Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited Study Guide

Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited by Vladimir Nabokov

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Summary

Speak, Memory is divided into 15 chapters that follow Nabokov's life chronologically through his early adulthood. Much of the book is spent defining the golden years of his opulent childhood—years that Nabokov has many times described as "perfect." In the initial chapters Nabokov notes in list-like fashion significant family members, teachers, tutors and governesses from his childhood and through the chronological list breaks off in tangential asides that lead to stories and moments remembered.

It seems Nabokov is discovering what is happening as he writes and has not constructed thought, memory or story before sitting down at the page. Throughout the book the reader gets a sense that someone is prodding Nabokov, asking questions to further his stories, to encourage him to more acutely remember details—initially it can be assumed that he is metaphorically speaking to Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory, but towards the end of the book he begins using the pronoun "you" and it is revealed that this is Vera, his wife and whom he has dedicated the book to. She is his Mnemosyne.

The last third of the autobiography takes place after Nabokov's family's exile from Russia. He must leave behind the city manse and country estate that he loves so much because of his father's liberal politics during the Russian Civil War. It is when he leaves Russia for England, and then later Berlin and Paris, that he realizes he loves Russia. No matter where Nabokov lives, or how many other democratic, noble-class Russians he meets, he still does not feel part of this group of émigrés. The Russia that Nabokov knows and remembers is one where he experiences an elite wealth and sheltered entitlement. As an adult in exile he spends his time butterfly hunting, composing chess problems, writing novels and teaching language classes. He enjoys his simple life with his wife and his small son, but he always longs for the Russia of his childhood. He does not go back because he knows that that Russia is gone.

Chapter 1

Summary

In Chapter 1 Nabokov recalls his earliest memories—his cave in the nursery created by a gap between the wall and sofa, draped in blankets and the moment when he first becomes aware of age. He establishes his narrator's voice in this section and repeatedly refers to the Greek goddess Mnemosyne almost as if he is talking to her and not oneself reflectively.

In some of the earliest memories he has to tease out the anecdotes and vignettes by locating the memories in context. He recalls one memory of him and his father in a diner, but cannot remember how old he is. He does remember his father objecting to eating with a Japanese man. From this Nabokov deduces that this must have been 1904 during the Japanese-Russian conflict; therefore he was five.

In his first decade of life his family's wealth oscillated between rich and poor. But by the end of the decade his family was quite wealthy with multiple homes and a plethora of hired help—governesses, teachers, tutors, cooks and housekeepers.

Analysis

Nabokov establishes form, organization and voice in this first chapter. The chapter has an overall theme and then is broken down into individual sections that encapsulate a specific anecdote, vignette or sketch relating to the overall theme of the chapter.

Nabokov's voice in this autobiography is reflexive and he teases out his memories with references to time, people and objects (photographs). He asks questions of himself—of his memory and refers to the Greek goddess of memory, Mnemosyne, as if he is talking to her rather than an audience of readers. This would be consistent with the title of Speak, Memory, as if he is commanding the memory to reconstruct moments from the past (much later in the book readers learn the metaphorical Mnemosyne is Vera, his wife).

Vocabulary

abyss, prenatal, chronophobiac, mourned, smug, encroaching, venerable, gaudily, lobed, recapitulation, bade, ornamental, diminutive, resplendent, primordial, bayonet, parquet, penumbral, umber, inexplicable, alleviate, berth, cataclysm, obscure, eunuchoid, languid, melancholy, zestful, copious, tepid, coeval, accosted, rustic, trifle, ascertained, excrescence, vehemently, tedious, bellicose, bunting, levitation

Chapter 2

Summary

Nabokov paints himself as a child with unique idiosyncrasies. He recalls always having aural hallucinations—dreamlike hallucinations where he can hear figures talking, often in English, in an overheard conversation. He doesn't recall anything significant about these conversations overheard, except that he could hear them. And when he would try to focus on seeing these conversations they were simply gray figures in a mist, a ghostly outline of a person.

Another one of Nabokov's interesting abilities is what he calls "colored hearing": each sound has a particular color to him. As a child he did not find this peculiar because his mother said that she shared a similar trait and she spoke to him as if this were what every child experienced. It wasn't until later in life that he learned it was not something everyone perceived.

Though his mother was not domestic, in his illness as a child, he and his mother became very close. During this time he became obsessed with math and mathematical equations. His mother encouraged this obsession and would listen to him compute numbers. It is through this lens—of a child who is ill, with a talent for mathematics and colored hearing--- that he recalls the first memories of his mother. He recalls her playing tennis in the summer and hunting for mushrooms. She did little around the house, but when she was big with child he remembers her wanting him to wait to open his stocking —she had wanted to see the delight on his and his little brother's face.

Analysis

In this section Nabokov illustrates through what lens we will read his memories. Clearly, how he perceives the world will affect how he recalls memory. Already, he has noted two ways in which his world is colored—through the logic of mathematics and the natural sciences and the perception of colored hearing. How his brain thinks specifically will render his memories verbalized different than others. His descriptive language holds a musical quality that not all those perceive—in a way his language not unlike musical notes at all—though he has explicitly said that he dislikes music.

His mother is painted in a much-romanticized way—she was a lovely aristocrat who had little involvement in the house duties. Her spare time was spent playing with her dachshund, enjoying the sport of tennis with friends and family and hunting mushrooms.

Nabokov also recalls her playing with him—which signifies that despite his governesses, his mother was still involved in mothering, so much so that he describes their relationship as close. Clearly, Nabokov identifies with his mother. He was unaware of his peculiar talents as a child because he was never made to believe that they were peculiar. He believes that he is similar to his mother, that he sees the world the way he

does because of her, just as she believed that history colored her perception of the world.

