findings on his journey - that historical fact is a mysterious thing filled with fictions and personal agendas and feelings which is gradually rewriting out past and our understanding of the landscape around us. In a

deeper sense as well, the fictitious world of Tlon is similar to the fictitious world that we occupy within our own psyches - a landscape made up of internal references to memories, passing feelings and dreams which may or may not really reference truth, fact and history.

Chapter IV

Chapter IV Summary

In Chapter IV, WG Sebald's journey continues as he makes his way to the town of Southwold, there to rest footsore on a bench in a part of the town called Gunhill. The twilight gloom makes him wonder what it must have looked like on a similar day some four hundred years previously in 1672 when the Dutch fleet appeared off of the coastline as the Dutch attacked the naval forces of Britain. Having already seen the famous painting depicting the sight, the author thinks that the masterpiece must be a poor comparison to the real thing, where nothing much could have been seen for the fogs of war, nor the real human terror felt as it was in real life. This titanic battle, exemplified by the warships of the Dutch and the British the author imagines to be the herald of a lost age, slowly being swallowed up by darkness.

This darkness naturally leads him to thinking about the gloaming he sees gathering over the waters, and how his muse Thomas Browne himself talked about the darkness of the world taking over the globe both physically every nightfall and spiritually. This leads him to a dream he once had where he walked a mountain range, as he felt then and now upon the edge of some vast terra incognita.

His memories and dreams of standing on coastlines and on the edges of things reminds the author how, just barely a year ago he was on the Norwegian coastline, after having gone there to study the Master Painter's already mentioned in this book. Whilst for other intellectuals, the author writes, the exactitude of Dutch towns, their straight lines and the precise placing on a flat landscape speaks of the perfection of civilisation, for the author he sees within it an almost corrupting lifelessness as he remembers his times in Holland. It is here that he also took a trip to see his patron Saint (St Sebolt), who travelled medieval Europe performing miraculous cures. The grandness of St Sebolt's reliquary (gold and sheet silver sculpture) lies in contrast in the author's mind as he remembers his plain journey away from Amsterdam back to Norwich, where at first all of the works of humanity became smaller and smaller until finally nothing could be seen of the actual people and individuals.

Back in Southwold again after his reminiscences, the author makes his way to the Southwold Sailor's Reading Room, a library - type establishment where the logs of the naval history of the town is kept. Here he finds another book compiled many years ago documenting the events of the First World War, with suitable newspaper headlines. This macabre and grotesque history is carried on the next day when WG Sebald finds an article in the local paper about the involvement of Serbo-Croatia in the Second World War and draws contrasts between the time of the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand (and the start of events of events that led to the First World War), and the Nazi-occupied Serbo-Croatia. Here we learn that one of the United Nations Secretary Generals was once an officer in a Serbian Intelligence Unit, responsible for making sense of the concentration camps run by the Nazi Serbs. The author draws no distinct

conclusions about the man, whether as an apologist or as a defector who eventually was the one to record the greeting to all extra-terrestrials that currently is on the Voyager II space vessel leaving our solar system.

Chapter IV Analysis

Chapter Four builds upon the conjecture cast within Chapter Three; by examining the different layers of 'lost' history and its shifting relationship to what we now conceive of as 'fact.' The author starts this study in his physical journey to the park of Gunhill in Southwold, where once there was a great battle that in part decided the fate of the British Isles.

This 'lost' battle is not a greatly recognised or remembered fact, and yet the author shows how the British defeat of the Dutch forces was pivotal for Britain eventually becoming a seafaring world power. This obscure fact is in danger of becoming lost for the author, and he finds it fascinating that this small, quiet little town of Southwold could once have held witness to such a momentous occasion. The author goes even further in his analysis here as he repeatedly makes the assertion that History is mysterious, everywhere and needs to be rediscovered; he makes the point that the actual experience of that event (the battle) is itself lost to us, and the surviving painting probably does not show the real human experience of the battle at all.

This Chapter also addresses the question of 'what stands the test of time?' During his reminiscences of Southwold and the past battle, the author also remembers going to Norway and seeing the reliquary of his patron saint, St Sebolt who is now imprisoned within a vast gold and silver edifice with carvings and statuary. This grand shrine to his namesake can be seen as one of humanities attempts to conserve the past, and the author contrasts this with the common experience of flying - where first everything becomes smaller, further and more distant until such a time as no real people can be see, only parts of their buildings and industry. In this section the author is likening this experience of flying to be similar to movement of Time: where all we can see when we look back are the works of people but not the people themselves (like his patron saint has left a grand shrine, but the actual man, his thoughts, and feelings are lost)

The strangeness's and the perversity of history is finally thought upon at the end of the chapter, as the author reveals how, even amidst all of the glorification of the World Wars the history of those times has been in part misunderstood. The final revelation of how one of our Secretary Generals of the United Nations was himself an intelligence officer of the Heersegruppe during the Second World War. The author is purposefully leaving the question open at the end of this chapter about who controls our understanding of history, and what 'real' facts are.

Chapter V

Chapter V Summary

Chapter Five (V) begins the next night in Southwold, as the narrator and author in part hears a documentary about the last man hung for high treason in the British Isles, one Roger Casement. Even though he fell asleep halfway through hearing the documentary, the chapter then pieces together the story that Sebald heard.

An influential figure in Roger Casement's life was Joseph Conrad, a famous writer who once wrote a book called 'The Heart of Darkness' documenting his own travels into the Congo. Joseph Conrad was born Jozef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowska. His family travelled from the Ukraine to be reunited with their father Apollo in Warsaw as he tried to instigate a Polish Uprising against the occupying Russians of 1861. At a young age, Jozef Konrad saw his family face internment by the Russian occupation - an event that shattered his mother's life who wasted away and died. When his father was finally released, the young Konrad saw too his father die a wasting illness without the love of his wife and Konrad was sent to live with a mentor named Tadeusz. The young Josef Konrad, years before becoming a writer had seen his family die in the horrors of imperialism at the turn of the twentieth century and became obsessed with idea of being a sailor. He eschewed his mentor's desire for him to follow in his fathers footsteps and become a writer and instead travelled the world.

