Submission Study Guide

Submission by Michel Houellebecq

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

This guide was created from the following version of this book: Houellebecq, Michel (translated by Lorin Stein). Submission. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2015.

Submission consists of the narrator, Francois's, memories of the year 2022 in France. A Parisian literary academic, Joris-Karl Huysmans specialist, and professor at the Sorbonne Paris III, François felt that his life as a sexual being had come to an end. Since the completion and overwhelmingly positive reception of his dissertation, François engaged in year-long romantic liaisons with his students. He had not produced any work of value in over a decade, and wondered what he would do with his life before he died.

Meanwhile, France was in the midst of a political revolution. Two outside parties, the National Front and the Muslim Brotherhood, replaced the traditional French parties, the center-right UMP and the center-left Socialist party, in the general election. Both parties proposed a complete overhaul of the political status quo: the National Front wanted to severely limit immigration and secede from the European Union while the Muslim Brotherhood, led by the charming Mohammed Ben Abbes, wanted to change societal norms to reflect the values of Islam. Afraid of the inevitable anti-Semitism that an Islamic government would incite, François's young, attractive girlfriend, Myriam, fled to Israel. Lonely, François began seeing escorts but was left unsatisfied by his sexual encounters with them.

Fearing violence and civil war, François fled Paris on election day. Driving down deserted roads dotted with corpses, he ended up in the historic town of Martel. While there, François discovered that a series of terrorist attacks, in which nativist and Jihadi forces stole the ballots, occurred earlier in the day. A recount was held, and as a result of a surprising endorsement by the UMP, Mohammed Ben Abbes won by a landslide.

Meanwhile, François took refuge in Rocamadour, a famous medieval Catholic stronghold. Every day in Rocamadour, François visited the famous statue of the Black Virgin. After about one month, he decided to return to Paris. His mother and father both died soon after his return, and François decided to visit the monastery, Ligugé Abbey, where Huysmans took his vows. François was unmoved by the monk's lifestyle and returned to Paris after only a few days.

Back in Paris, François's academic career started to pick up. After the Muslim Brotherhood came to power, he was forced into early retirement because he was not a Muslim. However, upon his return from Ligugé abbey, François was asked to come to work for the Saudi-run Islamic University of Paris-Sorbonne by the minister of education, Robert Rediger. Over wine, Rediger explained that François would have to convert to Islam but would enjoy a major salary increase. François had always considered himself an atheist, but was persuaded by the promise of multiple wives. The Muslim Brotherhood legalized polygamy after they were elected, and Rediger assured François that a man of his status would be given up to three wives. After, a short period

of deliberation François decided to accept the position and convert to Islam. He imagines his future as a successful academic with young beautiful wives.

Part I

Summary

Chapter One of Submission opens with a quote from En route (1895) by Joris-Karl Huysmans:

"A noise recalled him to Saint-Sulpice; the choir was leaving; the church was about to close. 'I should have tried to pray,' he thought. 'It would have been better than sitting here in the empty church, dreaming in my chair — but pray? I have no desire to pray. I am haunted by Catholicism, intoxicated by its atmosphere of incense and wax. I hover on its outskirts, moved to tears by its prayers, touched to the very marrow by its psalms and chants. I am thoroughly disgusted with my life, I am sick of myself but so far from changing my ways! And yet . . . and yet . . . if I am troubled in these chapels, as soon as I leave them I become unmoved and dry. 'In the end', he told himself, as he rose and followed the last ones out, shepherded by the Swiss guard, 'in the end, my heart is hardened and smoked dry by dissipation. I am good for nothing.'"

The novel begins with the narrator, a French literary academic, reminiscing on the conception and defense of his thesis ‘Joris-Karl Huysmans: Out of the Tunnel’ at the University of Paris IV-Sorbonne. He remembers the friendship he felt with Huysmans over the seven years that he spent studying him and states that of all the art forms only literature allows one to truly come in contact with another human spirit. The narrator goes on to explain that his dissertation was very well received and that immediately after his defense he was offered a job at the University Paris III. He remembers feeling depressed even though he had reached his goal because the end of his life as a student meant an end to his freedom from the workforce and consumerism.

The narrator recalls that he had a new girlfriend for every year that he was in school and states that this pattern continued into his professorship. While he was a student he dated other women his age but as he got older he realized that only young women with perfect bodies excited him and started sleeping with his young students.The narrator then begins to recount his more recent past. After running into two of his exes from his student days, Aurelie and Sandra, his desire to have flings with students began to fade and he worried that he was experiencing some form of andropause or male menopause. To remedy his fears, he spent an evening watching internet pornography, finding that he could still achieve an erection from normative sexual acts.