Vocabulary

aural, fatidic, degenerate, marred, conjured, motes, vitreous, palpebral, pretentious, chromatisms, arbitrary, cornices, armorial, quinsy, laboriously, voluminous, reticulated, parcel, subliminally, remnants, premonitions, schismatic, dogma, chimeras, inept, ascending, obsolete, appraisive, effaced, coevals, traversed, temperamental, assiduous, pedantically, assuage, gustatory, agarics, putrescent, bolectic, nebulous, beatitude, boletes, lurid, extraneous, viscid, bulbous, allay, hoary, jurist, larceny, furtive, dismally, bourgeois

Chapter 3

Summary

Nabokov outlines his family history in Chapter 3 starting with his father's side of the family. His paternal grandmother was German and his paternal grandfather was Russian. His father is from a very political family with many famous uncles. Likewise, Nabokov's father was a political liberal in Russian politics—as wells as a famous lawyer and journalist. After he compiles an exhaustive list of his father's relatives, he then follows his maternal lineage.

His mother's brother, his Uncle Ruka, owned a home next door to Nabokov's family's country house. He recalls as a child the affectations from his Uncle Ruka and the clattering of horse hooves of his uncle's carriage as it came down the road. His uncle was a wealthy diplomat who favored Nabokov and when he died, left him an inheritance and estate worth over a few million dollars by today's standards. Nabokov was never able to enjoy this inheritance because within one year he was forced to leave in exile with his family.

At the time that Nabokov receives the inheritance, his family is so wealthy, and he is so involved in the troubles of youth, that he is never fully grateful for the inheritance. He retrospectively feels guilt for this and for not defending Uncle Ruka's reputation. It is in the remembering of his Uncle Ruka that Nabokov feels grateful for his gift of recall, of memory and recollections, because it is in these reveries of a vivid memory, that no one will ever die.

Analysis

This section begins like a camera that is looking at a large overall picture and then as Nabokov works down his family tree he finally focuses on one specific relative. The organization of this chapter leaves the reader feeling as if Nabokov discovers the memory and emotion regarding Uncle Ruka as he is reciting his family history—that he has happened upon an old memory and it has become uncovered as he lists the other relatives. For this Nabokov is grateful. At the end of the chapter, he recalls his Uncle Ruka with great detail and feels that he is paying homage to him that he didn't so long ago when he died. In his vivid recollections his Uncle Ruka is not dead, and it is in this time and space of the memory that no one must ever die.

At the beginning of this section Nabokov raises an important distinction between what we think we remember and what reality exists. He tries to recall his family's crest and he thinks it is bears holding a chess board, but in writing the essay he looks up the family crest and instead it is lions holding just the few checkers of a corner of a chess board. He is disappointed that his memory is not the reality, but more than that what he has

remember is not what really is. What is more important the memory or the truth of the memory?

Vocabulary

heraldist, faunal, bestiary, ursine, regardent, tinctures, gules, gorget, foliate, tenacious, supercilious, scanty, eminent, posthumously, guilded, provident, austere, acolytes, epitaphical, simile, earldom, vehemence, ministerial, conducted, rendezvous, vignette, linden, virginally, gallows, execution, bastion, callously, ambulation, despotism, manorial, sonorous, magisterial, decoy, vestibule, palpate, crooning, conspicuously, fastidious, garble, amiss, algal, excoriation, jaunty, keenness, crenelated, ecstatic, preciosity, robust

Chapter 4

Summary

As a child Nabokov's family likes Anglo-Saxon culture. Nabokov recalls learning to read in English before Russian and that this learning to read the stories in the beginning reader books was the beginning of his love affair with story. He recalls summer evenings in the nursery with his mother, playing with blocks while she read to him in English. Though he loved the language and his mother reading to him, he liked very few of his English governesses and the language lessons taught. It was at the end of his language lessons, when he would get to the back of the primers and the practice sentences would finally form a story, that he enjoyed it.

Analysis

Chapter four recounts Nabokov's early memories of reading at the country house, of his wealthy family enjoying English goods and delicacies. In this chapter, Nabokov confirms that he grew up entitled in a Russian aristocratic family. His family was wealthy enough to procure English items, as well as own two estates—one in town and one in the country.

He and his siblings were afforded lessons in English, music, sport and art. In this section Nabokov lists his governesses and teachers in a character sketch-like fashion, as if they might become characters in one of his novels. He disliked all of his formal education, except he loved reading. He recalls his moments reading with his mother in an ethereal glow in late summer in his nursery—a golden bucolic image.

Vocabulary

protrude, entwist, slouch, inkstained, vesperal, doleful, portentously, limpid, aseptic, allegorical, plight, ascend, transcendental, venerable, ablutions, deluge, engulf, insipid, glaucaus, adroitly, myopic, torpid, balk, intonation, sepia, boudoir, oriel, nebulous, taut, devoid, gaunt, impinged, subjective

Chapter 5

Summary

In the previous chapter Nabokov lists his teachers and governesses, in the beginning of this chapter he admits that he uses the details of their persona as characters in his works of fiction, but what troubles him is that once he has written them into a story—into his fiction—his stronghold on actual events fades and what is real and what is fiction becomes nearly indiscernible. He notes that not only does he use people in his fiction, but details of place and even these memories fade and crumble and he forgets what is truth—as if writing the fiction rewrites his perception of truth, of what can be recollected by memory.

The end of this chapter focuses on one French governess that took care of him and his brother for seven years. He refers to her simply as Mademoiselle. He claims that he did not like her, but she becomes significant for the time that she has spent with him and how her presence affects his memory of his childhood. Not only was Mademoiselle not liked by the children, but also the adults. As a Frenchwoman living in Switzerland she often was lost in the Russian language and customs and felt out of place with the adults that would dine at Nabokov's family's home. Often she would cry taking a slight at things misunderstood and retreat to her bedroom threatening to leave. Nabokov recalls his mother going after her and trying to calm her down, until the day she didn't, and instead let Mademoiselle pack her bag and leave.