Eventually, the author describes how Jozef Konrad travelled to Lowestoft, gained his captaincy and British citizenship and became, in effect, Joseph Conrad. He finally returned to the Ukraine and took up a service with the Society of Belgium for trade with the Congo: he was appointed as one of the first captains to open up the Congo via the Congo river and oversee the colonial expansion. Here Conrad saw entire tribes of the indigenous cultures being enslaved and used, but found that he was not in a position to talk about it.

The author is reminded of the memorial of the Battle of Waterloo, where thousands of soldiers lost their lives and yet this tragedy seems to be expunged from the landscape of the memorial in Brussels.

Continuing in his reconstruction of the story of Conrad and Casement, the author reveals how the immigrant to Lowestoft, Joseph Conrad met Roger Casement in his role as a British Envoy there, and entrusted to him all of the information that he had gathered. When Casement published his report of the atrocities he was awarded a distinguished medal of honour by the Foreign Office, but succeeded in offended other world leaders. He was sent to the Amazon, where he reported that the Amazon Company was itself conducting atrocious crimes against humanity on the behalf of European colonialism. This time Casement was knighted (an attempt to 'buy him off'), but Roger casement, one of the rising stars of the British diplomatic service didn't stop there. He then proceeded to write about the status of the Southern Irish in Ireland (then

under British rule). Roger Casement became so radical that he eventually sought German support for a civil uprising (which never arrived) and Roger Casement was instead imprisoned and hung. As a part of this a diary of Casement's was found which talked of his seditious views and his homosexuality. The author finishes this chapter by wondering if this was a plant by the imperial powers used to discredit their critic, Roger Casement.

Chapter V Analysis

In a similar fashion to the Chapter's before, the author carries on his analysis of History and the misrepresentations of history discussed in Chapter Four (IV). It starts by the author describing how he half saw a documentary whilst staying in Southwold discussing the last man hung for hgh treason in the British Isles (Roger Casement) and Casement's involvement with the writer Jozef Konrad (Joseph Conrad as we know him now).

This partly heard documentary, fading into dreams is characteristic of the novel entire and reinforces the tone of the novel; of slipping between fact and fiction; and the contrast between the unknown and the known akin to sleep and wakefulness.

The authors intense study of the writer Joseph Conrad and Roger Casement, their history and their biography is an attempt by the author to describe how history and the facts of the past are actually made up by individuals: their lives and their actions. By studying the individuals here, the author is claiming that we can only really understand history be examining people, which is itself an exploration 'into darkness' as we cannot possibly know all of the internal psychological workings of another individual.

By revealing that our current celebrated writer (Joseph Conrad) in fact himself had a 'forgotten history' and that the accepted traitor of modern times (Roger Casement) was in fact a very principled young man, who tried to speak out against the effects of colonialism, the author shows how strange and misrepresented history can be. The author is subtly making the point that our own histories and that of world history is vast and contains both paradoxes and contradictions. Our attempt to understand our past and our own psyches is filled with problems as there are simply so many facts and variables in time. The threat felt by the author in response to this problem is the metaphor of corruption and the 'darkening' or forgetting the important things and of the facts of the past becoming corrupted or misrepresented.

Chapter VI

Chapter VI Summary

Chapter Six continues as the author Sebald leaves the town of Southwold, where he crosses the river Blythe and travels through Walberswick to Dunwich, a coastal walk that takes him out onto the dunes and heaths that surround the empty shoreline of that area.

Crossing the small bridge over the Blythe the author discovers a tiny serviceable carriage, painted over but still carrying with it the discernible crest of the Imperial Court of China. Local legend has it that it was once one of the trains that the Royal Emperor and Dowager Empress of China themselves used, and somehow has ended up as a tiny local line commuter here in east Anglia.

This discovery leads the author to think about Empires, and the Chinese Empire in particular. He thinks about his own investigations about the fall of China, shortly after the late nineteenth century when the Opium Wars and the Taiping Rebellion tore apart the infrastructure of the country. What follows is one of the authors classic studies of history as he considers how the Celestial Court of Emperor Hung Hsiu-ch'uan fell into turmoil as the rebellion that started in Taipan gathered momentum and force and spread through the country. What 'saved' the Celestial King was his acceptance of aid from British and French forces who forced his hand in order to award them trade concessions in their 'Opium War'. Instigated by the East India Tea Company, the Western forces wanted a clear trade of Opium throughout China through to their secure areas around Hong Kong, and were themselves about to go to war with China because of it. What followed was almost a war of three sides (the Rebels, the Imperial Chinese and the Westerners) until the Treaty of Tsientien was signed and the British and French forces were allowed to defend Imperial Throne in return for access to their country.

What came after was the reign of the brutal Dowager Empress of China, whom herself is implicated in the apparent deaths of several other heirs to the Imperial Throne and, after decades of tyrannical rule eventually died a lonesome and penitent death.

Thinking about the throes and fates of Empire leads the author to think about the changing landscape about himself, as Dunwich is filled with sea-castles, towers and fortifications that have invariably vanished into the sea. Those that have survived have left little more then ruins, and the author speculates whether this is true of all civilisations - that we all run inland away from an encroaching 'eating up' of the sands of time.

Thinking about Dunwich, the author remembers that this melancholy heathland was the haunt of Victorian poets like Charles Swinburne who was drawn to this collapse of splendour. Charles Swinburne himself was the product of two ancient families the Ashburnam's and the Swinburne's who had themselves long been members of the elite;

members of their lineage forming parts of the royal courts, trading with the entire world, even becoming Barons for the Holy Vatican Kingdom. The poet Swinburne however took a different route, although he dreamed of lost battles and explorations his small stature and frame lent him towards the arts as he found himself living at the collapse of Imperial rule throughout the known world.