The narrative then switches to a description of his work schedule as a professor. After the narrator was awarded his professorship, he only had to teach on Wednesdays with a class on Decadents and Symbolists in the morning and a doctoral seminar in the afternoon. One day after his morning class a colleague, Steve, asked the narrator to join him for a mint tea at the Paris Mosque. Even though the narrator did not really like Steve and saw him as a poor academic, he still agreed to go. While at tea Steve expressed his concerns over a new 25-year-old lecturer who wrote his dissertation on

Léon Bloy and was said to have “nativist connections” (21). After mentioning the ban on exchanges with Israeli scholars by the conference of University Presidents, Steve declared that Bloy was a nativist and anti-Semite. Even though the narrator knew that this claim was untrue, he still told Steve that he was onto something just to make him happy.

On his way back to Paris III the narrator saw three men in their twenties, two Arab and one black, standing in the doorway of his classroom. He was relieved to see that the young men seemed calm and were not armed that day. The narrator identified the young men as “young Salafists” (24), a group that had carried out attacks on teachers in other French cities. When the narrator approached the men they were surprisingly cordial and explained that they were there to visit their “sisters” (23) gesturing to three North African women wearing burkas. The narrator remarked that perhaps the men’s peaceful behavior was the result of an agreement that the young Salafists struck with the administration. He wondered if said agreement included a clause banning Jewish organizations from campus.

After his class the narrator bumped into his colleague Marie-François who invited him to lunch at a Moroccan restaurant. Over tagine, Marie-François told the narrator that the current, feminist president of Paris III, Chantal Delouze (referred to as “Big Delouze”), would be replaced by the famously pro-Palestinian Robert Rediger. The narrator and Marie-François discussed the upcoming elections and the growing power of a new party called the Muslim Brotherhood versus the waning popularity of the right-wing National Front. The narrator was not very interested in the conversation and made comments that sounded clever but were really empty and false. As he watched Marie-Françoise speak with passion about how the Muslim Brotherhood would change university leadership, he admired the fact that she was at least interested in something.

After his doctoral seminar, the narrator went home to eat a microwave dinner and watch the political talk shows on France 2. As he watched the National Front candidate proclaim her love of France, he wondered if he was really done with love and if so, what could replace the void it would leave in his life. He debated whether or not to call one of his student lovers, Myriam, and wondered if she was still interested in him.

To take his mind off of Myriam the narrator wrote an article on Huysmans for the Journal of Nineteenth-Century Studies. In spite of the article, the narrator could not stop thinking about how attractive Myriam was and decided that she was the best sexual partner he ever had. After a few days he finally decided to call her and they arranged to meet that evening.

Myriam came to the house wearing a very short black skirt and tights. After a glass of whiskey, she told the narrator that she had always thought of him as macho. The narrator admitted that he was macho stating that he was never fully convinced that it was a good idea for women to have the ability to vote, study with men, got into the same professions, etc… Myriam was shocked and asked if he was for a return to the patriarchy. He responded that he was not really for anything but believed that at least in the patriarchal system, people reproduced keeping the population stable.

To change the subject, the narrator asked Myriam if she would like to order sushi. After he ordered she remarked that he did not seem well, that he never seemed happy because of his inability to make the compromises that most people make to get through their lives. The narrator then put on an album by Nick Drake and the two sat in silence for a long time. Finally, Myriam said that she had better go. Naming the narrator for the first time, she told him “I’m really sorry to see you like this François” and the two kissed each other goodbye. A few minutes later the sushi was delivered.

Analysis

Submission was published on January 7, 2015, the same day as the terrorist attack on the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo. Due to this coincidence and to the book’s controversial subject matter, it automatically became the center of a heated public debate. France’s prime minister, Manuel Valls, denounced the novel the next day stating that: “France is not Michel Houellebecq...it is not intolerance, hatred, and fear.” (Chrisafis, “Michel Houellebecq…”, www.theguardian.com) Indeed, Submission appeared at the height of a growing tension between French nationalists and the pro-immigration left. In the months leading up to the attack, the media and newspapers seemed singularly focused on Islam as a threat to France’s people and culture. The National Front, or the far-right, anti-immigration party mentioned multiple times in Chapter I of Submission, received a surge in popularity during this period.