Analysis

Though as a child Nabokov recalls not liking Mademoiselle, now in reflection he writes about her with fondness and great detail. His memories of childhood are permeated by her—and he even argues with her memory of events. At the end of the chapter he recalls visiting her in Switzerland as a college student on break. During this visit they recount memories together, but their memories are not aligned. Still, Nabokov does not stray from his perception of memory and writes it as if it is truth, though he does acknowledge in parenthetical asides that she believed something different to be true.

What Nabokov does not mention in his arguments with her memory is that he was a very young boy and is recalling images as an adult of his first memories—boyhood memories of a governess he didn't like. The reader must wonder if this woman was so disliked by Nabokov as a boy then why did he go to visit her later as a college student. By that time in Nabokov's life she represented his childhood and the boyhood distrust in her had faded away. He recalls his boyhood years through the people who cared for him —his French Mademoiselle as well as the other English governesses he and his brother had as boys.

BOOKRAGS

Vocabulary

retrospective, intrusion, covertly, vestigial, wrath, prodigious, mitigate, hyperborean, raucous, dexterous, spectral, hyperbole, dictum, iridescence, enthralled, gloaming, nondescript, implement, squandered, nomadic, reconstitute, meek, tedious, induced, emitting, nib, susurrus, limpid, berimed, xanthic, fulvous, potent, effluvia, oxidized, melodramatic, debasing, senile, risible, refulgent, lambency, perilous, tenuous, precedence, banality, dulcet, uncouth, morose

Chapter 6

Summary

From a very young age Nabokov enjoyed being in nature, specifically hunting moths and butterflies. He first became enamored with the winged insects after finding his mother's old nature books in the attic. During periods of illness when he must be kept inside, Nabokov pored over these books. During the warmed months at the country house, Nabokov would spend the summer afternoons exploring the private English-style Park near the country home. He would wander every day along the wood and scout tree trunks for new discoveries.

When he would find new moths, or moths that he could not identify in the scientific moth and butterfly books, he would send the descriptions and photos into scientific journals. Once, he thought he had discovered something new, but a scientist pointed out that this moth had been discovered in the past century. As revenge later Nabokov makes this man a blind character in one of his novels. Later, his love of these creatures becomes a lifelong obsession that takes him around the world and everywhere he has gone he is looked at as if crazy and not to be trusted. Nevertheless, this he does not mind and continues hunting with his net.

Analysis

Nabokov delights in the obscure in nature—in the fact that so few people care to look for these creatures. His love of language, the sound of language and his colored hearing can be compared to this. Already described as a different child, his prodigious study of moths and butterflies confirms the theory that he was a quite eccentric young man who grew to be an eccentric adult (still on the hunt for moths and butterflies) who was able to capitalize on his special gifts of hearing language musically and tactile descriptions of detail.

This chapter also illuminates how his parents indulged his whimsy and love for moths and butterflies, his father even helping secure rare samples of moths. He grew up in a place with the family support and financial support to study and invest in such rare hobbies—he even has his own park in which to moth and butterfly hunt.

Vocabulary

fallow, endemic, marooned, ether, curious, abolished, nomenclatorial, taxonomic, solicitude, ardent, hermetic, mimicry, mimetic, addendum, plausible, crepuscular, jubilant, undulate, retiary, ostentatiously, blithe, illumine, ribald, dipterist, discarnate, guttural, uliginose, unsated

Chapter 7

Summary

In Chapter 7 Nabokov travels via train to Biarritz, France where his family vacations every summer. He recalls his train travels with an idyllic romanticism seen through the eyes of a little boy. He loved the lavish train cars in which his family traveled, he and his brother with their tutor, and the other members spread throughout other lavish train cars.

In the subsequent sections of chapter 7 Nabokov is attempting at recalling all of the details of a little girl he knew named Colette at Biarritz. At 10 years old, Nabokov was in love. He loved her because she was different. Her parents were not wealthy and he feels she is not looked after appropriately. He wants to save this little French girl and spends all of his time that summer digging with her in the sand, concocting ways to get her away from her family. Throughout his rendering of his summers, Nabokov is frustrated that he cannot recall Colette's dog's name—so much that he addresses the audience with this frustration. But, as he is recalling details about her and moments they shared at the beach, finally, he remembers that the dog's name is Floss as if some other obscure detailed has triggered this information.

Analysis

Chapter 7 reads like Nabokov is sitting next to you telling a story—almost as if he is imaging someone asking questions and he is trying to recall details to answer them; later, the reader learns that this is Vera, his wife, who is most likely asking him questions. At one point in the chapter, Nabokov addresses his audience by confessing his frustration about not recalling Colette's dog's name. He continues on with the story, piling up details about Colette and her family, and the time they shared together. The reader gets a sense that Nabokov is recovering long-forgotten details and he is making these discoveries on the page, with little revision—the reader is reading it as it is happening for Nabokov. Finally, when he reaches the end of the chapter, he remembers that the dog's name is Floss. This recollection is discovered only through a myriad of other recollected memories.

With each chapter more is revealed about the extensiveness of Nabokov's wealth and entitlement. In this chapter Nabokov is becoming aware of discrepancies between how he is being raised and the experience of others. Colette he quotes as his first love. He is shocked by how her parents care for her and treat her and in return he loves her because he wants to save her. He wants to give to Colette what has been given to him in his own golden childhood. He is realizing that he lives a luxurious and opulent life that few others experience.