Chapter VI Analysis

Chapter Six concerns itself with the collapse of splendour, and in particular the collapse of Empire. Just as in Chapter Five we read about some of the mistakes of Imperialism (through the story of Konrad and Casement and colonialism), here the author makes that advent more personal, leading us into a study of how the old Empires of the world where trying to 'hold back time'. They were, in effect, vast edifices that had become top heavy, and for all their splendour, as time marched on their foundations were being eaten away.

The author examines this by recounting the story of the collapse of Imperial China, the advent of civil unrest (the Taiping Rebellion) and the introduction of global commerce (the the Opium Wars) into a previously dynastic society. The death of these great world powers, their splendour and might is similar to what Sebald sees all around him; the gradual shifting sands of the coast eating away at the landmass, destroying whole villages and towers.

What survives out of these ravages of time are two things; the memoirs of the poet Charles Swinburne and the Chinese train. The author is reminding us that, around us and underneath our feet are the clues that form links in a chain that can tell us about the past. Symbolised by the story of Charles Swinburne, who himself died at the turn of the twentieth century, remembered hearing from his own grandmother of a time when she would travel to grand courtly balls and see suicides buried at crossroads. By showing us these recollections of dead men, the author is reminding us that even though all of these events are long ago - the power of human recollection, and of passed down memory is so vast that it does not take long to find a human thread, bringing to life our 'dead' past.

Chapter VII

Chapter VII Summary

Walking through the heaths and dunes of Dunwich, the author travels to Middleton to meet there some old friends of his Michael and Anna Hamburger. Walking away from the coast, the author gets lost in a series of dunes and paths that seem to roam endlessly but lead nowhere. This maze strikes the author as almost spiritual, as, more and more scared he finally managed to evince his escape and stumble into the town of Middleton. In Middleton his appearance is met with shock or amusement by the normal shop workers and checkout girls until he reaches his friends house, one Michael Hamburger.

It becomes apparent that the author and Michael have been friends for a long time. They both share similar academic passions and a fascination for history, their own past, the landscape, and dreams. Going into his house, the author is struck by feelings of familiarity, so much so that it almost feels like he is walking through his own house, or his own life. These feelings of a parallel life being led within his friend Michael are further reinforced as the author reveals how they share many coincidences - they both have randomly met the same people, have worked and studied in the same areas, and both share the same interests. The author wonders whether these interconnections are significant, whether time and life are much more complicated things than we can normally think of, or whether this is mere happen stance.

Michael Hamburger himself is older than Sebald (by ten years), who remembers fleeing Berlin before the Second World War, and distantly remembers the sights and smells of the old Europe before the wars of the twentieth century marred them. Travelling back to Berlin, Michael recalls how everything that he saw was a sort of 'ordered chaos' or bricks laid out in builder's rows next to the bombed landscape as the city attempted to rebuilt.

Further on into his short visit, Anna recounts to them both a dream she had of travelling in a limousine with the author as they made their way through a forest of vast diversity; of trees of every conceivable kind layered upon each other.

Chapter VII Analysis

Chapter Seven concerns itself on what links the past with the present, what these connections are made of and how they operate. Just as in the previous chapter the author used the figure of Charles Swinburne and the poets recorded memories of his Ashburnam grandmother, in this chapter the author's friend Michael Hamburger performs a similar role in linking the past and the present.

This use of the individual to link the past and the present is by now a tactic that we can see and recognize (the author used his own friend Frederick Farrar previously in the

book to perform the same literary device). It helps the reader to really feel for the past that the author is trying to evoke and helps the author make his point about our relationship to the past.

Michael Hamburger, having seen Berlin years before the Second World War as a child and seeing it later after the Allied Victory exists within the book as a kind of living testament to the past, a bridge to long ago events. We can sense that in his recollections the author is using Hamburger to describe the fact that we are all of us a little like the Charles Swinburn figure of the previous chapter - we are all living testaments to a forgotten past, and all carry within us hidden histories.

Alongside these metaphors within this chapter is the symbolism of feeling lost, adrift, and in a sea of references that we are unable to understand. By constantly using dream and psychological imagery (the maze of Dunwich, the hallucinations of Michael Hamburger, Anna's dreams) the author sets an unreal, or a 'hyper real' tone to the whole chapter where it is easy to feel like the author is drowning in a sea of symbols and memories. This effect is quite deliberate, as the repeated use of these emotional and psychological elements adds to the books whole narrative mood of shifting between the known and the unknown, the material and the immaterial. It also works to describe how the author himself and the individual is caught amidst Time, History and their own Psyche. The author and the character of Michael are able understand themselves through their feelings, their memories of their past, and the associations that they can draw between them.

Chapter VIII

Chapter VIII Summary

The next day sees the author travelling out of Middleton through Woodbridge to the ex-military bases at Orford, following the Anglian coastline as it meanders southwards. Soon after leaving Middleton he falls into conversation with a Dutchman by the name of Cornelius who came here looking to buy a large tract of land. His family were sugar beet farmers, and what follows is a discussion of how sugar beet in fact made up the principle wealth and industry of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (before the Great World Wars). It becomes obvious to the author that many of the great artistic endeavours of the world (from the Hague to the Tate) owe their existence in part to the wealth of the sugar industry, which sought to legitimise itself by buying into the high society art market, funding museums and galleries all over Europe.

This edge of decadence and the fading of glory continues through the chapter as the authors travels through Woodbridge and the estate of the Fitzgeralds, a rich, aristocratic family who were once so powerful as to be one of the wealthiest families in Europe. Their later-day scion, who died at the turn of the twentieth century himself grew to hate his own rich heritage and took to living first in a small cottage on the grounds of his country estate (the family mansion), and after that seeking to sell the property back to the state and moving into a tiny two bed bungalow cottage in the local town. Fitzgerald himself was besotted with very few people, one another younger man whom he saw as his muse and his dearest companion, and in his later years a Mr Crabbe who tended and cared for him until his death.

The story of Fitzgerald marks for the author the fate of those curious people who lived from the late 1800's to the early 1900's, a creature of a bygone age who was out of place in the modern world. This fact he sees reflected as he remembers a journey he made through Southern Ireland and staying at another grand country estate, the home of the Ashbury's.

