

Salt to the Sea Study Guide

Salt to the Sea by Ruta Sepetys

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Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: Sepetys, Ruta. *Salt to the Sea*. Penguin, 2015. Kindle edition.

Two unrelated people - Florian and Emilia - meet by chance after he saves her from an attacker, and together they seek shelter in a barn, where they meet other refugees: Joana, Heinz, Klaus, Ingrid and Eva. They get to know a bit more about each other, albeit in a wary way, and Joana tries to help Florian with his injury. She eventually succeeds in gaining at least some of his trust, despite his initial reluctance. It emerges that they are all running from something other than the war, especially the four primary characters from whose perspective the story is told - they are all being "hunted" by something. The other "perspective" comes from a young Nazi officer named Alfred, who emerges, through the things he says and how he talks about other people, as a very callous and dangerous person.

Other personality traits begin to emerge about everyone else in the new "group" assembled in the barn and no-one is by any means perfect. Florian is mistrustful to the point of coldness. He even considers abandoning Emilia for his own safety. Joana is pragmatic yet guilt-ridden. Eva keeps saying harsh things, only softened by the word "sorry," and shows an unwavering will to simply survive. Heinz, the "shoe poet" as he becomes known, is a dispenser of earthly wisdom. The three most "innocent" characters are shown to be Ingrid, the blind girl who otherwise has very sharp insights into other people, Klaus the little boy "adopted" by the shoe poet, and Emilia, who idolizes Florian and maintains an innocent outlook despite all she has been through, though even she is forced to use a gun on a German soldier in self-defense. It becomes clear that they must all simply do what they must to survive.

It also emerges that Emilia is heavily pregnant, but does not tell the truth straight away as to how this came to be. Florian's "secret" is at risk of being uncovered by the shoe poet, a shrewd observer, but he is a good enough man to keep the secret safe. The group take shelter in an abandoned estate, where they manage to find some temporary warmth, shelter and respite from the freezing weather conditions, and to feel temporarily safe. However, this only lasts a short time, as they soon encounter the horrific scene of an entire murdered family and realize that this too is not a safe place.

At the first checkpoint, where they encounter many other evacuees, a bomb falls on the crowd killing many of them, and they are forced to hasten their escape. They make a plan to cross a frozen river to the other side, and Ingrid uses her blindness – and other heightened senses – to her advantage to test the water. Unfortunately, more bombs soon fall and Ingrid ends up falling through a hole in the frozen lake and is lost. They are all forced to keep on going and pushing on. They eventually reach Gotenhafen, with thousands of other refugees, where they also encounter Alfred, and the difference in their personalities really starts to show.



The group has to employ deception to get on board, most of all Florian who is on the run from his former comrades, having stolen a priceless work of art, which turns out to be the reason for his secrecy. A gradual building up of mutual trust - and the disintegration of the barriers keeping them all apart - takes place, as friendship develops, and even a romance between Florian and Joana blossoms. It also emerges, gradually, that each character is holding a secret from everyone else, and these begin to emerge over the course of the novel, as hardships continue. Much longer than expected is spent sheltering in a cathedral near the ship, increasing the chances of any of their secrets being discovered before they are able to board.

After some time, with the exception of Eva who boards another ship which will allow her to take her stuff, they all end up boarding the Wilhelm Gustloff – the ship originally designed for leisurely travel but now a makeshift refugee vehicle - and depart for Kiel. During the voyage, Emilia gives birth to her baby and Joana and Florian affirm their love. A short time into the voyage, the ship is attacked by Russian torpedoes which results in the ship sinking, and the loss of thousands of lives. The true personalities of all the characters begins to emerge, Alfred is shown as cowardly and indifferent to the suffering of others, while Joana, Florian and Emilia do all they can to help those in need. When boarding a lifeboat, Emilia allows the little boy Klaus to take her place, and the shoe poet ends up perishing in the attempt to jump from the ship and reach the lifeboat. Alfred becomes increasingly delusional and falls into the sea and drowns in an attempt to throw in Emilia after discovering her true identity, and eventually Emilia perishes too. Florian and Joana end up adopting Klaus and Emilia's baby, Halinka, and they go on to live a happy life.



Section 1: Joana, Florian, Emilia, Alfred, Florian, Emilia, Joana, Florian, Emilia, Alfred, Joana, Florian, Emilia, Joana, Alfred, Florian, Joana, Emilia, Joana, Florian, Alfred, Emilia

Summary

(NOTE: The chapters in this book are not numbered, but alternative between each main character's point of view, and so each chapter is named after the relevant character. This will mean quite a lot of jumping around between characters, and the same scene being repeated from different points of view. Since each character does not always talk about themselves, but other people and what they observe, it may seem like some chapters named after certain characters do not correspond to the story of that actual person, but the best effort has been made to label each chapter with the character whom it is referencing.)

The first four chapters introduce the four narrators of the story, from whose perspective we see everything. They also occur at the exact same moment in time, from different perspectives, as they all end exactly the same way. The first narrator is Joana, whose opening words “Guilt is a hunter” show a troubled woman who does not have the luxury of dwelling on this guilt for long as she joins a random group of people in fleeing East Prussia. After telling us of her “desertion” of her home country four years previously, a young boy joins the group, who turns out to be an orphan. The group chances upon a young woman, frozen to death, and the narrator, although taking pity, takes the woman’s identification papers because there is simply no time to lose and it is a matter of survival. The next narrator is Florian, who is first seen hiding under trees from “The Black Death” – the engines swarming above. He is an actual deserter of his “side” of the war, but is motivated by conscience, but also because he has stolen something. Then we meet Emilia, a young girl who is also hiding from the enemy in the woods, who tries to warm herself against the freezing cold by thinking of something else. She is suddenly accosted by a Russian soldier who tries to abduct her but is prevented at the last minute. The next narrator is Alfred, a Nazi soldier writing a letter to his sweetheart, bragging about what great responsibility he has and how far ahead he is getting in the ranks. After the end of each character introduction they all hear a bang.

Florian: Two of the characters are hearing the bang for the same reason, as it turns out Florian is the one who shot the Russian in order to protect Emilia. However there is



immediate tension as they realize that the other is on the opposite “side” of the war - he is German and she is Polish.

Emilia: Emilia immediately starts remembering the way the Polish were taught to think of themselves as inferior but seems to have mixed feelings about Florian.

Joana: Joana introduces the cobbler man, or the “shoe poet,” as he warns about the perils of traveling in exile without a good pair of shoes.

Florian: Florian prepares to abandon Emilia as he remembers Germans cannot associate with Poles, but Emilia sees him as a “sleeping knight,” from the tales of knights rising to rescue Poland.

Alfred: Alfred continues to write to his “Hannalore” about how respected he is when he is having orders barked at him by his superior.

Joana: Joana continues to be plagued by her conscience when Emilia and Florian make a sudden entrance into the abandoned barn where the evacuees are sheltering.

Florian: Florian remains evasive and on guard, initially refusing Joana’s offer of help with his wound but then giving in.

Eva, the giant woman, is introduced, who softens the blow of anything hard she says by saying “sorry.” It is made clear that the collective plan is to keep moving west until they reach safety. It also becomes known, via Eva, that Emilia was sent to what was supposed to be a safe place but would later become the scene of Russian brutality, from which she is now fleeing.

Florian: Florian finally accepts Joana’s offer to nurse his wound as it becomes too much; she tries to get to know him, but he refuses to so much as tell her his name.

Emilia: Emilia continues to remember the endless news of death she encountered between her escape from Nemmersdorf, where she came from, and now.

Alfred: Alfred continues to write to his “Hannelore,” sounding almost excited at the prospect of thousands of evacuees having to try to board the ship he is working on.

Joana: While Joana attempts to tend to the significant wound suffered by Florian, they bond - very slightly - over this shared experience, and through being made more vulnerable. After Florian insists that Joana tell him something about her, she makes the staggering admission, “I’m a murderer,” which is perhaps more than Florian was bargaining for. Even so, he is adamant that “I couldn’t let a pretty girl sidetrack me,” so this shows that even this admission was not sufficient to keep him at a distance.

Florian: Florian goes through Joana’s suitcase in a desperate bid to learn more about this potential enemy (as all are to him right now) and he tries to leave, but is stopped by Emilia.



The group begins to rise and prepare to abandon the barn for somewhere safer and warmer, and then realize that Florian and Emilia – “the deserter and the wandering Pole” – have gone.

Florian: Florian keeps telling Emilia to go away and eventually relents and gives her a gun to defend herself should she be attacked again. While the group are walking for hours in the snow, the blind girl in the group, Ingrid, is able to tell much about Florian and Emilia by using her other senses, and she is portrayed as being far more attuned to them than the others could be.

Emilia: Emilia is reminded of her mother when she looks at the trees, and reminisces about stories being told within the hollow of an oak tree. She remembers how her mother died in childbirth and tries to take comfort in nature by talking to the trees while she is walking.

The group finds an abandoned mansion after resigning themselves to having no luck, while Florian plans to abandon Emilia and Alfred talks about Operation Hannibal, a planned mass evacuation.

Emilia: Emilia recalls the day she tried to go to school and found the school shut down, desks piled into trucks and books burning, and how the Nazis said that they “wouldn’t need an education” anymore. She wonders, “Would a German girl open my desk and find my treasures inside?” Emilia also thinks about how she was lucky to get an education before it was too late - until she is ambushed by another soldier and readers hear a bang once more.