BOOKRAGS

Vocabulary

germinate, obliged, pedantic, aerial, discarnate, scuttling, valise, coronet, receptacle, cunningly, contrived, recouped, ascend, pathetic, elation, vicious, equilibrist, nictitating, bivalve, illegible, carousing, begrimed, gamely, stalking, dismembered, quiddity, agile, torus, languorously, wallop, diffuse, exuberance, ominous, sonorous, microcosm, iridescence

Chapter 8

Summary

Nabokov summarizes the years 1907-1908 with snapshots or “slides”. He lists the male tutors that he shared with his brothers once Mademoiselle was released from her duties of tending to them. He has a series of tutors—often dismissed after short periods—until Lenski. Lenski is a poor graduate student that stays with them for a few years. Lenski is idealistic and decides that he will put on a pageant with photography slides and readings every other Sunday afternoon. Nabokov endures these Sunday afternoon but hates them and recalls the stifling rooms jammed with his cousins and siblings, and how no one was paying attention to “poor” Lenski.

Analysis

Nabokov compares his memories to an orchestra. One chord is struck and it all starts, fuzzy at first, and then unifying until the orchestra comes to life. First, this analogy is ironic because Nabokov has already stated that he does not appreciate or understand music, yet he likens his own ability to recall detail to an orchestra. Secondly, once Nabokov started describing the “slides” he becomes more and more detailed, until finally he can see the image clearly and recollect all of the details of the particular memory. An analogy to a photograph might have been more appropriate.

Nabokov organizes this chapter setting out to describe “slides” or photographs from the years 1907-1908. He flips through his memories as if he is actually looking at a photo album. His narrative voice is always there on the surface, directing the reader where to look and pointing out why he is recalling what he is recalling.

Vocabulary

superseded, ingenious, admirable, simulated, detest, languid, profane, clamored, cavort, lugubrious, reminiscent, undulations, exuberant, pedagogic, imbecile, sibilant, vying, trysting, penitently, pogroms, pedantically, ablutions, sousing, purblind, sacrosanct, obscure, jurisdiction, circumspection, impecunious, obsolete, oscillation, lurid, supplications, tawdry, tumid, bassoon, etherish, dissonances, tonalities, consummation, debouchment, prodigal, pulsation

Chapter 9

Summary

Nabokov is looking at a scrapbook, as he is writing this chapter that his mother made about his father. He lists his father's accomplishments—he is a quite famous liberal politician. He has served in the Russian service and also been briefly detained in a prison. Nabokov's father is an intelligent man who has always worked for his convictions—with grave risks. He is killed in Berlin by an assassin while protecting one of his political comrades.

At 11 years old, Nabokov's father decides that the tutors are no longer sufficient and sends him to a school for liberal thinkers. Nabokov is significantly wealthier than anyone else at the school and is even given grief about the limousines picking him up and dropping him every day at school. Nabokov knows that he is different in other ways as well—he dislikes what many of the other boys likes.

One day a reporter makes a derogatory comment about his father in the paper and his father writes to the paper requesting a duel with said reporter. Nabokov learns about the scheduled duel from a friend of his at school who is passing the paper around. All day long Nabokov is haunted by infamous duels and when school is over, his driver is not there to take him home. He walks home afraid of bad news. When he gets home there are a lot of people milling about his house and he rushes upstairs to find his father on the stair landing. The reporter had apologized and the duel was called off. Nabokov cries and embraces his father.

Analysis

Structurally this chapter begins as a chronological list of his father's achievements spurred by articles and pictures in the scrapbook and then when Nabokov enters school at 11, the focus changes from his father to his own experiences. The second half of this chapter reads like a story with a traditional story arc.

Though readers already get a sense that Nabokov is not like other children, in this chapter it is confirmed by his description of why his teacher felt that he was non-conforming. Though Nabokov has eclectic ticks, especially for a boy of 11, it is his elite wealth—especially among the liberal democrats—that really makes him different. He recalls his childhood city home being on the same street as foreign embassies and national political leaders.

Vocabulary

bedraggled, vicissitudes, scrupulously, disbanded, mediocrities, quaint, massacrous, eschewed, demagogue, cacologist, prophetically, serialize, pedantic, overture, hiemal,

hyperborean, jaundiced, robust, apparatus, disintegrated, debile, consociative, averse, harping, clandestine, rascality, feudal, salient, repute, wrath, palfrey, balustrade, malachite

Chapter 10

Summary

In Chapter 10 Nabokov enters his teenage years. He spends a lot of time with his cousin Yuri who does not share Nabokov's preciousness or his wealth. Yuri is described as light hearted, fun and easy going. He falls in love with an older married woman and seduces her, he charms and talks with the servants in the house and Nabokov watches, detached from the experiences. He likes Yuri but does not wish to be like him.

He first learns about love and sex through his discussions with Yuri. Yuri tells him about his love for the older woman but the only thing that Nabokov can compare it to are the feelings that he felt at 10 for Colette, the French girl he played with on the beach at Biarritz. And then one summer he and his brother travel to a different town to have braces put on and there they live with their tutor Lenski.

They go roller-skating one afternoon and Nabokov sees a beautiful woman. For days he fantasizes about this woman and is trying to figure out a way to talk with her. They convince Lenski to take them to a carnival one night and one of the tent acts is dancing girls. Lenski, Nabokov and his brother are watching when Nabokov realizes that one of the dancing women is the same woman that he saw at the skating rink. He is disappointed—not necessarily in her but in the fact that he had been tricked into believing she was of the same class. He felt foolish that he didn't know the difference.

Analysis

Nabokov is distressed by his discovery of the roller-skating girl that he is fantasizing about is the same American dancing girl at the evening show of the carnival. He is upset because he feels it a betrayal to himself that he wouldn't know this about the type of woman she is. This is the first recollection he has of fantasizing about women and he feels it an utter failure of his restless pubescent years.

Even though he watches Yuri's exploits with an indifferent detachment as a youth, as he writes his autobiography he describes Yuri and his affectations with affection and longing. Readers learn at the end of the chapter that Yuri dies in war just a few short years after their time together as teenagers and readers get a sense that this affects Nabokov's nostalgia for this time period.