The Ashbury's turn out to be a group of three unmarried daughters, their mother and older brother who live in the decaying Ashbury mansion whilst their grounds all begin to be swollen up with weeds, and their tasks seem to have no meaning or benefit. On his last day, the author remembers, the older brother asked him to stay and watch some old cinetapes of what the estate was like in its heyday, with workers and grand balls and rich cars. That was before the Irish Troubles, when the Republicans sought to throw the aristocracy off the land and the economy went into a deep depression. During the early part of the Twentieth Century Southern Ireland was in such a bad state that mansion after castle was either sold off or left to rot and ruin, and only a very few of the surviving aristocracy are now left.

Coming back to his surroundings, the authors finds a similar tale to be told around Woodbridge, where once there was a very strong German and English collaborative

effort to built healthy spar towns, hotels and pleasure resorts. After the death of Kaiser Wilhelm and the years that led up to the World Wars that connection between the two countries was lost, and the estates and pleasure palaces and hotels were similarly sold off, bought by the state or by property developers.

His last visit in this chapter concerns the authors visit to 'Shingle Street' and Orfordness. Outside of these old and derelict seaside resorts of Woodbridge resides the long shingle and stone sandbank of 'Shingle Street'; a wide desolate landmass that was once occupied by the Ministry of Defence during and after the Second World War. Now abandoned, the author walks across this empty wasteland wondering at the horrors of the weapons this facility once made, in little hollowed out and ruined huts still visible in the landscape.

Chapter VIII Analysis

Chapter Eight is principally concerned with the collapse of the Empire, and the events that directly lead to our present modern era. Using the figure of FitzGerald as another psycho-pomp who travels between the 'forgotten era' of the 1800's and the turn of the twentieth century the author examines how the individual psyche, and each person's personality is also the cause for history becoming lost. We understand through the authors use of Fitzgerald that as an individual he was distressed and upset by his childhood and upbringing, and abhorred the modern intensive farming techniques that he saw employed all about him. He was an exile from his own past who didn't want to move into the future yet also one who similarly found that the future was corrupting and darkening.

Similarly, the author finds resonances here with the Ashbury's, as a family who couldn't survive in the modern era as they had been brought up in the traditions of the old one, and so did not know how to adapt to the waning, decaying of their society and the shifts in national politics.

The final scenes of the journey in Chapter Eight; the ex military weapons base at Orfordness, is set as a counterpoint against the figures of the Ashbury's and the Fitzferald's. The sudden, new, and deadly technologies of the cold War somehow seem more devastating and at the same time more corrupting and empty than even the worlds that these old families inhabited. This is another use of the author's themes and metaphors of the decaying nature of all time.

Chapter IX

Chapter IX Summary

Chapter Nine (IX) sees the author travelling out of Orford to the area known as 'The Saints' a collection of villages near Ditchingham at the end of Suffolk and the end of Sebald's pilgrimage. His first stop is at Chestnut Tree Farm, where he visits his friend Thomas Abrams who, peculiarly, has spent his life building a scale model of the Temple of Jersualem as it was prior to the time of Christ.

Abrams is presented almost as a modern day eccentric, who has gained international respect for his scholarly dedication to his art. What was once a pastime has since become an obsession as he tries to recreate brick by brick, a 1:1000 scale model of the birthplace of the Judaeo-Christian traditions. Now courted by Jewish Elders, Californian Evangelists and even the Rothschild's, Abrams is bemused at this interest and awe as he quietly works away at his life's project.

Continuing his journey into the Saints' villages the author reflects on the fate of Charlotte Ives, a wealthy, local woman of good social standing who, as a young child was the student to the disgraced Vicomte de Chateaubriand. What follows is a study of those times in the eighteenth century when, her father a Reverend took pity on a French nobleman driven out of his homeland by the vagaries of the French Revolution and asked him to stay with them to teach his young daughter Charlotte. Over the years the pair grew closer as he taught her languages, history, philosophy and music until such a time as he felt that he had to make his departure. On their last meal the Reverend asked the Vicomte to marry Charlotte, to which Chateaubriand replied that he could not, that he had already been married years ago (a scheme engineered by his sisters), and, breaking his own and Charlotte's heart left their family estate.

Many years later, as Chateaubriand rose in prominence he took to writing his confessional memoirs and wondered what would have been better - disappearing into a peaceful, content life in the English countryside as a farmer or doing as he did - remaining honest but instead seeing the horrors of the Revolution, the rule of Napoleon and the reinstatement of the July monarchy. He eventually became the French Ambassador to the English court, and it was there that he met Charlotte again late in life, who was now married to Admiral Sutton. Chateaubriand never really recovers his emotional poise.

The author travels through the Saints' villages to Ditchingham cemetery, where he visits Charlotte's tomb and sees other graves of equal antiquity - dating back to the seventeen hundreds. Here he muses on the massive trees that stand in the cemetery and other great trees that he has known. Even these have suffered the depredations of history, as Dutch Elms Disease ate away at the grandest trees near where the author lived and the Great Storm of October 1987 destroyed the rest. The authors account of the storm is almost dreamlike as he considers how the only thing that was left was the ruined clay

soil that could not support the verdant shade-loving plants any more and wide and open skies filled with stars.

Chapter IX Analysis

In this chapter, we see the author turning away from his earlier discussions of Empire and the effects of Time on the grand legacies of the past and instead turns his attention to the human. By focusing on the life of Chateaubriand the author is describing how emotions and an individuals actions play a key important role in our appreciation of History, and how sometimes these personal feelings, these losses and victories are lost or are covered by large events.

In a sense, the author can be said to be juxtaposing the concept of 'History' against that of 'Time'. History is, in effect, a created thing filled with the actions of Empires and historical events such as the fall and rise of Empires, Revolutions and Wars. This History, even though we all partake and owe something of our past to it, clouds the issues of our real emotional lives and and it is easy to forget 'the little people' or the human actors, what they felt and why they did what they did in the course of Time.