Analysis

The first obvious theme in the novel is one of repetition. Sepetys uses this in various subtle ways but the first and most apparent instance is in the very first words of each main narrator, which are, “_____ is a hunter.” Respectively, these are: “Guilt is a hunter” (Joana); “Fate is a hunter” (Florian); “Shame is a hunter” (Emilia); and “Fear is a hunter” (Alfred), which clearly shows that they all feel “hunted” by something. As the story takes place right in the middle of one of the most volatile parts of one of the worst wars in human history, this collective feeling is not really surprising. There is a brief introduction to each of the four narrators, as each one “establishes” themselves and where they are. They are all running from something, in some way, and at the end of each introduction there is a “bang,” which seems to immediately unite them, literally in the case of Emilia and Florian. This also serves the purpose of immediately uniting the core characters, despite their differences, as during wartime people from very different walks of life were forced to come together, and to rely on each other, in order to survive.

The prevalence of snow and ice is notable, as the setting is in the middle of winter, so everyone is freezing, and this is further amplified by the distrust each harbors towards the other. The relentless snow and ice that numbs everyone almost - but not completely - also numbs the “luxury” of feeling, as the only thing they, right then, have in common.



In this way, it seems that the winter serves as a metaphor for the ongoing distrust the characters have to force themselves to gradually overcome. However, understandably, there is a strong reluctance to do so, because no one can really know for sure who is on which side of the war. Informants and spies abounded during these times, and neighbors would denounce neighbors out of fear that they themselves would be targeted should they not obey the authorities. That countries such as Poland, Lithuania and (then known as) Prussia fell right in the middle of the "divide" would only have added to the confusion and uncertainty. Because Florian is a Prussian, and has by his own account been, previously, on the Nazi side, the conflict he feels, and the idea that he cannot trust anyone, is palpable. This is shown through his refusal to reveal any of his identity, and the fact that he bites the stick – given to him to alleviate his pain when having his wounds tended by Joana – “not out of necessity, but in defiance.” They are all brought a little bit closer together as the nurse still has to do her job and tend to those in need and who, for whatever reason, end up in her care. However, Florian is no saint despite his professions to want to "avenge" his betrayal by his Nazi mentor, as rummaging through the nurse's suitcase immediately after he demands that Joana never steal anything from him clearly demonstrates a double-standard.

On the flip side, Alfred - who is later revealed to be separate from the other narrators in more than just distance - epitomizes the narrow “vision” of the Nazi party, with callous, even sociopathic, disregard for anything except for his own interests, and when writing to “Hannelore,” might as well be writing a diary. He describes himself as a “brave man of the Kriegsmarine” and “quite an accomplished watchman,” which is remarkable considering those on the side of innocence are plagued by feelings of guilt, fear and shame. He also serves to heighten the very real danger felt by vulnerable people like the pregnant young Emilia - with no papers or acceptable identity - and the blind Ingrid who the Nazis would consider to be inferior and “undeserving of life” due to her disability.

The personality differences of each of the characters could be said to speak to their humanity; they are all people despite their name, race or nationality, and it becomes ever more apparent that personality will stay the same whichever “side” one is on. Eva is clearly a brusque and unsentimental woman by nature, and the war has done nothing to change that, merely hardening her already tough shell. Joana is a pragmatist who simply gets the job done and does what she needs to do, and again the war has brought out the side of her who excels at helping other people. The “shoe poet,” the elderly man, has grown wiser in his old age and, despite his misfortune, seems to give off an air of “having seen it all before,” and his skills observation are sharp as ever as he discovers Florian's secret, saying, cryptically, that “the shoes tell the story.”

Discussion Question 1

How does the BANG at the very beginning of the novel create a sense of cohesiveness between the currently unrelated main characters? Give three examples.



Discussion Question 2

What is the significance of euphemism thus far in the novel - such as Eve's rather clumsy attempt at it simply by saying "sorry," for example - particularly in the role it appear to play, in this novel, of surviving a war?

Discussion Question 3

Florian is determined not to give away any more about himself than absolutely necessary. What are the main reasons for his not wanting to risk giving away his true identity?

Vocabulary

germanizable, fuhrer



Section 2: Florian, Joana, Florian, Emilia, Joana, Florian, Joana, Emilia, Alfred, Florian, Joana, Emilia, Florian, Alfred, Joana, Emilia, Florian, Joana, Alfred, Florian, Emilia, Joana, Florian, Alfred, Emilia, Joana, Florian

Summary

The group eventually chances upon an abandoned stately house but there is immediately a bad vibe about the place. It was abandoned so quickly that the previous inhabitants were unable to finish dining.

Florian: Florian and Emilia see the house from the distance but they are too scared to approach immediately, waiting to see if they can see whoever is inside.

Joana: Joana goes outside and spots the two, trying to help Emilia who is in shock from shooting the German soldier, and it is only then that it is discovered that she is heavily pregnant.

Alfred: Alfred continues to brag to his "Hannelore" about the size and luxury of the Gustloff, the ship which will eventually attempt to carry several thousand passengers to safety.

Florian: The group warms up in the big house and a record is put on, with a few of them having a dance. Florian reminisces about how he ended up being groomed as an apprentice to a Nazi art collector, thinking he was simply being employed to restore old works of art but was in fact being used as a tool for sprucing up and then pilfering art from its rightful place.

Joana: Ingrid and Joana talk worriedly about the journey across the ice en route to Gotenhafen, and because Ingrid is in danger of being exposed as having a disability, Joana goes to get supplies upstairs but is stopped by Florian. The reason becomes clear later, as Eva makes the grim discovery of an entire family lying dead upstairs, and it is figured out that it was a murder-suicide carried out in order to preserve the family dignity.



The group makes to leave and then see a mass evacuation coming their way. Florian and Joana realize that Emilia has no papers to ease her passage to safety.

Emilia: Emilia becomes increasingly aware of the life growing in her belly.

Florian: Florian realizes that he must pass through the checkpoint with stolen artwork which could get him in serious trouble, but the soldier acknowledges him as a fellow and gives the Nazi salute. The relief is short lived as a bomb falls on the queue killing several people instantly.

Joana: Joana is desperate to go and help the injured, but she is prevented from doing so, making her feel very guilty.

Alfred: Alfred continues bragging, to himself this time, about the pretty girls who will be coming to serve on board the ship soon.

Emilia: The group decides to wait until the ice refreezes over the lake before attempting to cross, and Emilia remembers what her father used to say – “Per aspera ad astra,” Latin for “Through hardship to the stars” in order to keep herself going.

Joana: Joana manages to procure for Emilia the papers of a dead Latvian woman because she bears a passing resemblance.

Emilia: Emilia thinks of the different types of birds there are for various types of unfortunate people.

Florian: Florian describes how he forged a pass in order to go through the checkpoint more quickly and escape charges of treason.

Joana: Joana and Ingrid only narrowly manage to pass the checkpoint due to her blindness, and the shoe poet manages to disarm the soldier with an amiable interest in his sore foot and the promise of better footwear, which has the effect of putting the soldier in a good enough mood to let them go. Joana soon realizes that something is missing from her suitcase, which unbeknownst to her, Florian had stolen.

Alfred: Alfred writes once again to Hannelore about how great the Gustloff ship is going to be and how valuable it is going to be to passengers, saying that tickets “will be more valuable than bars of gold,” some of which Alfred then steals for “posterity.” He notes that ten of the lifeboats are missing.

Florian: Florian takes shelter in a cathedral along with hundreds of other evacuees and checks that his stolen cargo is safe. He recalls the passion which his supervisor, Dr. Lange, had for the Amber Room, an almost mythical chamber of all sorts of jewels and artwork and the holy grail for the Nazis, which they had been stealing parts of bit by bit, and in the process implicating Florian. He has in his possession the ultimate piece of the Amber Room, the amber swan.

Emilia: Emilia thinks more about August, the object of her affection.



They leave the cathedral and begin to attempt to cross the ice. Ingrid insists on going first because she can sense more, but they are ambushed by another round of Russian aircraft firing upon them and Ingrid ends up falling through the ice. Joana: Joana is angry about being prevented, once again, from trying to save someone but they all try to move along on their journey.

Emilia: They confirm that they are going to Gotenhafen and Emilia remembers her father, and how she always had to pretend to be happy to keep him happy.

Florian: Florian is about to be relieved to be continuing onwards alone but the rest of the group catches up with him and together they travel to Gotenhafen.

Gotenhafen is utter chaos when they arrive, with lost people and stray animals everywhere and many distressing scenes. They come across a woman who has stolen a goat from someone, and starts threatening to “sell information” which causes them all to laugh for the first time.

Emilia: Emilia realizes that she is close to giving birth and Florian wonders about his chances of making it onto the ship, thinking that he will have a better chance if he is wounded but, unbeknownst to him, the opposite is now true. The shoe poet trades a pair of shoes for porridge and they find a place to take shelter until the boarding.

Alfred: Alfred receives a worried letter from his mother wishing him well and he merely tells her to stay out of his room.

Joana: Joana finally gets Florian to allow her to examine his injuries, but he still does not tell her his name.

Alfred: Alfred finally meets two members of the group, Joana and Eva, while rummaging through their luggage. He continues to pretend to be a big deal when he is the lowest ranking worker on the ship, and attempts to flirt with Joana, taking her to the doctor to be presented as an available nurse.

Joana: Florian finally tells Joana his name, and she insists to Alfred that they be boarded on the same ship.