Vocabulary

unabridged, whorl, frontispiece, attainments, squeamish, imprisoned, breloque, prone, detachment, ambered, clangorously, educe, dismay, epigraphs, supine, intrepid, decanters, aureole, absinthe, defilement, camphine, expectoration, spasmodic, luxuriance, interpolating, sate, chaparral, amelus, docile, atonement, parapet, ruffian,

pedagogical, aria, effusions, ignominious, parody, portent, minion, trumpery, menials, elucidate, agglutinate, ocular, formidable, mandibles, prodigious

Chapter 11

Summary

In the summer of 1914 a “fury of verse-making” came over Nabokov. He remembers roaming the country house grounds with his butterfly net, briefly ducking into a pavilion during a fierce and beautiful storm and once the clouds had passed needing to write verse. He cites this particular storm as the catalyst for his verse.

As a beginner of poetry, he recognizes that he wasn’t very good. The rhythm of words and sounds were particularly important to him and he believed that through his veil of words the beauty he saw would be encapsulated—that others would see things as he did. But to other his writing was an amalgam of words, not necessarily depicting the grandiose beauty that he thought they did. He becomes so distraught by his poetry that he cannot eat or butterfly hunt. His writer’s block ends when he goes into a trancelike state in the woods and comes out overhearing the sounds of the servants’ entertainment. It is after the trance that he can finish his poem. His first elegiac poem is about love—love that he has never had nor lost.

Analysis

Chapter 11 begins Nabokov’s discovery of writing, specifically verse. In hindsight he is embarrassed by his imitation of other poets; by his theme of romantic love—which he had never experienced; his youthful ennui; afternoons reading his mother his bad poetry. He is unnerved when he realizes that the “veil of his words” don’t necessary show others exactly what he means.

It is in coming out of a trancelike state that Nabokov is finally able to complete his first poem. Earlier in the book Nabokov recalled experiencing aural hallucinations and trances where he could hear conversations—in the trance that helped Nabokov finish his initial poems he could hear music, he could overhear the dinner bell gong, the laughter of the servants in their quarters and other things not explicitly experience by him firsthand—like romantic love.

Vocabulary

inordinate, zoolatry, unobtrusiveness, baroque, casements, oblique, rhomboidal, cordate, globule, fissure, immemorial, instantaneous, languid, ardent, volutes, tabulation, ethereal, jauntily, lustrous, credulous, iambic, elegiac, tetrametric, scud, atrocious, enclosure, itinerate, metronomic, macules, keen, raucous, modulations, refracted, firmament, nebulae, laciniate, ecstatically

Chapter 12

Summary

This chapter starts when Nabokov is 16 and in love for the first time. It is summer and in the distance he remembers the war, the Russian Revolution but it had not yet affected their family life yet—though his father was away serving in his political position. He sees a girl walking through the woods with her friends and every day with his butterfly net in hand, goes to see if he can find her.

He watches her for weeks with her friends, finally one day he finds her alone. Her name is Tamara and she is 15 when they meet. They have a secret love affair—though his mother, tutor and gardener know. He sneaks away in the afternoon and at night to visit her in the woods. Though they could go about the affair in a proper way by meeting each other's parents, they both enjoy the privacy and secrecy of their meetings. He continues to write verse and now all of his poetry is about Tamara.

He submits a book of poems and they are published—though the reviews are very bad. His father and mother encourage him to not take it too seriously and the gaffe of poorly-written poetry is brushed aside.

The summer ends and Tamara and Nabokov's love affair moves to St. Petersburg where they now sneak around in public parks, and then art museums. At the end of the year Lenin takes over and Nabokov's family must leave St. Petersburg for Crimea. In Crimea his family is very poor and they do not know, initially, if they will ever see Nabokov's father again.

Nabokov admits that his loss of love for Tamara and his nostalgia for Russia are mixed up in the same event, emotionally. His homesickness overwhelms him just as much as the foreignness of Crimea. As the Germans enter Crimea, his family must flee in exile to Constantinople.

Analysis

Finally, Nabokov gets the great love affair of which he has dreamed. The summer is idyllic—even with the rain and storms—for a love affair in the Russian countryside. The reader will notice that the nostalgic description of the Russian countryside rivals the beauty he describes of Tamara. Toward the end of chapter 12, Nabokov admits that his recollection of his first love is twisted and mixed up in the nostalgia for his home country of Russia—he equates the loss of one with the other though they happen coincidentally simultaneously.

Throughout this chapter Nabokov alludes to never being able to return to the Russia of his childhood. His family lost the country estate Vyra and Nabokov lost his uncle's inherited estate next door. So, even though he did return to Russia, it would never again

be as it was. After his family's exile to Constantinople his family never returns to Russia. This chapter echoes the heartache of a boy who loses his childhood, like a rug tugged out from underneath him. The bucolic childhood that Nabokov has described as perfect has ended.

Vocabulary

concolorous, vicinity, Petrarchally, eschew, uvular, clerical, diminutives, adage, livid, escarpment, sylvan, amours, ingratiating, lacery, paleographic, gaunt, prismatic, monolithic, perilous, massifs, esoteric, fortitude, mimetic, proletarian, vindictive, diffident, apparitions, gaiety, crags, coeval, auspices, occult, conjuration, plangent, anesthetic, garrulous, syncopal, astride

Chapter 13

Summary

In 1919 Nabokov's family, now reunited with his father, flee Crimea for Western Europe. His family settles briefly in London and Nabokov and his younger brother, Sergey, attend Cambridge University. Shortly after they begin school his parents and three younger siblings move to Berlin. At Cambridge Nabokov is sick with a nostalgia for Russia, and even though as a boy he favored English over the Russian language, it is in England that he works at defining himself as a Russian writer.