The author continues this personal reflection in the way that he examines Ditchingham cemetery and the lives of the great trees that he has known and sees around him there. Trees occupy a curious, overlooked place in Time - they are largely forgotten and thought of as old, as parts of the landscape and as parts of History, where in actual fact the author is asserting that they have more in them akin to ourselves as individuals immersed in Time. Like the example of the Herring in previous chapters, the Tree can be said to be an analogy for the human condition - how they are individual, unique, overlooked, and yet form bridges between the past and future events before finally being brought low by the ravaged of Time itself.

Chapter X

Chapter X Summary

Chapter Ten (X) exists, like the first chapter in this book outside of the narrative journey that the author makes, and in it the author returns to his muse the Scientist, Philosopher and Doctor Thomas Browne.

Thomas Browne, he writes, held within his collection a book detailing an almost fictitious library of wonders (or Museum of Marvels). Some of the items of which were real objects, some of which Thomas Browne himself owned or had seen, and many others that he had not or had only heard of. The book is like a catalogue of marvellous sites, books, artefacts and visions that would make up the ultimate collection of curiosities. Here the author describes some of the items in the Museum, from the lost treatise' of King Solomon and other historical figures to works of art and visions of fabulous lands, or a complete botanical dictionary of all the plants that existed under the sea. Included within this account are the two hollowed out bamboo canes carried by friars who had bent sent to China as envoys, and returned carrying within their walking sticks the cocoons of silk moths.

The rest of the final chapter now concerns silk production or seri-culture. Silk production began in the legends of ancient china, as the Celestial Emperor told his Empress and her female attendants to start cultivating the silkworm, and from it produce the threads that could be woven into silk. This industry so perfectly suited their climate and they guarded this secret so jealously that China became rich out of Silk trade (producing the lightest and strongest fabric yet known to humanity). After sericulture was eventually introduced to the West it spread from Byzantine Europe to Greece and the Mediterranean before eventually the court of King Henry IV himself was introduced to its mysteries. Here he introduced the culture to France and allowed the fleeing Flemish and Hugenot families (fleeing persecution from Europe) to oversee the silk trade in Norwich, Great Britain. They soon became some of the most powerful businessmen in the British Isles.

The author reflects how this strange process has become the fascination of countries all over the world, as silk production was introduced to Germany by the Kaiser's but quickly failed before its reintroduction by the Nazi Reich who saw in its selective breeding and control over product the perfect system of production.

Silk production failed, inevitably, to bring about the social changes and advances in wealth that it promised to the World but, the author writes how even as late as the death of Queen Victoria we saw that mourning silks were still in fashion. The very closing monologue of the book tells the reader how mourning silks - or the light black coloured drapes of the very finest weave of silk were and are used as a a sign of the richness and honour afforded to the dead.

Chapter X Analysis

In the final chapter of The Rings of Saturn, the author ends the book on a strangely meditative note which draws together strands of theme and meaning from throughout the book. Here we see the theme of corruption, finality, endings, and decay in the rise and fall of Empire and the fall of the silk industry and yet, at its very heart is a the mystery of the self-generative silkworm.

Placed in comparison with the rest of the book (which has been about the gradual decline of all things), the final chapter points myopically at the very strange mystery at the heart of Time (for the author). This mystery is symbolised by the silkworm or the creature that recreates itself in four successive cocoons before becoming an almost translucent and ethereal moth. Its after products (the webs and strands of fibre which become silk) are some of the strongest materials known to the world, and long outlive the small beast. This silk itself, even though it is a by-product of the life of the moth has itself become an obsession for civilizations and people alike.

In this way, the silkworm and sericulture can be seen as a metaphor for the individual's place in Time itself. The individual inevitably passes away, and we might hope that there might be something immaterial, beautiful and ethereal at the end of our lives, but what we are left with is the works and the artefacts, the doings of people left in the objects that they create, the buildings and the books and the impacts on other people around them. It is these objects which make up the stuff of History and which obsesses whole Empires, all the while forgetting the soul-like creature that first spawned them; the individual. This crowning metaphor can be understood as the the real reason behind the whole book, and the authors own answer to his confusion and feelings of emptiness that plagued him on the journey through the East Anglian countryside.

Characters

W.G. Sebald

The central character of the book is the author himself, W.G. Sebald was born in the Bavarian Alps, from where he studied at the Freiburg University before moving to Britain (East Anglia) and settling down.

As a character within his own book Sebald takes the central position of the entire narrative: the entire novel is written in the first person style, and the authors own recollections, studies, feelings and dreams become important pieces of the narrative and the clues which drive the book onwards. As the author is casting Himself-As-Narrator as a character, he himself takes on a slightly fictitious air as he attempts to perform upon himself the same kind of treatment that we might expect of a fictional character within a novel. Just as in a normal work of fiction we investigate the actors actions, their feelings and responses; we are doing the same to the author himself - a technique that clearly marks this book as owing itself to Postmodernism.

Sebald-as-Character appears to be a man confused, amused and amazed at life in general, and the passage of events that make up 'Time' in particular. This obsession is in part motivated by his own feelings of internal desolation after experiencing the loss of a friend and suffering a nervous - emotional breakdown. As he reflects on his emotions he writes about a pilgrimage he took a year earlier when he walked between just outside of Lowestoft to Bungay in his home country of Suffolk, and all of the thoughts, recollections and salient feelings he experienced there. His actions as a character almost fade into insignificance (the act of physically walking) as we hear the narrator's interior monologue and learn of the interior journeys and connections that he is making. We can surmise that whilst the book is set within Sebald-as-Narrator and Sebald-as-Character, it is really a method to use himself as a method to explore himself, his interior landscape and his psyche.

Frederick Farrar

Frederick Farrar is one of the few 'living memory' characters in the books The Rings of Saturn by WG Sebald. Frederick Farrar was a neighbour and a close friend of the author whilst he lived in East Anglia, who forms a character in the book as the author travels once again through Lowestoft to revisit a favourite landscape.