Emilia: Emilia distrusts Alfred because of the way he treats a starving dog, and remembers how people always have had to leave her, including when her father left her with another family.

Florian: Florian realizes that he can use Alfred’s self-importance to his advantage and enlists him on a “secret mission” on the condition that all of the group are able to board without imposition.

Joana: Joana is told to only approve those with a good chance of survival for registration but she gives some of them a chance anyway, of whose chances she is not entirely certain. Eva leaves the group because she does not want to part with her valuables.



Florian: Florian remembers his time with the Nazi art restoration team and realizes he had trusted Dr. Lange until he found all his letters to him unopened and realized he did not care. Then they took away his father when Florian went to seek his advice.

Analysis

All of the characters keep secrets to a degree, but while Florian, Joana and Emilia do so out of shame, fear and necessity, Alfred is an altogether different character. He seems to enjoy keeping secrets, which has been exploited by Florian in order to ensure the others' safety, and also in his letters to Hannelore, in which he says that he will only give so much away, without apparent reason, "I mustn't empty my net too quickly. I must keep you, my little fish, swimming to the top of the water for food." This quote shows the amount of control and power he is bent on exerting at every opportunity. He also anticipates the influx of (female) refugees into the ship, admiring the décor, "I liked the look of those mermaids, held captive in the tile," showing that he also likes the idea of having all these women as a captive audience. The fact that he only wants to save Emilia because she resembles "a fine specimen of the Aryan race" speaks most of all to his superficiality.

Septetys is also adept at building tension through certain techniques employed throughout the novel. One is foreshadowing, as Joana talks about how cold and dead the air is when she goes up the stairs of the mansion, which would later turn out to be the scene of an entire family shot dead by the patriarch, rather than allow them to fall victim to the Russians. It is also telling that they did not realize that they were staying in a house with an entire dead family the whole time, and that the toy rabbit she passed on the way up those stairs would later be revealed as that of the little boy.

Another writing technique employed by the author is anthropomorphizing inanimate objects and features of the landscape; namely, the ice. The ice after it claims Ingrid when she fell in, the ice "ached and groaned, like old bones carrying too many years," and with the shoe poet saying, "The ice is arthritic, but no fractures yet," which serves the purpose of ascribing intent to inanimate things and perhaps making them more menacing than they already are. With frequent mention of inanimate things like the trees, the sky, the snow and the ice, the author describes them in ways which show how all the people who had to make their escape in circumstances must have begun to feel after a while.

Furthermore, using Emilia to make most of these observations in her narration serves the double purpose of bringing these things to life - to be either protective or threatening - and to highlight Emilia's active imagination. When it emerges that Emilia is pregnant, Florian's admiration for the girl, in managing to survive and keep going, begins to grow, and he begins to see Emilia as symbolizing more than one thing. She is not only pregnant with a baby but "pregnant with a vision of freedom," but he still tries as hard as he can to keep his physical, and emotional, distance.



Emilia is also the same as she was before, clearly still just a teenage girl, but it emerges that she has already seen and experienced more than she ever should have at her age. She recalls how the Nazis suddenly decided that the Polish should no longer be educated, how they should only be taught "to count and write our name," and that her father disagreed automatically put himself in immediate danger. She recalls how the Nazis would execute Polish intellectuals and how the professors of an entire city met that fate, but Emilia had already learned to read the language so at least for her it was not necessarily too late. In this respect, and in the fact that she is pregnant, she comes to be a symbol of Poland itself; in dire circumstances, subject to more hardships than she could ever deserve, but also, despite everything, hopeful for the future.

The sense of betrayal is also keenly felt by Florian, who learned the hard way that, despite being "on the right side" of the Nazis, that they are ultimately self-serving. The pivotal moment of realization for Florian came when he realized that Dr. Lange had not opened a single one of his letters professing his admiration and commitment to his role as apprentice. This offers more insight into his motivation for stealing the artwork and going on the run, as if he feels that maintaining integrity - turning the injustices of the Nazis upside down - will somehow undo everything they have done.

Discussion Question 1

How are Florian and the shoe poet's personalities similar and different? What personality traits do they share that are helpful to them in a time of war? Why are those traits helpful?

Discussion Question 2

Florian has stolen a priceless work of art from the Nazis, determined to get revenge for their betrayal of him, but the work of art was already stolen. What are Florian's personal beliefs regarding theft, particularly considering it is during wartime? Is there an irony in his particular attitude?

Discussion Question 3

Joana is a trained nurse, yet is prevented on numerous occasions from doing her job, whether it is being distrusted by Florian when attempting to tend to him, or being dragged away from the casualties of the bomb, and Ingrid falling into the ice-covered lake. What does Joana's enduring guilt about this say about her character?

Vocabulary

junkers, documentarian



Section 3: Alfred, Emilia, Florian, Alfred, Joana, Emilia, Florian, Alfred, Joana, Alfred, Joana, Alfred, Florian, Alfred, Joana, Florian, Alfred, Joana, Emilia, Florian, Alfred, Joana, Emilia, Florian, Alfred, Joana, Florian, Alfred, Joana, Emilia, Florian, Alfred, Joana, Florian, Joana, Alfred, Emilia, Joana, Florian, Emilia, Florian, Joana, Emilia, Florian, Joana

Summary

Emilia: Emilia, who was forced to assume the identity of a dead Latvian woman in order to secure her passage, suddenly has an attack of a guilty conscience until a woman with a dead baby is turned away, then she realizes that she has to do it to save her own baby. Emilia remembers when Poland was invaded from both sides and now has no idea which will be the right side to be on.

Florian: Florian finds a propaganda leaflet outside the movie house. Florian gets Alfred to bring him Joana, and preemptively protects her by saying that she is already taken. Florian tell Joana that he was named after sixteenth century painter Florian Abel, which explains the non-German name.

Joana: Joana and Emilia finally board the ship and she is told that she is the first expectant mother there.

Alfred: Alfred continues to speak disdainfully of those who do not accept the “mercy” of the Fuhrer, and Joana is suddenly overcome with guilt and all the emotions of the past four years as she finally has a moment to do so.

Emilia: Emilia is racked with labor pains and has a dream/memory of when her mother died in childbirth, and of the stork flying away at the same time. She feels like the pain



of labor is punishment for the lie she has told which she soon admits to Joana. She gives birth to a baby girl.

Emilia: The truth finally emerges about how Emilia became pregnant. August did exist but he left before the Russians came. They demanded the daughter of the family but the mother told them to take Emilia instead, and Emilia had invented the story of August in order to better cope with the reality.

Florian: While waiting in line to board the ship Florian and the shoe poet learn of a mass tragedy at sea where a ship sunk carrying thousands of Americans, foreshadowing the events to come. A woman tries to buy the boy Klaus from the shoe poet but he refuses, and Florian has to expose his wounds in order to be allowed a chance to go on. Florian reveals that his father was hanged for treason, mentioning Sippenhaft (blood guilt) as a possible reason that he might be blacklisted anyway, even if he had not stolen the art, the map and key. After a tense moment they are all eventually allowed to pass on to the next stage of embarkation. They run into Eva, for the last time, and she tells them that the soldiers are about to start inspecting everyone's luggage.

Joana: Joana is distracted from Emilia by Alfred who tries to make a move on her and she rebuffs his advances.

Florian: Florian is taken aside for additional inspection. He is forced to name Joana as his nurse and eventually has to bluff his way through when the soldier becomes too challenging.

Alfred: Alfred finally unites Joana and Florian, and Joana tells Florian the story about Emilia. They share a kiss and then part for the time being.

Emilia becomes even more determined for her baby to know the "real" Poland, specifically what it was like before the war.

Florian: Florian continues to tolerate Alfred for his purposes despite finding him increasingly intolerable.

Joana: A soldier approaches Joana demanding to know more about Florian and she tries to deflect as much as possible.

Emilia: Emilia finds strength in her baby and though the shoe poet's words that "life has spit in the eye of death," referring to the baby.

Florian: Alfred procures food for Florian, and they begin talking again, during which he recites Mein Kampf, at which point Florian realizes he is a "sociopath in training." Alfred goes to fetch Joana again for Florian, and she sees that there are thousands more on board the ship than there should be.

Joana: She angrily confronts Florian for putting her in danger and Florian tells her the truth about his mission, meanwhile word gets through to the wrong people about his theft and a man-hunt begins for Florian.



Florian: The ship finally makes its departure, and Florian witnesses terrible scenes of desperation to get on board before it pulls away.

Analysis

The theme of war - and its associations with death, despair, hardship, the end of an era - are evoked effectively throughout the novel. However as the story progresses, the theme of birth is brought ever more to the forefront. Sepetys only reveals Emilia's pregnancy at a relatively late stage, about a third of the way into the novel, giving the impression that it is a "twist" in the story, which will further complicate the journey to freedom, and place even more at stake in the event of failure. The author begins to introduce more references to the idea of birth and pregnancy metaphors become more frequent, such as Emilia saying "The Wilhelm Gustloff was pregnant with lost souls conceived of war. They would crowd into her belly and she would give birth to their freedom" and later, "the ship was born of death" as she found out the fate of the man who inspired its name. In this way, Emilia discovered when losing her mother at a young age, birth is dangerous, reflected in the way she is wary of the steel structure, deeming it a ship of war and not a true ally of the sea. So the idea of pregnancy becomes a double-edged sword, but a situation which, nonetheless, is unavoidable. Emilia prepares to reject her baby, because of the circumstances under which it was conceived; Florian points out that Emilia represents the Poland during wartime, and the baby represents the Poland of the future, whose future is currently uncertain, but it is hoped will be a positive and free one. Even with this influence aside, before long motherly love and instinct takes over and she accepts her new baby as her own.