He notes that it is during this time period when he and younger brother Sergey enjoy a close relationship. Though Sergey is only ten months younger, he and Nabokov interacted very little in their childhoods. (Nabokov quotes that he was the coddled one and Sergey the observer of the coddling.) Though Nabokov is homesick for Russia and is doing his best to identify himself with his country, finds he has very little in common with other Russians and has difficulty relating to them, except his brother.

Analysis

It should come as no surprise to the reader that Nabokov and his brother cannot relate to other Russians, even other expatriates whose families were of considerable wealth. Nabokov lived such an opulent and sheltered life—sheltered not only from hardships of the world but from Russian culture itself. He spoke and wrote English before Russian, his nannies were French or English and indulged him in English treats and accoutrements. Even the gardeners curated traditional English gardens. But, it is when he is in England that he is nostalgic for Russian, but he learns it is a different Russia than his roommates and other expatriate Russians experienced.

Naturally since Nabokov and Sergey feel as foreigners that don't belong to the same place as the other Russian countrymen, they redefine their relationship. In Russia they had little to do with each other, but at Cambridge they are the only people who understand their upbringing. This helps forge a closer relationship than they had when living together in the same manse or estate.

It is revealed in this chapter that Nabokov is not speaking directly to the audience, or Mnemosyne, but to his wife Vera. He refers to "you" directly and also mentions in reference their infant son, Dmitri that they have together.

Vocabulary

internment, prudent, barbaric, voracious, reticent, adulation, listless, amiable, inanition, inauspicious, disgorged, staid, abominable, exuding, indolently, veer, potent, tedious, venerably, palindromic, bestial, sinistrally, dexterally, wield, fatuous, eloquent, astute,

bourgeois, vile, inept, farcical, opulent, vermilion, lugubrious, abetted, eccentric, esoteric, cloistered, diaphanous, denunciation, ebullient

Chapter 14

Summary

In 1922 Nabokov graduates from Cambridge and continues to write. To supplement his writing income, like many other expatriates (or émigrés), teaches language lessons. He notes that there were large colonies of Russians intact in Paris and Berlin but he does not choose to affiliate with them, instead assimilating into the culture of wherever it is he is living. He notes that many democratic Russian families fled Russia around the same time that his family left.

While he is in exile—teaching and writing—he also composes chess problems for master players. He derives as much pleasure from the cognitive problem solving as he does from touching the cherished chess set that he has carried and loved all the way from the Russia of his childhood.

Analysis

When Nabokov first flees the Russia of his childhood he associates the nostalgia for his home country with the loss of his first love; likewise, there is another regime change in Russia that allows him to travel home and coincidentally he finishes a chess problem that he has been composing for some time. He feels the relief simultaneously.

That Nabokov choose to not be part of the Russian émigré groups should come as no surprise to the reader. Though he is Russian and of a similar class and political stance, he feels very little connection to these groups, though he is trying to define himself as a writer who represents Russia. He was raised in such a way that he always feels extraordinary and of a different class.

Vocabulary

triadic, antithetic, indigence, diabolical, dossier, parasitized, colloquial, capitulation, expatriates, impunity, leniency, myopic, nostalgic, palpable, drisk, genuflectory, precipice, coteries, raglan, plangent, decorum, prodigious, exigencies, penultimate, delectation, poignant, emetic, divulged

Chapter 15

Summary

It is May 1934 and Nabokov and his wife Vera have an infant son, Dmitri. Nabokov recounts, with distinct detail, his baby's hands, the parks they visited, the toys he played with, the tender moments he shared with his wife as they watched their son watch for trains. A conflict that both Nabokov and Vera struggle with is raising their boy with the very little they have when they were raised in such opulent households.

But, Nabokov mentions that even the best nurses and governesses didn't provide such pure food for him, or give him baths nearly as tender. He recognizes that Vera's mothering is better than anything he received as an infant, despite their poverty.

He thinks back to when he was a boy and how he liked to manipulate his surroundings by digging and making towers, destroying and then building up again. He recounts his own remembered infancy as he watches his young son play at the sea shore. Shortly after this trip, his family travels to Paris; it is 1939.

Analysis

More than any other chapter in the book, this chapter was written for Vera. He is writing an homage to their infant son and her beautiful mothering. He remarks that he has never seen anything like the patience she has for Dmitri. He recounts tender moments with beautiful revealing details. Nothing in the book is this intimate—and it is also in this part of the book that it becomes clear that Nabokov has written this book for Vera and his son Dmitri. Again, he addresses her directly.

An interesting conflict that Nabokov faces is how to raise his boy with the tenderness and sheltered entitlement without the opulence that Nabokov enjoyed. He finds himself in Berlin at the gardens and none are pristine enough for his boy. He does not want his boy to have to see the ugliness of other people—their habits, bodies, or trash. Nabokov is peculiar—he has outlined his idiosyncrasies throughout his autobiography, but it is in this chapter that it is apparent he is misanthropic. Through he loves his family; he never fits in with others and always reverts back to a longing for a perfect golden childhood. Now, with a child of his own he has to reconcile his past with the reality of his poverty.

Vocabulary

limpid, unsheathed, vacuity, stropping, nebulae, postulating, scrupulous, replete, skeins, spatial, elucidate, semaphore, fervency, friable, supercilious, vitiated, curative, topiary, phonetically

Important People

Vladimir Nabokov

Nabokov is the author and narrator of Speak, Memory. Nabokov is a well-known writer around the world with Lolita being his most famous book. In Speak, Memory Nabokov outlines the major events and people that defined his childhood from infancy through young adulthood. Initially it sounds as if the narrator is speaking to, or having a conversation with, the audience directly, but later in the book readers understand that it is Vera, his wife to whom he is speaking.