As a result of these external political circumstances, Submission is often read as a satire that cautions France against ‘submitting’ to Islamic influence. However, to read the novel this way is to ‘take the bait’ that Houellebecq laid out for his paranoid readership. In an interview with the Guardian in September 2015 the author responded “Yes, I plead guilty” when asked if Submission deliberately plays off France’s fear of Islam. (Houellebecq in Chrisafis, “Michel Houellebecq…”, www.theguardian.com) In Chapter I discrete queues trigger this paranoia: both Steve and Marie-Françoise take the narrator to “Islamic” establishments (a mosque and a Moroccan restaurant) and his apartment is described as having “oriental” decor. Perhaps the most memorable scene in the chapter is François’s encounter with the three young Salafists in which just the sight of three young men of Middle Eastern/ African descent causes him to cower. These triggers serve to catch the eye and lead the reader astray. Indeed, beneath the hot button surface theme of Islamic domination in France is a pointed critique of the French people and France’s social structures. Nowhere is this made more apparent than in Chapter I of Submission.

Set just before the 2022 election, this chapter explores themes of boredom, passivity, and meaninglessness. From the very first page the narrator, François, is depicted as a passive figure. In fact, he remains nameless until the very last page of the chapter. François is a pawn in Houellebecq’s vision of a redundant French academic system. Specifically, the faults in literary academia and their effect on French culture are highlighted in this chapter. Submission opens with a stirring, exquisitely written excerpt from En route by J.-K. Huysmans. This passage, which focuses on the feeling of religious ecstasy associated with Catholic ritual, stands in stark contrast with

Submission's bland narrative tone. The juxtaposition between Huysman's effusive rhetoric and the narrator's bored nihilistic observations signals a change in the French character. All of the academics that we meet in this chapter study literary giants from one of France's most artistically fruitful epoque, the nineteenth century. The narrator studies Huysmans and the Symbolists/ Decadents, Marie-Françoise is a specialist on Balzac, and Steve wrote his dissertation on Rimbaud. In contrast to the figures they study, who broke with tradition by creating daring works of art, these academics produce redundant, half-hearted analyses of canonical French works. In short, they (like perhaps the entirety of the French people) are living off of the fumes of their nation's illustrious past. In the opening passage of Submission the narrator states that "Much, maybe too much, has been written about literature" (6). This phrase intimates that perhaps everything has been written about literature and literary analysis has become an exercise in meaningless repetition. This point is reiterated in the figure of Steve, who is not respected by his colleagues because he wrote his dissertation on the "sham topic" of Rimbaud (20). François explains that Rimbaud is "the world's most beaten-to-death subject" with "millions" of dissertations on the subject in existence (20). It seems as though these academics (and perhaps in Houellebecq's view, the French people as a whole) are suffering from a kind of cultural semantic satiation in which endless repetition has rendered their cultural history meaningless. Emblematic of this is the fact that François often says things in conversation with his colleagues that he admits are devoid of meaning. For example, when Marie-Françoise expresses concern over the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood on the election he responds with a statement that sounds engaging but is actually false:

"'But there's the Muslim Brotherhood. They're an unknown quantity. If they got twenty per cent, it would be a symbolic benchmark, and could change the balance of power….' I was talking utter bullshit of course. Ninety-nine per cent of the Muslim Brotherhood would throw their votes to the Socialists. In any case, it wouldn't affect the results at all, but the phrase balance of power always sounds impressive in conversation, as if you'd been reading Clause-witz and Sun Tzu. I was also rather pleased with symbolic benchmark" (26).

A feeling of superfluousness thus evades the scenes set in Paris III. François lectures to near empty classrooms occupied only by a few (always female) students. He even admits that he sees teaching as a futile exercise because he does not believe that intelligence can be transferred from one person to another. In fact, he seems far more interested in using Paris III as a place to find young women to sleep with than inspiring the next generation of literary scholars. He explains:

"[...]I didn't like young people and never had, even when I might have been numbered among them. Being young implied, it seemed to me a certain enthusiasm for life, or else a certain defiance, accompanied in either case by a vague sense of superiority towards the generation that one had been called on to replace. I'd never had those sort of feelings" (11).

The narrator's disinterest and antipathy towards the youth, and thereby the future, leads into the chapter's second focal point: the diminishment of the native French population.