Denial also serves as a powerful tool for various characters, including Emilia, in the story. Her references to birds, or bird-like imagery, is ever-pervasive, and in Emilia's world everything seems to be connected to, or like, birds. She says of Joana and Florian "When birds pair, their plumage becomes more vibrant" as she notices the change in them both. The way Emilia sees everything, partly due to her tendency to see birds everywhere, puts a sort of euphemistic glow on everything. She describes people falling off the ship and into the sea as being "like human raindrops" and trying to do the same for her baby as she sings a lullaby as everyone around her is panicking. That very lullaby refers to "duckies," which her mother once sang to her, which also shows how she finds comfort in visualization, and in passing on tradition.

It also takes a negative turn, when hearing Hitler's words, "When was the helpless goose ever not eaten by the fox?" when referring to the "weak" and "inferior" in society. It is also interesting to compare this with Alfred's letters to Hannelore, in which he makes frequent references to birds, which somehow tie in with his delusions. Furthermore, he, too equally insists upon his love of Germany, the German way, and seems to think it has a bright future - as bright a future as Poland is said, by the other characters, to have. Someone clearly has to lose, in this case. But next to Alfred's obvious delusions of grandeur, believing he is far higher ranking than he is, it is easy to see this confidence in the German side as being far more precarious, which is further



strengthened by the hindsight of over half a century, knowing how the war would eventually be won.

It is also becoming clear that Alfred's increasing delusion, and desire to see the Nazi way succeed, and himself in power, is comparable to Hitler's trajectory. He was barred from serving in Hitler Youth due to a weakness but saw this as a sign that he was destined for greater things, in the same way that Hitler's rejection as an artist was taken as a signal to start the Nazi party, and to start stealing instead of creating art. He also apparently rejects all sense of innate good in favor brutal efficiency, saying "Through instinct we succumb to weakness and emotion." The contrast between the perception of instinct, between Alfred and Emilia, is perhaps best explained in the fact that Alfred experiences no instinct, being a mere "observer" of everything (and being detached from the subsequent tragedy) while Emilia's instinct to survive, and to protect her baby, is merely what it means to be human.

Discussion Question 1

Emilia's pregnancy begins to take prominence in the novel, particularly in the time immediately before giving birth, and pregnancy and birth metaphors appear far more frequently. In what ways can such circumstances as the ones facing the characters be seen as being like birth, or death, or even both?

Discussion Question 2

Alfred is shown to take immense pride in being a member of the Nazi party, in its order, efficiency and (so-called) superiority. In what ways could Alfred, in fact, have been considered a perfect role model for the Nazi regime despite his ultimately low ranking?

Discussion Question 3

Birds are a recurrent theme in the novel, whether literally or metaphorically. In what way does the metaphor of birds fit into the novel as a whole?

Vocabulary

bolsheviks, amber room, red army, blood guilt



Section 4: Florian, Alfred, Joana, Emilia, Florian, Joana, Alfred, Emilia, Florian, Joana, Florian, Joana, Emilia, Florian, Alfred, Joana, Florian, Alfred, Emilia, Florian, Alfred, Joana, Florian, Emilia, Alfred, Florian, Joana, Emilia

Summary

Alfred: Alfred gives a far colder account of the departure, shouting to those left behind “Until death, it is all life!” despite thinking of them as unworthy.

Emilia: Emilia recalls the midsummer tradition where young girls and women create candlelit wreaths and send them down the river in the hopes of them reaching their future husbands, and hers tipped over and caught fire, which she seems to view as a bad omen, as it ended up “quietly sealing my fate.” She changes her mind and then wonders if Florian was the one, saying that in Poland “Saint Florian was fighter of fire.”

Alfred: Alfred gets seasick and is mocked for making a fuss when other soldiers are badly wounded.

Florian: Florian goes to Joana to get a haircut as a disguise in case they are looking for him, and Joana tells Florian that she is a murder, as she is responsible for writing a letter which implicated her cousin and her family and they ended up being deported to Siberia.

Joana: Joana relays the message Alfred gave her to Florian, not realizing what it actually meant but it meant that Dr. Lange was dead and they were most likely coming for Florian too. He rests for a while with the shoe poet, who finally gives his name as Heinz.

Florian: Florian and Joana are, separately, thinking of each other when a series of bangs is heard from each main character’s perspective, as the ship is hit and then begins sinking.

Emilia: Panic begins to hit the passengers on board and Emilia gets frustrated at the passengers frozen on the spot.

Alfred: Alfred witnesses a little girl being crushed by a piano.



Florian: Florian's backpack snaps and falls when he is trying to escape.

Joana: People are trampled underfoot as the panic causes everyone to surge towards the exits, and Joana becomes convinced that they are all going to drown.

Alfred: Alfred continues to show his true character as he is asked to help evacuate people, caring more about getting himself out than anyone else.

Emilia: Emilia reaches the top deck of the ship and witnesses people falling into the sea, singing a lullaby to her baby, Halinka, as she holds onto the railing for dear life. People are fighting each other to get onto lifeboats and it is utter chaos everywhere.

Florian: Florian notices that they are not even filling the lifeboats, of which there are already far too few.

Alfred: Alfred shows perhaps the most callous disregard for life to date as he passes an injured woman begging for help with the thought "she would need help to fix her ruined face."

Emilia: The group all find a lifeboat to get on, and because women and children are prioritized she gets on, Emilia tells Florian to go on only to bring the baby down. By that point there is only room for one more and she tells them to let Klaus the boy go on, then the boat is lowered down. Emilia, Alfred and the backpack are still on board. The shoe poet, Heinz, then jumps into the water to try to get on the boat but sinks and does not make it. Emilia and Alfred manage to free a raft and get on, and she witnesses a teenage boy refused access to a full lifeboat and he ends up sinking into the sea. Joana, Florian, Emilia and Alfred worry about, respectively, the baby and the "wandering boy," and the Polish girl and the rucksack, the "knight" and the baby, and a medal.

Florian: Florian witnesses a sailor try, in vain, to break the glass of the sundeck in order to save the trapped people inside, and is forced to watch them drown. As they all bear witness to the tragedy unfolding in the sea, they each say that whatever respective thing was hunting them in the beginning, "is a hunter" once again.

Analysis

When the ship starts sinking, there is a return to the idea of repetition, as the first that is known of this happening is each character hearing a "BANG," and then all hell breaks loose. This section of the novel is characterized by the horror of sheer chaos, and being helpless as terrible events take place. Alfred's demeanor in this part of the novel is disturbing, as he continues to show his true character, more than ever, during the evacuation. He deems himself a public servant yet steals a coat from a woman trying to put on a lifejacket and only half-heartedly helps people trapped in their cabins, and merely watches when he thinks a man is about to commit suicide. Even when he sees bodies floating everywhere in the sea "like human confetti," getting a medal is his only concern.



This calmness in the face of disorder can be seen as an extreme version of the Nazi adherence to order and efficiency, and their disdain of others who they see as beneath them, and who have less privilege. Earlier on, Florian had noted the “organisation” of the chaos by the Nazi officials, showing their cold detachment from the humanity with which they are dealing, and Alfred has prided himself on being a model soldier and member of the Nazi regime, despite being continually interrupted with demands that he return to his menial tasks, thus widening the gap between fantasy and reality. However, even Alfred had earlier on said that war has a way of getting people to show their true selves, which is just what is happening here.

The true characters of Florian and Joana begin to emerge, showing them to be very much the same people, deep down, as they seem to be, dutifully trying to help whoever they possibly can. Despite these characters coming through for other people, the idea of duplicity is still pervasive enough that it applies to those who turn out to be on the "good side," with Emilia insisting on referring to Florian as a "knight," despite him being just an ordinary man. The reference to St Florian, the Polish saint with whom Emilia was familiar through her fascination with tales and legends, further emphasizes the idea of people being other versions of who they really are. This duplicity also works against Florian; despite his brave attempts to help others, he is still preoccupied - obsessed - with seeing his backpack, with its illicit contents, to safety. This shows that even good people can be fallible, but it is also perhaps symbolic of Florian's determination to hold onto a principle. He is determined not to let the Nazis get away with their theft of priceless works of art, so he must himself commit forgery, and deception, in order to prevent this from happening.

Discussion Question 1

How do Alfred and Emilia - who otherwise have nothing in common - both display a type of detachment, or dissociation, from what is going on around them when the ship is sinking? Why might each of them act this way?

Discussion Question 2

It is only at this stage that real names are finally exchanged: Florian reveals his name, to the shoe poet and to Joana, and the shoe poet reveals his name as Heinz. What is the importance of real names in the novel, and how do they affect the concept of personal identity for each character?

Discussion Question 3

Is it more likely that Emilia's act of self-sacrifice is pure altruism, or can it also be seen as a patriotic act - laying one's life on the line for their country, as which happens during wartime?