Farrar was an elderly gentleman at the time that the author knew him, who clearly remembered the outbreak of hostilities that marked the beginning of the First World War. The author uses the character of Farrar as a living bridge and a testament to a far off time which almost seems lost to our modern day selves as he contemplates the town of Lowestoft seen through Farrar;s eyes, and the strange, ominous importance of 'The Last Post' being played one day at school.

By setting his friend Frederick within the narrative of this book, the author succeeds in bringing to life some of his message and the material of the work. The idea that history and the past is not really dead in so far as any one can remember it or pass on those stories of about it. The author also uses the recollections of Farrar almost as a modern day herald of a lost time (symbolised by that Bugle playing the war memorial, The Last Post). In a literary way, the character of Farrar and his memories are used as a psycho-pomp between the modern world of appearances and this darkening, almost forgotten history that the author is exploring.

George Wyndham Le Strange

George Wyndham Le Strange is one of the strange historical figures who appears in the book as the author travels near his old home. Lord Wyndham was a tank commander who helped liberate the Belsen concentration camp during the Second World War whom, afterwards took to a reclusive life, becoming ever more strange as he took to living underground and never leaving the confines of his home. He even gave his entire land and fortune away to his housekeeper, on the proviso that she never talked to him during meal times.

This strange figure is used by the author as an example of the unique, the particular and the individual that make up the progress of history. The impact of this figure piques the interest of the reader into individual stories and histories, as we are forced to wonder who these individuals are who made up history, what motivated them and what became of them as the great events of civilisation moved on.

The character of Wyndham Le Strange can also be seen not just as the particular and the unique amidst the sea of Time, but also as evidence of the theme of corruption, or the 'darkening' and 'winding down' and the narrator sees everywhere. As the man's life became stranger, smaller and quite literally darker (as he chose to live underground) so too this can be seen as a metaphor for what can happen to whole civilisations and events.

Joseph Konrad

Joseph Konrad the writer is another particular character whom the author writes about during the book. It is revealed that the writer of 'The Heart of Darkness' (which attacked the effects of colonialism) himself had a lost, a forgotten past in which his father was a Polish social activist against their Russian occupiers during the nineteenth century and he saw both his parents pass away before becoming a sailor and working for the colonial expansion into the Congo.

Konrad is depicted as a chronicler of his times, but also as a relic of a past time, of pompous empires with expansionist aims. The author studies the writers life story and his works as a way to highlight the similarities and differences to our own times: how sometimes great atrocities can be covered over, forgotten or misunderstood.

Konrad can be seen alternately as a poor figure in the book, who was himself not able to fight against the human rights abuses that he saw committed against the Congolese, and we are reminded of just how shockingly relevant this story is for our modern times of Globalisation. The story of Konrad and his involvement with Roger Casement and the Congo is in itself a very fitting piece of 'lost information' that itself could become an important fact for understanding our own modern times.

The very fact that the author focuses so much attention on Konrad (and some of the historical figures in the book) points to the authors belief that by understanding individuals we can come to understand history, and that sometimes the vagaries of chance (of one person meeting and influencing another) could be the pivot that changes the course of civilisation, were we to understand all of these individual connections deeply enough.

Roger Casement

Roger Casement is another historical figure who features in one of the chapters of The Rings of Saturn. The inclusion of this character is perhaps an example by the author how our accepted version of history can be so misleading, could in fact be a misrepresentation or at the very least is a gloss over deeper truths.

Roger Casement was the last man to be hung in the British Isles for High Treason, where he connived with the German Reich to support the Irish Easter Uprising (fighting the English Rule of the time). What we discover through the authors investigations is that Roger Casement had a passing acquaintance with the author Joseph Conrad, whom he had met whilst working as a diplomatic envoy to the Congo. Casement unequivocally opposed the colonial expansion into the Congo, pointing to the oppression of the Congolese peoples, and afterwards, when sent to the Amazon formed the same opinions. Despite being awarded medals and a knighthood for his work overseas, Casement turned down these honours and instead worked to highlight the plight of the Southern Irish under British Rule in the British Isles at the turn of the twentieth century. His continual opposition to the British monarchy, colonialism in all of its forms and his siding with an armed rebellion earned him his eventual death for High Treason. In his prosecution a diary was revealed where he was said to have plotted the uprising and was also a secret homosexual (still a crime at that time). The author attempts to paint a full picture of Roger Casement's life and his previous attitudes about the world hegemony to better understand why he felt so strongly as to approach the German Reich for help in his personal crusade.

Objects/Places

The Hospital Window

The Hospital Window is one of the first visions and objects in the book, it is important because it at once symbolizes the authors very real incarceration in a psychiatric hospital following a nervous breakdown and also his internal incarceration in a world devoid of meaning and full of desolation.

The Burial Urns

The Burial Urns described by Thomas Browne are talked about by the author being found throughout Norwich and Suffolk and hold a peculiar fascination as they symbolise the things that we wish to live beyond our own deaths. They are in a sense time capsules from the past to the future and contain also an analogy to the silkworm and the hope for a rebirth or a metamorphosis.

Rembrant's Painting of 'The Dissection'

The author talks about Rembrant's painting and travels to see it ensconced in The Hague during the book. Here it takes on new relevance as the scientific dissection and understanding of death and of the physical finality of life but contains for the author a contradiction. The scene it depicts is removed from the actual essence of life as the participants fail to understand what they are looking at or why.

The Herring

The Herring, as an object and creature is talked about by the author as being of vital importance to the economy and the culture of the East Anglian fishermen and within it the author finds resonances with our own fragile human state and the mysterious qualities of its post-death phosphorescence.

The Imperial Carriage

The Imperial Carriage is one carriage of a train found at a deserted branch line in the rural coastline of Suffolk. From its history the author draws out his speculations on the relics of Empire, how they are left long after their use and are continually reused and re-purposed by the human imagination.

The Dunwich Maze

The Dunwich Maze is not a 'real' place but becomes so in the course of the narrative as the author gets lost in the footpaths that criss-cross the dunes outside of Dunwich. As the author gets lost the Maze becomes a figurative place for his own interior sense of confusion and symbolise the maze of the psyche itself.