As a child Nabokov was mischievous with an obsessive interest in mathematics, language, and moths and butterflies. When he began writing poetry few people thought that he would ever become a writer one day. A central conflict that Nabokov deals with is how to represent Russia as an émigré, especially when he lived in a Russia not experienced by others.

Vera Nabokov

Vera Nabokov is not mentioned until Chapter 12 and then only in passing as a reference to them having a child together. In Chapter 15 Nabokov describes Vera as a patient, kind and loving mother—that even in their poverty she provided the best and healthiest food, that she would wait for over an hour around the train tracks for their son Dmitri to see a train.

Though the reader knows little about Vera except from descriptions in the last chapter, it is clear by how Nabokov writes about her, that he loves her. Speak, Memory was dedicated to her.

Elena Ivanovna Nabokov (Mother)

From an early age Nabokov relates with his mother. Though he describes her as not being domestic in their households, she does spend time with her children—reading to them, playing with them and tending them when they are ill. When his mother is not with them, she enjoys playing tennis and hunting for mushrooms.

As a young child Nabokov describes the colored hearing that he experiences and she explains to him that she experiences something similar. Part of their relationship is sharing some of the same idiosyncrasies.

Mademoiselle

Though Nabokov repeatedly mentions how much he disliked his French Mademoiselle, he writes about and references her just as much as he writes about his mother and father. A large stern French governess from Switzerland, Mademoiselle is insecure and not well-liked by the children or the adults.

As a child Nabokov would play pranks on her, like running away or hiding from her. He found her too strict, too inflexible to be a governess of two young boys. As a college student Nabokov travels to Switzerland and pays Mademoiselle a visit. They recount memories of when Nabokov was younger and disagree on a number of points. Nabokov notes the discrepancy but chooses to stick to his remembered version.

Vladimir Dmitrievich Nabokov (Father)

Nabokov's father was a famous politician, reporter and lawyer. He was the son of other political figures and judges. Nabokov's father had many published pieces that Nabokov read and has stated that they influenced his own writing. Nabokov's father is described as a loving and patient man—a man of both business and family.

He dies in Berlin in 1922 shielding a political speaker from an assassin. Nabokov looks up to his father but never mentions wanting to be like him or feeling the need to metaphorically "fill his shoes."

Objects/Places

Vyra

Vyra is the country estate set in the Russian countryside. As Nabokov recounts his childhood he is nostalgic for Vyra.

Moths/Butterflies

Nabokov is obsessive with moths and butterflies from an early age. Multiple times he refers to this being an interest even in his adulthood.

Liberal School

The Liberal School is where Nabokov's father sends him once he is too old for tutors. It is a school for intellectual thinkers.

Duel

When Nabokov is attending the Liberal School, his father challenges a reporter who has defamed him to a duel. The reporter apologizes and the duel is canceled.

Biarritz

Biarritz, France is where Nabokov's family travels to vacation.

Crimea

Crimea is where Nabokov's family travels to when they think their exile will be brief. They later flee Crimea for Constantinople and then Berlin.

Love Letters

Tamara and Nabokov write love letters to each other when he leaves in exile.

Cambridge University

Cambridge University is where Nabokov and his brother, Sergey attend university.

Berlin

Berlin is where Nabokov's family eventually settles after they leave Russia in exile.

Chess Problems

Nabokov composes chess problems.

Themes

Reconstruction of Time and Place

Throughout the book Nabokov questions his own memory by asking more and more detailed questions of his own recollections. At times, he is even frustrated by what he cannot recall. In Speak, Memory he recreates time and place by using photographs, his father's scrapbook and chronological and historical events.

In Chapter One he is recalling his earliest memories, only he cannot recall exactly what age he is, so he uses contextual clues to help him recreate time. Once he knows how old he is, he is able to fill in the other details. Speak, Memory at times reads like a list of events until something stops Nabokov, or catches his attention and then he tells a specific anecdote or vignette. Sometimes one anecdote will lead to a detailed story and sometimes they are glossed over before moving on to the next item on the list of events.

One of the interesting feelings that Nabokov captures throughout Speak, Memory is that everyone has the capacity to rediscover a forgotten time and place. There are moments in the book where he actively tries to recall something and cannot—it is only after unearthing other details that finally the forgotten information reveals itself. In this way Speak, Memory reads like an exercise in recall—an exercise in discovery and recollection of what is long forgotten.

Fiction vs. Perception

Nabokov mentions in the first couple of chapters that he often uses the details of his real tutors and governesses as characters in his fiction. In addition to people he uses the real details of places—like most writers do. But, Nabokov writes with such detail that he loses track of what is fiction and what is real—he says that once a place is used in fiction it crumbles in his memory. One might argue that if his fictional characters and places are based on real places and people it is all real—but Nabokov has shown that context for details is crucial—it is what reconstructs time and place, essentially memory.

If the details of time can be resurrected and remembered accurately then people and places are not lost. In many ways this is what Nabokov has done with his book. At the time of writing Speak, Memory he has lost his father, his brother Sergey, Uncle Ruka and various teachers, tutors and governesses, in addition to his beloved childhood homes. Essentially in this book he recreates them, so that they are never gone or dead.

But with memory, especially the memory of a child, reality can differ from what is recalled. Like when Nabokov and his governess Mademoiselle argue about specific events when Nabokov was a boy. Their recall of the same events differed. Though Nabokov notes these differences, he still writes his as truth because it was for him. Truth, for Nabokov, is what is remembered and the more tactile details recreated, the more real the memory.

Life of an Émigré

Growing up Nabokov speaks better English than Russian and also reads in English before Russian, much to the chagrin of his Russian parents. As a boy growing up in Russia, Nabokov enjoys the pleasures of Western Europe more than the pastimes of his own countrymen. However, once Nabokov is in exile from Russia, he longs for his home country. One might argue that Nabokov is not longing for Russia, but for the wealth and opulence that his family afforded in Russia; that he misses his city manse and drivers; the country estate of his childhood and the inherited estate of his Uncle Ruka. More than anything, what Nabokov longs for is his childhood.