Vocabulary

volksdeutsche



Section 5: Alfred, Florian, Joana, Emilia, Alfred, Florian, Joana, Alfred, Emilia, Florian, Joana, Alfred, Florian, Joana, Alfred, Emilia, Joana, Florian, Emilia, Alfred, Florian, Joana, Emilia, Alfred, Florian, Joana, Alfred, Emilia, Joana, Florian, Joana, Florian, Emilia, Florian

Summary

Emilia: Emilia realizes that she has what the knight wants – the bag – and he has what she wants – her baby. The entire ship lights up before going dark again and finally sinking into the sea. She sees dead people everywhere, including a woman whose skirt makes her appear to “pirouette” and several children. Because they have flipped over it gives a grotesque new meaning to the song “duckies with their heads in the water,” and she is overcome with a feeling of shame.

Alfred: Alfred gives an abbreviated, and rather more sympathetic, account of the entire event to Hannelore.

Florian: Florian realizes that despite the scale of the tragedy it would not be reported and that ships would give the area a wide berth so as not to also be targeted. He wonders if his bag and its contents are safe, and if the Amber Room really is a curse.

Joana: Joana thinks the opposite to Florian, that the event will make news around the world, being worse than the Titanic or the Lusitania. Joana thinks about her mother and also wonders if Emilia made it out alive, admiring her self-sacrifice. They then learn that a ship is coming to rescue them.

Alfred: Alfred reveals in his letter that Hannelore had long since been taken away by the Nazis, along with her parents, and that their final parting was her defiant proclamation of being Jewish. He still does not think that he has done wrong.

Emilia: Emilia reveals that Alfred is starting to become delirious and thinks she is Hannelore, then she finally forgets that she is not supposed to be speaking and shouts defiantly that she is Polish, in exactly the same way as Hannelore. Alfred starts verbally abusing her then when she tries to help him; he recoils and ends up losing his balance and falling into the sea and drowning. She sees light approaching.



Florian: A ship arrives to rescue Florian, Joana and everyone else on the lifeboat. The baby is taken up, then the children, then the adults. Florian's hands are so cold he cannot use them to climb up, and he is knocked back, dislocating his shoulder as he tries to grab on again, falling into the sea. He hears Joana telling him to kick and he re-emerges, then is pulled from the water and onto the ship.

Joana: They all try to get warm again, and Florian tells Joana he heard her and she does not know what he is talking about. They have no idea what has happened to Emilia, and learn that they will be landing in a safer place in Germany.

Emilia: Emilia has a vision of being in the future, at home, making doughnuts and rose petal jam with her daughter. Her daughter spots Emilia's mother and brother returning home, as they have the storks who were away all winter, and it becomes clear that this is meant to be Emilia's heaven.

Florian: The scene shifts to a time, more than 20 years later, when Florian and Joana have survived the war and have been raising Klaus and Halinka as their own children, safe in America. He receives a letter from an old acquaintance who hears about Halinka, all grown up now, who has become a champion swimmer but who has run into questions about her nationality due to being born on a ship, and has questions of her own about her mother, about whom she knows so little. Also, his long-lost bag had washed up in Denmark, along with Emilia – “She arrived in February” - and so, despite the reemergence of everything that had been put to rest - both Emilia, and the bag which Florian had been seeking for so long - there is a sense of everything being at peace once again.

Analysis

Sepeyts navigates the culmination of the unfolding tragedy through showing the eventual - if accidental - separation of the main characters. Florian and Joana finally manage to board a lifeboat, but only on the assumption that all the others in their group will follow. Florian and Emilia perform a temporary exchange, Florian gets the baby and Emilia gets the backpack, but again, only on the understanding that it will be temporary. When the sudden choice is flung upon them - only one more can be taken - Emilia's split second decision to let Klaus take her place reveals her own true character, the selflessness of a mother who wants children, even if they are not her own, to survive. This division is all the more poignant as it turns out to be permanent, which can be compared with the war, no-one ever knowing how long it would be, or if they would ever see loved ones again.

Perhaps due to things being at a crucial moment, where it is really a matter of imminent life or death, there is nothing more to lose in a final act of defiance. This idea is introduced when Alfred's letters to Hannelore eventually reveal that she was taken away by the Nazis because she was so sick of Alfred's narcissism, and his oppression of her culture, that she shouted that she was Jewish in public, and to his face. The loud proclamation of her true self reveals more about who she was through the retelling of



Alfred than it might possibly have been if she had been an actual character in the novel. This defiance is echoed later on, when Alfred grows increasingly delusional, and perhaps less of a threat to an increasingly worn down Emilia, who is sick of lying, and sick of hiding. She eventually snaps and declares that she is Polish, and it is Alfred's very rejection of this, the attempt to take her down, which results, ironically, in his own undoing. It would be a very long time before, collectively, the oppressed people would be able to openly claim pride in their culture, but the dire situation of the ship's sinking serves as a microcosm of this event finally taking place.

Through Emilia's final chapter, she has a vision of being reunited with her daughter, her mother, and her little brother, showing that it is meant to be heaven, and revealing to readers that Emilia did not survive. However it is still, in this scene, portrayed as a happy ending, because she and her family are all together again.

One of the most significant parts of the story comes at the very end when, within a letter to Florian, more than 20 years after the sinking, it is said that Emilia washed up on the shore of Denmark, where the letter writer lives, along with his backpack with all his things inside. Florian had requested that they bury the items, still scared of having secrets exposed even with the war long over, and Emilia has been buried near the cottage, finally able to rest in peace. The phrasing "she arrived in February" softens the blow of what must have been a tragic discovery, but the letter still manages to end on a note of optimism and a sense that the worst is over and that everything is finally at peace. The idea of reunion, even if it is immediate, and while still alive, is still evoked as "counting" in the ways that matter, as the author draws the events of one of the most tragic chapters in recent history to a close.

Discussion Question 1

What is the significance of exchange in the novel, particularly for Emilia? What eventual effect would these actions of compromise have on Emilia over time?

Discussion Question 2

Joana mentions, in passing, that this tragedy will come to be as widely known as other sinkings like the Titanic, but has since received far less attention in terms of historical coverage. Why might this be?

Discussion Question 3

In a letter exchange between Florian and an unknown woman, two decades after the ship's sinking, two facts are revealed: his adopted daughter Halinka is having issues with defining her nationality due to the circumstances of her birth, and also that his rucksack containing all his possessions has washed up on the shore. What is the metaphorical significance, if there is any, of these two occurrences, particularly considering that these two were the subjects of an exchange all those years before?

Vocabulary

pirouette



Characters

Joana

Joana's narration is the very first in the novel. She is shown to be fleeing not only the encroaching invasion of her homeland of Lithuania, but the guilt she feels about those left behind, and as it later emerges, of accidentally implicating family members who are deported and face an almost certain death.

Despite this immense burden, she is shown to be the most capable and resourceful character largely due to her medical training and perseverance. This most likely ensures her survival, as her skills are in such high demand when evacuees start approaching, and also when boarding the ship where thousands of them will be needing medical assistance. She is also willing to get to know people such as Florian, who remains guarded for a very long time, as she wants to medically help him.

Due to her down-to-earth nature, she has no qualms about delivering Emilia's baby, and those of many other pregnant women, under extreme pressure; she rebukes the advances of amorous soldiers; and she falls in love with Florian. She and Florian eventually end up caring for Emilia's baby and also Klaus, the little boy.

Florian

Florian is perhaps the most enigmatic character in the novel. From the beginning, he is on the run, just like everyone else, but for different reasons. Until very recently he was an apprentice for someone he thought was an art dealer but was in fact an art thief, pilfering the works of artists from occupied countries to be placed under the ownership of the Nazi regime. Florian developed a very strong skill for replication, and subsequently, forgery.

Once Florian realizes that his skills are being used for underhanded purposes, and that he was lied to by his supervisor, Dr. Lange, he takes his revenge by stealing the most precious piece of art of the entire collection and runs away. Because of this he realizes that he is in grave danger if caught, and so does not reveal his real name until much later on in the novel. Even when beginning to fall for Joana, he does not reveal more about himself than absolutely necessary.

Florian is not afraid to stand his ground when necessary, and knows that Nazis respond to displays of power, having been an "insider" for some time, so he bluffs his way through many of the scenes, including his passage onto the ship. He does his best to ensure the safe passage of the group of whom he has become a member, whether he likes it or not, which shows his capacity to care and be decent despite being on the "wrong" side of the war as a Prussian. He eventually makes his feelings for Joana known, and after they survive the tragedy, he claims guardianship of both the children who end up in their care.



Emilia

The young Polish girl, all on her own, starts the novel by being ambushed by a Russian soldier and saved by Florian. She has already seen immense hardship and this act of saving her life means that she becomes drawn to Florian, calling him her "knight" from then on.

Emilia shows a very unusual inclination to trust others despite what she has endured; it is nearly a third of the way through the book before it is revealed that she is heavily pregnant, and longer still before she admits that the pregnancy is the result of an attack by Russian soldiers who invaded the household where she was staying. Through memories and flashbacks, she reveals more of the life she once had, as a simple teenage girl who enjoyed a simple and happy life at home with her family. She lost her mother in childbirth and her father ended up not being able to afford to keep her at home, so he sent her to live with a family where she was not entirely welcome. She ended up falling in love with the son in the family and invented a story about how it was his baby in order to better cope with her situation.

When Emilia eventually gives birth to her baby, she is planning to reject it at first, because of how it came into being, but eventually she comes to love her daughter, naming her after her mother. Emilia also shows extreme bravery when she is given the chance to board a lifeboat to be saved and she instead puts the little boy Klaus in her place. Emilia is strong, resilient and hopeful of a better future, right up until the very end, when she perishes during the ship's sinking.