Shingle Street

Shingle Street is the colloquial name for a spur of land that runs by the coast on the banks of the river Ore outside of Woodbridge. It is a long spit of shingle, dune and sand that was once occupied by the British Ministry of Defence as a weapons facility. In its now abandoned desolation and threat the author finds the themes of desolation and emptiness that had plagued him earlier in the book.

Thomas Abrams' Temple of Jerusalem

The scale model of the Temple of Jerusalem is visited by the author as he goes to see one of his acquaintances and friends who is also its creator. It can be said to be a study of the works of History set in replica, and represents humanity's obsession with the past.

Coastlines

Coastlines are a frequent place visited by the author through his journeys described in this book. They not only represent the edges of things; where the material becomes the immaterial or the known the unknown, but also the edge between fact and fiction and between history and the mind.

The Silk Moth

The silk moth is encountered at the very end of The Rings of Saturn but is referenced obliquely several times throughout the novel. It holds a fascination for the author not only for the miraculous industry and material that can be produced from it, but also by its metamorphic ability.

Thomas Browne's Museum Causaeum

Thomas Browne's Museum is a fictional encyclopedia of curiosities and wonders of the world at the time of the early eighteenth century. Within its listings are such wonderful things as impossible creatures, lost treatises and writings of great historical figures and also real world things (or at least possible things such as the hollowed out bamboo canes that were carried by Western Friars, travelling from China and secretly carrying the cocoons of the silkworm).

Themes

Death/Endings

Death, finalities, and endings are a continual theme of the book and is used overtly as in the discussion of Thomas Browne's works or subtly by his intimations of loss and creeping decay. The Theme of death is first fully made known by the author telling us of the event that sparked off the entire book; the death of a close friend. Afterwards we are led into a study inspired in part by the eighteenth century doctor, philosopher, and theologian Thomas Browne who believed that everything diminished and finally died. This study makes up the backbone of the entire book as the author takes on this research as he studies the legacies of empires, individuals and objects.

Everywhere he goes he sees the ghosts of things that came before and vestiges of the past. The author marvels at grand structures such as the Chinese Empire, or the colonial rule over the Congo which have all since faded and passed away. This obsession with endings leads the author to study the rich houses and the theme of Corruption as well as all of the curious individuals who were themselves living in the 'end times' or the turn of the Seventeen, Eighteen and Nineteen hundreds. These people (such as Swinburne, Wyndham, Fitzgerald, or Chateaubriand) become like ghosts themselves straddling the ages whose own biography describes the effects of the theme of 'Endings.'

Corruption

Corruption is an implied theme in the book The Rings of Saturn. It starts in the very first chapter as the author feels this sense of creeping emptiness and desolation, and sees the strange red blotches on his dead friends face. The theme carries on all the way through to the very end of the book as the author considers the after effects of the Great Storm of 1987 turning once fruitful parkland into desolation, and also in the machinations of the Nazi reich as they sought to turn the silk worm sericulture to their own ends.

The corruption can sometimes be seen in the form of decay (the buildings on the coastline of Dunwich crumbling into the sea), as in the crumbling mansion of the Ashbury's. However it can also be implied in the actions of ever complex societies, including the First and the Second World Wars, the treatment of the Congolese people, and the moral corruption that becomes apparent as the author considers the effects of greed and expansionism.

History/Time

The themes of History and Time are similarly overt in this monologue of W.G. Sebald. The book concerns itself most directly with History, with the passage of time and the

events that have led us to our present places in life. He does this by taking in turn the places that he passes on his travels and studying their history, their formation and their trials and tribulations - always with startling revelations.

The author also looks at the individuals in his own life and the personalities that used to inhabit the Suffolk countryside as a means to study History - who they were, what they did and what they might have felt and what impacts they might have had on the landscape and society around them. All of the figures encountered in the book are at one and the same time caught and trapped by History (Chateaubriand is a immigrant from Revolutionary France, the Ashbury's hostages of the changing political climate of southern Ireland), they are people to which History happens to, and from which these people much try to survive and adapt.

History is itself seen in opposition to Time. Whereas History is the parade of events that are often characterised by politics and the actions of whole nations, history is also oppressive, and can obscure the real lives and feelings of people involved in Time (the case of Conrad and Casement, one of the previous Secretary Generals of the United Nations).

Style

Point of View

The Point of View of The Rings of Saturn starts from the first person (that of the author and narrator WG Sebald), and delves into the third-person omniscient as the narrator observes the events of history in relation to the landscape. WG Sebald is an unapologetically unreliable narrator, in the sense that this is book can be described both as a Subjectivist and a Post-Modern piece of work. This means that all of the events that happen through the course of the narrative are filtered through WG Sebald's own perception and psychology, and, where he is talking about a historical event he freely speculates about the supposed feelings and events that might have happened or might have been observed.

This shifting Point of View firmly places the reader into Sebald's interior landscape, especially as we understand that, for the post modernist, the interior memories, impressions and feelings are just as valid a source of fact as the 'events' of a particular encounter, or historical fact.

Elsewhere through the course of the novel, the author uses other points of view (usually the people that he has known, friends, or people who have told him interesting facts) to impart information. This gives us the impression that all of the events of the novel, and indeed of the History that he is introducing us to, is only half understood and that individual people are the windows through which we are allowed to understand any event.

Setting

The Setting of The Rings of Saturn takes place physically along the East Anglian coastline of Suffolk, and travels from Somerleyton Hall through Lowestoft to Orford, Woodbridge and finally Ditchingham at the southern tip of Suffolk.

The Setting is remarkable in the way that the narrator relates to it at once traversing it as if it were a normal physical description of towns and lanes, but also treating it as a terra incognita, filled with phantasms, visions and oddities. In a very real sense the Setting of The Rings of Saturn isn't merely the coastline of Suffolk but really the edge and coastlines of the authors own psyche, as he sees reflected within the landscape triggers and memories that are buried deep within himself. Although externally 'commonplace' (a quiet, fairly typical example of Great British countryside), the author manages to show how even the 'normal' and the mundane harbours sudden strangeness's and even wonders. He does this by finding the unique halls, manor houses and establishments of the local vicinity and delving into their past, revealing that this bare, quite boring piece of landscape actually harbours secrets.