As a student attending Cambridge University, as one of the few Russians there, Nabokov feels that this is when he first began working at becoming a Great Russian writer. Many of Nabokov's first stories and books were written in Russian though he is fluent in many languages. Though he works at defining himself as a Russian writer, he does little to associate with other Russians, finding them crass and too political.

Even as an adult he spends little time with the democratic émigré communities choosing instead to assimilate quietly into the backgrounds of the cities in which he lives. To define himself as Russian and as a Russian writer he needs nothing more than his recollections of the past. It is when he is removed from all that is Russian that he feels he truly belongs there.

Styles

Structure

Speak, Memory is divided into fifteen chapters and each chapter has multiple numbered sections, like a list. The autobiography unfolds chronologically from Nabokov's earliest memories until his early adulthood in 1939. Some chapters read like lists with tangential asides when Nabokov recounts an interesting or poignant memory.

Other chapters follow a more traditional story arc with a beginning, middle and end. All of the chapters are organized by time period and events and significant people that he recalls from that specific time of his life.

Perspective

Tone

Quotes

I may be inordinately fond of my earliest impressions, but then I have reason to be grateful for them. They led the way to a veritable Eden of visual and tactile sensations. (Chapter 1)

The follow of such thematic designs through one's life should be, I think, the true purpose of autobiography. (Chapter 1)

Music, I regret to say, affects me merely as an arbitrary succession of more or less irritating sounds. (Chapter 2)

To love with all one's soul and leave the rest to fate, was the simple rule she heeded. (Chapter 2)

She cherished her own past with the same retrospective fervor that I now do her image and my past. (Chapter 3)

It is certainly not then—not in dreams—but when one is wide awake, at moments of robust joy and achievement, on the highest terrace of consciousness, that mortality has a chance to peer beyond its own limits, from the mast, from the past and its castle tower. And although nothing much can be seen from the mist, there is somehow the blissful feeling that one is looking in the right direction. (Chapter 2)

The act of vividly recalling a patch of the past is something that I seem to have been performing with the utmost zest all my life… (Chapter 3)

That robust reality makes a ghost of the present. The mirror brims with brightness; a bumblebee has entered the room and bumps against the ceiling. Everything is as it should be, nothing will ever change, nobody will ever die. (Chapter 3)

'He was exceptionally gifted. I don't know what kind of teacher he was, but I do know that you were the most hopeless pupil I ever had. (Chapter 4)

I have often noticed that after I had bestowed on the characters on my novels some treasured item of my past, it would pine away in the artificial world where I had so abruptly placed it. (Chapter 5)

No matter who great my weariness, the wrench of parting with consciousness is unspeakable repulsive to me. (Chapter 5)

I sought in nature the nonutilitarian delights that I sought in art. Both were a form of magic, both were a game of intricate enchantment and deception. (Chapter 6)

But when I met Colette, I knew at once that this was the real thing. Colette seemed to me so much stranger than all my other chance classmates at Biarritz. (Chapter 7)

I am going to show a few slides, but first let me indicate the where and the when of the matter. (Chapter 8)

What she found especially hard to understand was that my father, who, she knew, thoroughly appreciated all the pleasures of great wealth, could jeopardize its enjoyment by becoming a Liberal, thus helping to bring on a revolution that would, in the long run, as she correctly foresaw, leave him a pauper. (Chapter 8)

There is, it would seem, in the dimensional scale of the world a kind of delicate meeting place between imagination and knowledge, a point, arrived at by diminishing large things and enlarging small ones, that is intrinsically artistic. (Chapter 8)

They accused me of not conforming to my surroundings; of “showing off” (mainly by peppering my Russian papers with English and French terms, which came naturally to me); of refusing to touch the filthy we t towels in the washroom; of fighting with my knuckles… (Chapter 9)

…for he had just discovered War and Peace which I had read for the first time when I was eleven (in Berlin, on a Turkish sofa, in our back garden with larches and gnomes that have remained in that book, like an old postcard, forever). (Chapter 10)

An innocent beginner, I fell into all the traps laid by the singing epithet. Not that I did not struggle. In fact, I was working at my elegy very hard, taking endless trouble over every line, choose and rejecting, rolling the words on my tongue with the glazed-eyed solemnity of a tea-taster, and still it would come, that atrocious betrayal. (Chapter 11)

I took my adorable girl to all of the secret spots in the woods, where I had daydreamed so ardently of meeting her, creating her. (Chapter 12)

His famous cousin at a session of the Literary Fund, asked me father, its president, to tell me please, that I would never, never be a writer. (Chapter 12)

Thenceforth for several years, until the writing of a novel relieved me of that fertile emotion, the loss of my country was equated with the loss of my love. (Chapter 12)

He is a mere shadow in the background of my richest and most detailed recollections. I was the coddled one; he, the witness of coddling. (Chapter 13)

The story of my college years in England is really the story of my trying to be a Russian writer. (Chapter 13)

Environment, I suppose, does act upon a creature if there is, in that creature, already a certain responsive particle or strain (the English I had imbibed in my childhood). (Chapter 13)

Topics for Discussion

Topic for Discussion 1

What is more important to Nabokov: the memory or the truth of the memory?

Topic for Discussion 2

Why does Nabokov wait until the last two chapters to reveal that his audience that the narrator communicates with is his wife, Vera?

Topic for Discussion 3

What does Nabokov believe can be resurrected with acute memory of detail?

Topic for Discussion 4

Why does Nabokov feel more of a connection with his Russian countrymen once he is living in exile? How does he define himself as a Russian writer at Cambridge?

Topic for Discussion 5

In interviews Nabokov has described his childhood as perfect—what moments in his childhood illuminate this belief?