Alfred

This character, despite being one of the four "main" narrators, is distinctly separate from the others, in more ways than one. At first he is shown to be only physically separate, as a soldier working in the dockland area of the Wilhelm Gustloff as it prepares to embark upon its journey.

Most of Alfred's speech is in the form of written correspondence addressed to his sweetheart, "Hannelore." However, through these "letters," a cold-hearted and even sociopathic personality begins to emerge. Alfred claims himself to be in a much higher ranking position than he is actually in. Even when Alfred is knocked down a few pegs by his colleagues, he insists upon maintaining this illusion, or that at least he ought to be considered a prime specimen of the Nazi regime.

However, the ideology of the regime encourages this sort of mentality, a sense of superiority as a result of "breeding" alone, but it becomes clear that this is deeply embedded in Alfred's personality. He remains coolly detached from the fraught emotions of the evacuees, talks openly about taking advantage of their position, and only becomes increasingly deluded as the sinking of the ship progresses, resulting, indirectly, in his own demise.



Heinz

One of the prominent members of the "group" of characters who end up banding together, Heinz - or the "shoe poet" as he is mostly called - is an elderly cobbler who maintains a surprisingly calm demeanor despite everything going on, and whom offers wise words to everyone else.

Heinz takes pride in his work as a shoe maker, claiming that a good pair of shoes is a highly underrated thing to have, and can say much about a person's personality. It is through this skill, and his shrewd observation, that he is able to tell that Florian is hiding something in the hollow of his heel - the stolen items - without Florian saying a single thing. He ends up being the unofficial guardian of the little boy, Klaus, and they form a deep attachment despite not being blood related.

There is a sense that Heinz has seen much in his lifetime, and that his impression is, as awful as these times are, that they too will come to pass. Nevertheless, he is strong and principled, in a quiet way, throughout the novel. Heinz does not survive the sinking when he makes a daring attempt to jump into the sea to reach the lifeboat to be with his adopted grandson.

Klaus

Klaus is the little boy who joins the group, along with Heinz, who Klaus ends up adopting as his unofficial "Opi" when he is made an orphan by the war. They stick together very closely, and Heinz does his best to keep Klaus' spirits up, being just a little boy.

A poignant moment comes in the form of Klaus claiming a ragged stuffed bunny as a toy, which was found at the abandoned estate they took shelter in, and which belonged to one of the children who was killed there. However, this toy goes on to bring him comfort for the rest of the journey. Despite suffering a tragedy in the loss of his beloved Heinz, Klaus eventually finds happiness in his new adopted parents - Florian and Joana - and little sister when they finally reach safety.

Eva

Eva is the remaining member of the "group," and is described as a brash and physically imposing woman. She lacks tact, saying constantly jarring things which she only softens by saying "sorry," earning her the nickname "Sorry Eva." She is disinclined to trust anyone, including Florian and Emilia when they first arrive at the barn where they are sheltering.

Nothing is revealed about Eva's background and past, but she remains a rather harshly realistic individual, reluctant to stop to help anyone for very long. She is very attached to her personal belongings to the point where she gives up a place on the Wilhelm Gustloff



because she would not be allowed to take them on board. She parts ways with the rest of the group before they board and is never from again.

Dr. Lange

Dr. Lange was the master to Florian's apprentice, enlisting him to help "restore" many priceless works of art, only to be hoarded in Nazi buildings for themselves.

Dr. Lange is originally a figure to be looked up to as a mentor, until Florian realizes that he has not opened a single letter he has sent, revealing that the doctor does not truly care for Florian. When he discovers Florian's theft, he sends his men after Florian; Dr. Lange ends up getting killed, and by a stroke of luck and some deception, Florian escapes with his life.

Emilia's mother

Emilia's mother appears in the novel only in Emilia's memories and imagination. She is portrayed as a loving and caring mother to Emilia, watching over her as she undertakes simple tasks like making jam, and dispensing wisdom that Emilia carries with her all her life. Emilia's mother dies when giving birth to Emilia's brother, but she still remains an important part of Emilia's life.

Halinka

Emilia's baby also does not play a direct role in the novel, but serves as a recipient of Emilia's projected hopes for the future. She is named Halinka after the pet name that Emilia's father gave her mother, and she becomes a symbol of Poland's future through her very existence.

In a letter correspondence to Florian far in the future, it emerges that Halinka has become a successful swimmer in America, and that she never knew her mother but still knew two things about her; that her name was Emilia and that she was very brave.



Symbols and Symbolism

Winter

Winter, in the novel, symbolizes a time period in which everyone is in greater danger than ever before.

Being the middle of winter in Central Europe means that the presence of constant cold weather, snow and, more dangerously, ice is a constant threat to the survival of the most vulnerable. With the additional factor of a war raging in the middle of everyone's lives, many have been driven out of their homes and forced to go on the run - many with nowhere to go meaning constant exposure to the harsh elements and a far greater struggle to survive. This risk manifests itself most literally when Ingrid falls through the ice in the middle of their attempt to escape, and when the majority of passengers on the sinking ship succumb, mostly, to hypothermia.

With the efforts of survival taking up everyone's energy, there is simply no room for anything more than what is absolutely essential. People who would not otherwise interact have been forced to band together for survival, but there is also no room for the normal processes of building up friendships, so interactions are largely perfunctory. Florian's refusal to trust anyone, to let his guard down, can be said to be similar to the way the snow and ice seemingly refuse to thaw.

Emilia's constant longing for better times - for summer days when she would make seasonal jam and be able to play and be carefree - contrasts strongly with the constant cold of the winter they all have to endure.

Art

Art is symbolic in two ways in the novel; not only of itself, as a creative piece, but of the things that people most value, if not their own lives. In contrast to the relentless and bleak conditions the group has to endure, art imagery appears as a common theme in the novel.

The most obvious example is that Florian is an art restoration worker, who takes pride in his work until he realizes what purposes his work is being used for. In an act of defiance, he steals the Amber Swan - the most prized possession in the entire collection - and hides it on his person during his escape. This ornament stands out in stark contrast to the bare surroundings the group finds themselves in, being a literal symbol of beauty amid such a dark time in history. The fact that it had to be stolen, in order to be protected, is comparable to those who had to run away from the "regime" in order to reach safety.

The endurance of art is also a recurrent theme. When the shoe poet says that "life is short but art is long," this echoes all the more true when Florian's possessions, which he



was so determined to smuggle out of Poland, end up washed ashore, surviving the ship sinking and 20 years at sea.

Trees

Trees are symbolic of "presence," - human or otherwise - in the novel whether in a good or a bad way.

Trees are prominent in the first half of the novel, when the group is mostly exposed to the elements of the outdoors when on the run. Trees become symbols of both good, in their capacity to hide, and protect, escapees from the enemy, but are also menacing in their height, and are described at one point as "soldiering," comparing them to the very figures who they are meant to be protecting the group from. On two occasions Emilia tries, in vain, to hide behind a tree, which reveals their ultimately limited capacity to intervene when someone is in danger.

Sewing

In the novel, sewing takes on the function of repair, or symbolizes the attempt to repair damage in adverse conditions.

Joana uses her stitching skills on Florian's wound when they first meet in the barn. Although even Joana is not overly confident in her ability, she is sure that the shoe poet would do a much better job being a shoemaker but his unfamiliarity with dealing with wounds would compromise that so she makes the best of what she can do. The healing process is slow, but heals eventually in time.

The second is a metaphorical one, residing mostly in the memory and thoughts of Emilia. Almost as soon as Florian regrets the unlikelihood of finding a couple undertaking needlepoint at the abandoned house, Emilia talks about how the gunshot she had to fire, to defend herself from her attacker, had "ripped a seam in my mind. Discarded memories were now leaking."

The ship, Wilhelm Gustloff

The Wilhelm Gustloff symbolizes the danger of pretending to be something - or more than - one is. Built originally for the purpose of leisure, then re-purposed during the war as a means of transporting essentials, and then evacuees, to safety, the ship is so large that it is possible to load it to nearly ten times its capacity, which makes no sense. It become a target for Russian submarines due to its very conspicuousness.



Birds

Birds are highly symbolic of the freedom of the characters in the story, particularly Emilia, and the precariousness of this freedom during wartime. These feature constantly, in some form, throughout the novel, whether literally or metaphorically.

Birds are seen, frequently, flying overhead, being far more free to come and go as they please than the people below them. Emilia makes constant comparisons between various things and birds, and reminisces about the storks migrating to and from her home when the seasons changed and, most poignantly, the one stork who departed from her home at the moment her mother died in childbirth. Birds, or ducks, also appear in nursery rhymes, so Emilia associates birds, most likely, with innocence.

Birds are also symbolic for others; Alfred puts a different twist on it, using the symbolism to appear more of a victim, saying "they saw me as a birdie with a troubled wing that should remain close to the nest... So I build my own nest and feather it with thoughts of you" when writing to Hannelore. The portrayal of birds as victims is contrasted with their ultimate capability of being able to fly away, in the case of Emilia, so they serve a dual purpose.

The physical embodiment of the importance of birds, however, is mostly found in Florian's theft of the Amber Swan, a literal symbol of what the Nazis prized so highly, and which Florian was determined not to let them have.

Candlelit wreaths

The candlelit wreaths symbolize the hopes of young women in the novel, particularly those of Emilia.

This is part of a midsummer tradition, according to Emilia, when young women would make wreaths, put lit candles in them and send them down the river. Legend had it that whichever man would catch the wreath at the other end would become their future husband.