This melding of the physical geography and the psych-geography of the author becomes so complete that at various points in the book we are unable to tell where we are as observers: whether in a phantasm of the narrator's mind or in an actual piece of the Suffolk countryside. At times the countryside takes on almost an alien quality - as if the landscape itself where unknown and, almost hostile. This appreciation of the external settings in this way is used as a literary device by the author to highlight the interior landscapes that he is travelling in and further helps the impacts of his recollections and stories.

Language and Meaning

The language of The Rings of Saturn is dense and knowledgeable; as befitting a serious academic text or a study of history. This can be seen in the authors use of exact terms and words (sericulture) his use of the characters surnames as their recognisers and his precise tone of phrase. His account is peppered with scientific and historical terms which further 'sharpen' the content and allows the reader to be encouraged into an understanding of his subject matter.

However, that being said, even with this academic and precise phraseology can be seen a sort of subjective playfulness as the author surrounds the drier, more academic descriptions with his own thoughts, feelings and intimations. These intensely personal accounts of how he is feeling and reacting give the feeling that we are witnessing a thoughtful but somewhat lost narrator try to navigate serious and weighty matters, and further adds to the book's tone entire.

On the whole, The Rings of Saturn is very interesting and engaging - filled as it is with facts, characters and particular things. However the delivery of some of the material can appear dry or lacking in real emotional depth as the language is so precise and academic.

Structure

The Structure of The Rings of Saturn is one of the key factors of the book that sets it apart from other memoirs, travelogues or novels. Split into ten Chapters which are each of roughly equal length, the The chapters (on the whole) chart the Narrator's and authors journey through East Anglia, Great Britain, from the coastal town of Lowestoft to Bungay. Inside these chapters however, and through the course of the journey the author repeatedly uses flashbacks, flash-forwards, scenes from history and his own interior dream-scape so that it appears that the movement of the novel isn't so much in a straight direction overland, but also moves sideways through Time and WG Sebald's own interior psyche.

The storyline itself equally moves from the observation of the East Anglian coastline to historical events: the attack of the Belgium fleet some six centuries previously, and from there just as easily to Sebald's dreams of ominous threat, and imminent danger. This movement of the narrative is called Subjectivist, and refers to the fact that the author is

painting a journey as it happens from his own subjective viewpoint. His own reminiscences, memories, and prodigious knowledge of the local history are all equally valid to the structure of the book as if they too are places to go to. In this sense the Structure of the book mimics somewhat the treatises of the early Renaissance (a fact which is emphasised by the author's fascination with the physician, philosopher, and writer Thomas Browne), where the novel is not necessarily a set of plot pieces adding to a resolution, but is actually a series of thoughts and musings on a subject.

The fact that the structure of the novel leads us on a journey to a final location gives the reader a contradictory sense of purpose and direction: we expect a revelation at the very end. When this does not happen, we realise that the rambling journey (both physical and psychological) is itself a metaphor for the rambling journey that individuals make through the course of their lives, and indeed that History itself takes (even though we are mistakenly given the impression that History and Culture is developmental).

Quotes

"At all events, in retrospect I became preoccupied not only with the unaccustomed sense of freedom but also with the paralysing horror that had come over me at various times when confronted with traces of destruction" (Chapter I, p. 3).

"...Browne scrutinizes that which escapes annihilation for any sign of the mysterious capacity for transmigration that he has so often observed in caterpillars and moths" (Chapter 1, p. 26).

"If i now look back at those times, Frederick once said, it is as if i were seeing everything through flowing white veils" (Chapter II, p. 48).

"I felt as if I were in a deserted theatre, and I should not have been surprised if a curtain had suddenly risen before me" (Chapter III, p. 76).

"But no one knows what shadowy memories haunt them to this day" (Chapter IV, p. 98).

"We may draw from this that it was precisely Casement's homosexuality that sensitized him to the continuing oppression, exploitation, enslavement and destruction, across the borders of socal class and race" (Chapter V, p. 134).

"We simply do not know how many of its possible mutations the world may already have gone through, or how much time, always assuming that it exists, remains" (Chapter VI, p. 154).

"I saw the labyrinth, the lightly sandy ground...a pattern simple in comparison with the torturous trail I had behind me, but one which I knew in my dream, with absolute certainty, represented a cross-section of my brain" (Chapter VII, p. 173).

"...a sudden, disastrous collapse would occur in the midst of the encroaching decay that went almost unnoticed, and had assumed the character of normality" (Chapter VIII, p. 218).

"It felt as if I were passing through an undiscovered country, and still remember that I felt, at the same time, both utterly liberated and deeply despondent" (Chapter VIII, p. 234).

"It seemed as if someone had pulled a curtain to one side to reveal a formless scene that bordered upon the underworld" (Chapter IX, p. 266).

"Now, as I write, and think once more of our history, which is but a long account of calamities" (Chapter X, p. 295).

Topics for Discussion

Discuss the significance of the silk worm in W.G. Sebald's 'The Rings of Saturn.'

With reference to the inner caption note, think about what the title of the book 'The Rings of Saturn' means to you and why the author, W.G.Sebald chose it for this work.

In what sense can the author's friends Frederick Farrar and Michael Hamburger be said to be living bridges to a lost age?

How does the author use the idea of 'edges', 'coasts' and 'shores' in his book 'The Rings of Saturn.'

Consider W.G. Sebald's writing style and his narrative voice in his work 'The Rings of Saturn.' What do you think are its strengths and weaknesses? What impact does this kind of writing have on the reader? Is it effective?

Do the characters and the Empires in W.G. Sebald's book 'The Rings of Saturn' are trying to 'hold back the march of Time' as described and to what extent?

Why do you think the author uses himself as the central character in 'The Rings of Saturn' - is it an effective waqy to tell a story?

What is the most moving part of the story, character, memory, or monologue for you from reading 'The Rings of Saturn'? Why?