Emilia's wreath, when set in the water, ended up toppling over and catching fire. This could be seen as foreshadowing her ultimate fate of being violated by the Russian soldiers, who ended up fathering her baby, rather than the one who she actually wanted to be her husband and father of her baby - August, the farm boy.

Birth

Birth symbolizes not only the literal birth of a person, as with Emilia's pregnancy, but the new beginning of many other things in the novel, such as new phases of life.



The war was said to have birthed refugees, while Alfred said that "war births litters of (secrets)." There is mention of the "birth" of the Gustloff being borne of the death of its namesake, and the subsequent "birth" of the thousands of refugees inside, who in turn anticipate the "birth" of a new life on the other side of the journey.

Above all, the birth of Emilia's baby symbolizes a new nation, and a new life, despite being born in some of the worst circumstances possible.

Large numbers of people

The large numbers of people, everywhere and throughout the novel, symbolize the sheer amount that is at stake throughout the entire war period.

The Second World War created huge numbers of casualties, millions displaced from their homes and forced to seek safety elsewhere. This meant that huge numbers of them were on the roads at a time, and on overloaded vehicles and ships. Unfortunately, large numbers meant greater risk, as they were more likely to be targeted. Planes dropping bombs would target densely populated places, and in the novel planes drop bombs on a group of evacuees and the characters barely escape alive.

Thousands of people crowd the port at Gotenhafen, desperate to get on board, but the sheer number of them makes helping them all virtually impossible. Ten thousand people end up securing passage onto the ship, severely compromising its safety, but thousands more are left behind, resorting to drastic measures to try to get on board. However, again, the huge number of people means more fatalities when the ship is targeted, resulting in the sinking being the worst of its kind in history.

The sea

The sea itself becomes an undeniable symbol of the futility of humankind against the elements. Ships can be built, and defenses put up, but being stranded in the sea is what ended up claiming the most lives. The sea becomes an unstoppable and immovable force, but eventually the sea would also return the personal effects which Florian had lost during the sinking so long ago.



Settings

The outdoors

This is not a fixed location but it is where most of the story, before the sinking of the ship, takes place. It is the wilderness, where the people are forced when they have nowhere to stay, or are looking for somewhere to stay. It is where everyone is at their most vulnerable, to freezing, starvation, attacks from the enemy, and - in one tragic scene - of falling through the ice of a frozen lake in the middle of an attempted escape.

The abandoned barn

This is where most of the characters meet for the first time, and come to form the group they eventually become. The conflict in personalities, and the mutual distrust, is palpable in this confined space, but it is also where the walls of distrust are broken down and they are compelled to form an alliance in order to survive.

The dockyard at Gutenhafen (Gdynia)

This is the very last port of call before boarding the ship that, everyone believes, will at last take them to safety. It is a setting of utter chaos, anticipation, and triumph and despair all at once. It is where German Nazi efficiency is shown to be upheld even when many are fearing for their lives, and where people are driven to desperate and tragic acts for a chance to board the ship. Because it takes the ship several days to fully board and then depart, a considerable amount of time is spent here, simply biding time.

The ship (Wilhelm Gustloff)

The ship, named the Wilhelm Gustloff after an assassinated Nazi official, becomes a dual symbol of both hope and destruction. For thousands it is their last chance at survival and later, in a bitter ironic twist, it becomes their death warrant. The ship is also where key events happen for the main characters before the sinking, where Emilia finally gives birth, and where Florian and Joana's romance finally blossoms. This setting would eventually become the scene of the greatest maritime disaster in recorded history.

Emilia's home

This is not a setting which ever physically manifests in the novel, but is frequently talked about wistfully and longingly by Emilia. She portrays her home, in Poland with her family, as being a time of innocence and joy, where life was simple and untarnished by the effects of war. Tasks such as making jam with her mother are talked about as if they

were the happiest events in her life, and eventually, upon Emilia's death, her version of heaven is exactly like this scene.



Themes and Motifs

Fairytales and folklore

The author uses fairytales and folklore throughout the novel - and particularly through the character of Emilia - to convey metaphors of what is "really" happening, in much the same way as many people suffering under the regime must have done so. Emilia is pivotal in the continuance of this theme, with her constant allusions to the folkloric heritage of her country.

First, Emilia foreshadows the oncoming of a savior-figure with a recollection of the story of the "sleeping knights" who are ready to come to Poland's rescue. This would have been familiar with many Polish people at the time, and it would most likely have been in their minds as Poland fell to the enemies and they were uncertain of their future. However, for Emilia, the "knight" actually seems to materialize, as Florian rescues her from an attacker, he becomes known to her as "the knight" from then on. The author seems to use the fairytale/folklore theme as a binding agent, holding together a nation being torn apart with the hope that things will get better one day, that their rescuer will come, and also in Emilia holding herself together, having endured so much so young.

The fairytale theme emerges, also, in the first type which normally manifests in a person's life: the nursery rhyme. The one sung to Emilia by her mother, "little duckies with their heads in the water," is one that she uses to comfort herself when things are at their worst. Again, the nursery rhyme is employed as a sort of euphemism for other tragic events which unfold, like a protective glow, when blind girl would later fall through the ice and into the water, and again when Emilia witnesses the horrific sight of drowned children "with their heads in the water"; even Hitler's speech, saying "When was the goose never caught by the fox?" is a dark reference to another famous and well-known fable. This seems to be the way in which Emilia sees the world, and because Emilia is symbolic of the "new Poland," and later on her baby too, the use of fairytales shows both its/her emerging maturity, and capacity to hold onto tradition while being hopeful of a better future.

Deception

Deception is shown to be a double-edged sword in the novel, as being the mark of a less than reputable character, but also as a matter of life or death for countless people fleeing a war zone with a fake name their only hope at escaping persecution.

Because the author uses first person point-of-view style narration, it can automatically be assumed that the characters' inner monologue will reveal any deception which they are using to separate themselves from the outer world. None of the characters is exactly who they say they are, and for good reason; they are all afraid for their lives and that revealing the truth will get them into trouble, or even killed. Florian is the most obvious



deceiver, hiding everything about himself and giving nothing away when first meeting the rest of the group, and giving out as little information about himself as possible, not even his name until much later on. However, the reason for this is understandable, and can be attributed to necessity. Joana conceals part of her past, out of guilt because she feels responsible for the fate of members of her family, and Emilia conceals that she is Polish, assuming the identity of a dead Latvian woman, because to reveal that she is Polish would be a death sentence.

Alfred is the only one who, one would think, would have no reason for deception, but appears to employ it most of all. He speaks as if he is the highest ranking official there - next to Hitler - but it is eventually revealed that he is very low ranking from external voices interrupting his internal monologue. Indeed, the Nazi party is shown to value efficiency and logic, in its cold processing of thousands of evacuees, qualities that Alfred seems to have - or at least believes he does. However, the sheer extent of his sociopathic nature is only apparent as the story unfolds, when contrasting his inner monologue with what is really happening on the outside.

One thing every main character has in common is employing various degrees of deception. The only real difference is their respective reasons for having to do so.

Duplication, specifically forgery

Duplication is shown throughout the novel to be more than just a technique; it is a life-saving measure on many of occasion. Whatever negative things are said traditionally about lying are turned on their head in the novel, and on more than one occasion, mark out a good character, rather than a bad one. This tendency is primarily manifested in Florian's forgery.

Florian had been developing a successful career as an art restoration worker, bringing back to life many ailing works by great artists. He exhibited a talent, and a preference, for duplication rather than creation, much to the bemusement of his friends and family. According to his belief, he was part of a project that would usher in a new age of art appreciation and culture in the burgeoning Nazi empire, until he realized that he was being used as nothing more than a tool for pillaging works of art that rightly belonged to others, and the decimation of other cultures in the process. It is then that Florian turns to forgery as a full-time occupation, using his talent, if not to good use, then as a tool for his revenge.

The way in which Florian most puts his talents to "good use" is when he forges extra tickets for the ship, to ensure the survival of himself and for members of his group. When it transpires that Alfred has been pilfering tickets for souvenirs, this turns out to be a lifesaving measure.

Another, very literal, form of duplication is also found in birth and, therefore, in the continuation of lineage and of a nation. Emilia's pregnancy and birth overshadow most



of the novel, as does the birth of many babies on board ship, prior to and during the ill-fated voyage.

This goes to show that duplication, if not employed by people deliberately, will happen naturally, as part of the course of life.

Birth

The theme of birth is very clear and literal throughout the novel, in that it is one of the basic facts of life - what makes the theme of birth so meaningful in this novel is that it continues despite conditions in which it would seem almost paradoxical to continue.

People give birth and produce life, and this happens even during times of war. Distressingly, it can often happen because of war, as the invasion of enemy soldiers sometimes resulted in waves of pregnancies and births, which is the fate that befell Emilia.

Emilia's pregnancy is not revealed until the story is well underway, and it is discovered entirely by chance. Yet, it is a pivotal circumstance for Emilia who, while the baby is growing inside her, cannot help thinking of her own mother and family, and what the future has in store. The true circumstances of her pregnancy are not revealed until near the end of the novel, and as a result she thinks that she will simply reject the baby, but it turns out to be not so easy to become separate her own child, who is now her own family. As the novel progresses, more pregnancy and birth metaphors emerge, such as Alfred's words that "war births litters of (secrets)," the "birth" of the Gustloff (after the death of its namesake) and its subsequent birth of the thousands of refugees inside - some of whom even themselves give birth on the voyage.

The idea of birth, and life, succeeding under the most difficult of circumstances is played out both in Emilia's story and the story of her country. Both face imminent death, whether through loss of life in childbirth or through the ravages of war, but also both realize that, should they survive, they will be born again.

Loss of reason and culture (to the Nazi regime)

The theme of loss of reason and culture is a particularly ironic one, considering that Nazis carried out the atrocity of completely erasing the native people's language and culture in order to introduce their own "renaissance" of intellect and cultural life. The irony is increased by the fact that Emilia, a Polish girl whose culture (and much of her family) was erased, is the one who brings this erasure to the reader's attention - in her own language.

War destroys a nation - especially the one under invasion - both physically and culturally. Not only are people - and their homes and possessions - under attack, but also their very way of life.



The author introduces this idea primarily through the very circumstances of the group of people whose story is followed in the novel - the fact that they have nothing but what they are wearing and carrying to live on. Emilia recalls that the Germans had renamed Polish towns and cities with German names, including the town which was “the home of the astronomer Copernicus, who proved that the earth rotated around the sun,” and that origin has now been appropriated under Nazi rule so that it is no longer their own. The execution of Polish senior professors and intellectuals further compounds the eradication of minds and intellect, with Emilia conjuring up a very potent image of her school desk and books being taken away. Her one solace is that she learned to speak and write Polish before they came, so that they could not take that away.

The Nazis were on a mission to appropriate and eradicate anything that interfered with their mission. Although Florian was originally affiliated with this movement, his character was redeemed when he applied his own intellect to a different purpose. There is an irony, then, that the Nazi, Alfred, eventually loses his reason, and grasp on reality, as he becomes more deluded with his own idea of self-importance. The turning of the Nazi cultural and intellectual theft on its head, and the fact that Florian's belongings - eventually - return to him, gifted by the sea, gives the message that, by rights, whatever is taken by force, under occupation, will one day be returned if one has faith and hope.

Styles

Point of View

The point(s) of view in this novel are, in fact, used as a narrative device.

The chapters are not numbered, as with "traditional" novels, but are all named after one of either four of the main characters - Florian, Joana, Emilia and Alfred - who tell their version of events as they experience them. The first person is often used as a narrative device, lending something of a more personal/intimate quality to the story, but less often is it used from more than one point of view. This proves highly effective at conveying the outlook, and attitudes, of highly diverse characters. From the resigned thoughtfulness of Joana, to the cautiously observant Florian, to the colorful imagination of Emilia, to the conceited arrogance of Alfred, all characters are best illustrated by their own words, and their own story.

The technique particularly comes into play at pivotal moments in the story, which are shared by all four characters, for example, when each of the characters hears a "BANG" in their first chapters, when a gun goes off, and then again, when the ship is struck and starts sinking. It is the same bang, and they all hear it the same way, but each of them is saying, doing and thinking different things when it happens. This shows that ultimately very different people can - and do - experience things in the same way.

Language and Meaning

Language is an interesting point of contention in the novel for various reasons. The language, as the reader sees it, is in English, but the language that is claimed to be in use is, primarily, German. That is the only common language all the characters, with their varying backgrounds, have in common, and so key German words and phrases come up frequently in the novel. Since the Nazis sought to homogenize their subjects and create one "master race," the prevalence of German makes more sense. Words like *sippenhaft* (bad blood/family) and *volksdeutsche* (honorary German) would have been familiar to those whose circumstances meant that they would have been relevant. Florian was under suspicion, even before his theft, because his father was caught betraying the Nazis, so he felt that his family name was now cursed. Conversely, Joana was accorded a higher status, despite being Lithuanian, due to being "Germanizable" - that is, being capable of assimilation into the "Aryan race" despite her perceived imperfection. Even though Alfred is the only one of the main characters without an alternative language, he is the one who turns out to be hiding (or trying to) the biggest secret of all, that he is an impostor and fakes everything about himself. The other three are all hiding something, too, but more out of necessity and obligation, and simply to survive.



However each of the characters speaks a different "native" language or dialect, and they bring their own words, phrases and linguistic traditions. Emilia speaks some German but reverts to Polish when under extreme stress, when talking to her mother in her imagination, and most poignantly, to her newborn baby. This shows that, even when people speak the same language on the surface, there are certain things that are untranslatable, and for which only a mother tongue will do.

Structure

The structure is tied in almost inextricably with the point of view, in that its structure is a chronological alternating of perspectives as the events in the novel unfold.

Events happen at, roughly, the same pace for everyone, and on a few occasions, events are even narrated more than once with the difference between how each character experiences that event. However sometimes it is unclear, at least immediately, if the narrative is what the person is actually experiencing at that moment, or whether their mind is elsewhere. Two characters, who are arguably "unreliable narrators," are Alfred and Emilia. Many of Alfred's "chapters" are written in the form of letters to his girlfriend Hannelore, so are not immediately or necessarily anchored in current events, but they serve more to give insight and context into the war from the "other side" - the Nazi/enemy side. In a similar way, albeit with a hugely different personality, many of Emilia's "chapters" involve her having thoughts unrelated to what is currently happening, seeing things in a child-like and imaginative way (imagining trees as having a personality and birds being like people and vice versa) or else reminiscing about her life in the past, back home with her family.

In short, the collective narrative is generally chronological, telling events as they happen, but with enough diversions from the linear path that the entire story does not unfold "truly" until much later on.



Quotes

What a group we were. A pregnant girl in love, a kindly shoemaker, an orphan boy, a blind girl, and a giantess who complained that everyone was in her way when she herself took up the most room. And me, a lonely girl who missed her family and begged for a second chance."

-- Joana (Joana)

Importance: This quote shows that such a diverse group of people, who would never have come into contact otherwise, have been brought together - or rather forced - by war, and the resulting state of emergency.

...your shoes are carrying your most valuable possession – your life."

-- Heinz (Shoe Poet) (Heinz (Shoe Poet))

Importance: A humble shoe maker shows himself, throughout the novel, to be the wisest character of all, and has learned enough to know that life is more important than possessions, but that a good pair of shoes make a big difference to the quality of that life.

Two warring nations gripped Poland like girls fighting over a doll. One held the leg, the other the arm. They pulled so hard that one day, the head popped off.

-- Emilia (Emilia)

Importance: This is a potent analogy of Poland during the Second World War as it was gripped by both sides. It is especially so because it compares the war to a childish feud between children, all the more relevant because Emilia is still so young.

Once the war ended, which side would be the right side for a Pole?"

-- Emilia (Emilia)

Importance: This is a question that would haunt many who were uncertain which side Poland was on, or to whom to lay their allegiance. This implies that there was always a chance that someone could, however unintentionally, suffer the consequences in the end up picking the "wrong" side.

Before this war is over, all men will have an opportunity to reveal their true selves."

-- Alfred (Alfred)

Importance: This novel has shown that war has a way of bringing out the worst in humanity. It is also ironic that this quote comes from Alfred, who said this in order to suggest that the war would bring out his best, most heroic, side.

Life is short but art is long."

-- Florian (Florian)



Importance: Because Florian has found his calling in art preservation, he has come to realize that it can outlast human lifespans, and therefore, in his view, of vital importance to save from destruction.

Death hath a thousand doors to let out life; I shall find one.

-- Heinz (Shoe Poet) (Heinz (Shoe Poet))

Importance: The shoe poet, Heinz, once again uses his wisdom to warn the others of danger and also to remember how important, and fragile, their lives are. Here he is warning that death is always waiting just around the corner, so to take great care and not take their lives for granted.

Was it enough to admit the lie to yourself and the heavens, or did you have to tell someone who listened?"

-- Emilia (Emilia)

Importance: Emilia has been carrying a big and dark secret until this point and felt the strong need to confess, but she is not sure that the listener actually heard her. So now she poses the question of whether it still "counts" as a confession in the eyes of God.

War had bled color from everything; leaving nothing but a storm of gray. I wanted her to know not only Poland, but my Poland. I pulled her close and whispered in Polish: "There were no ghettos, no armbands. I often fell asleep to a breeze floating through my open window. It's true. It was like that once.""

-- Emilia (Emilia)

Importance: Because Emilia's baby was born during such a time of strife and hardship, Emilia is desperate to convey to her, even though only a baby, that the world was not always such a terrible place, and also that it could go back to the way it was one day.

After bouncing for months on the run, the sway of the sea soothed like a lullaby.

-- Emilia (Emilia)

Importance: Emilia is, again, trying to find the good in a terrible and difficult situation. Her baby seems to be at ease, so she thinks that this might be because the ship is providing a temporary respite from continually being on the run.

Everyone was screaming. Screaming was not thinking... The scene played as if to music. People looked to me, eyes panting and desperate. Their hands reached for me in choreographed synchronization. Save me. Save me. Save me.

-- Alfred (Alfred)

Importance: This description of Alfred's observation shows his true psychopathy. During a time of utter panic and chaos, when people are purely trying to survive, Alfred is completely detached emotionally and seems to observe the scene at his leisure. With the type of language he uses, it is as if he were merely watching a concert or a show.



How foolish to believe we are more powerful than the sea or the sky."
-- Florian (Florian)

Importance: When the ship starts sinking, and people start dying in the thousands all at once, it brings home how utterly powerless people are against the elements. Any illusions of power brought on by being on the "winning" side of war are shattered here.