This point is made evident through François's romantic encounters with women. His old girlfriends, Aurelie and Sandra, are examples of sexually liberated women who have never gotten married or had children. François describes them as sad barren figures with withering bodies who will eventually die alone. In fact all of the women he names in this chapter, save for Myriam, are single middle-aged women. One of the most memorable descriptions of a female character in this chapter is that of Chantal Delouze (or 'Big Delouze'), the feminist president of Paris III. Described as having broad shoulders, a grey crew cut, and a hatred for men 'Big Delouze' is a caricature of the feminist stereotype. When analyzing Houellebecq's treatment of feminist figures in his fiction, it is important to note that he is an outspoken opponent of the movement. During an interview with the Guardian in 2005 he stated that "Women are not stupid, but the are not clever enough to realize that feminism did not bring them freedom, but the opposite. That's why I'm glad feminism is dead" (Houellebecq in Hussey, "Agent Provocateur", www.theguardian.com). Taking Houellebecq's very real opposition to feminism into account, François's statements on the patriarchy and machismo in the final scenes of the the chapter are given new weight. After telling Myriam that he is unsure about the value of women's suffrage and education, he states:

"[...] at least the patriarchy existed. I mean, as a social system it was able to perpetuate itself. There were families with children, and most of them had children. In other words, it worked, whereas now there aren't enough children, so we're finished" (31).

This point is crucial to Houellebecq's criticism of the French population. While the author does not necessarily make a statement against Islam in Submission, he does make the claim that certain twentieth-century social movements, like feminism and, as we shall see, social democracy and secularism, weakened France as a nation.

Discussion Question 1

Based on François's brief but meaningful encounters with Islam in this initial chapter (tea at the mosque, lunch at the Moroccan restaurant, the tense encounter with the young Salafists, and his lecture to a room of veiled women), how does Houellebecq play off of French fears of cultural domination/submission?

Discussion Question 2

Looking at the narrator's encounters with women throughout the chapter, how does Houellebecq lay the foundation for his critique of feminism? Does it seem that the author has a contempt for women in general or specifically to the the academic feminist movement?

Discussion Question 3

What examples can you find of Houellebecq's naturalist, hyper-realist style in Chapter I? How are François's seemingly bland observations make a powerful statement on the modern condition?

Vocabulary

marrow, galvanized, repugnant, grandeur, celeriac, remoulade, apotheosis, vagabondage, transgression, turgid, dissertation, irreproachable, halal, patriarchy

Part II

Summary

After his visit with Myriam, Francois kept to himself for a week not even feeling up to going to his Wednesday class. He felt that he had already achieved all of his goals a decade ago with the defense of his dissertation and the publication of his book, and he no longer had any motivation. He thought of the progression of Huysmans' novels and the author's eventual conversion to Catholicism. François admitted that it was hard for him, as an atheist to relate to the spiritual awakening that the character, Durtal undergoes in L'Oblat (1903). In fact, the idea of it bored him. Thinking of all this, François realized that just as Against Nature was the pinnacle of Huysmans' career, Myriam was the pinnacle of his love life.

He realized that the elections were rapidly approaching though admittedly, he was never very political. In his youth, politics were not very interesting with the balance of power shifting between the centre-right and centre-left each election. However, things starting to get more interesting in 2017 when the far right party, The National Front, grew in power. A month after the elections, Mohammed Ben Abbes started the Muslim Brotherhood, a moderate take on the previous Islamic party which had been flagrantly anti-Semitic. The Muslim Brotherhood enjoyed a meteoric rise in the polls and was now nearly tied with the Socialist party though still far behind the National Front.

The National Front and the Muslim Brotherhood were to have an eagerly anticipated debate that Wednesday. For the occasion, François bought three microwave dinners and three bottles of wine. The debate was fairly uneventful with the two candidates repeatedly stating their mutual respect for one another and declaring their love of France. The day after the debate a nativist website claimed that several people died in the riots following the debate. François realized that though there had been riots consistently for the past two years the media had virtually stopped talking about it. Everyone seemed to have gotten sick of talking about the racial violence and a general mood of "What will happen will happen" pervaded the nation (44).

The next evening, François went the the Spring launch party of The Journal of Nineteenth Century Studies at the Museum of the Romantics. It was a nice evening and he was happy to see his friend, Alice, who lectured at the University of Lyon II. Alice introduced François to his new colleague, the young nativist that Steve had spoken of, Godefroy Lempereur. As they exchanged pleasantries something exploded in the distance. François and Lempereur talked about the differences between their two authors of choice, Bloy and Huysmans, and François began to probe him on his right wing politics. Suddenly, they heard automatic gunfire and another explosion but this time much closer. This was the first fighting to take place within the borders of Paris and not in the suburbs. They saw smoke rising somewhere above Place de Clichy and the party began to disperse.

Lempereur invited François to his home to wait out the rioting. The young man lead him to a beautiful old hôtel particulier tucked away in a back street. François wondered how a young man a teacher's salary could afford such a place. Lempereur offered to turn on the TV to see what was going on but the two agreed that the main networks probably would not be covering it. François asked his colleague why he thought the media was participating in such an information blackout and Lempereur responded that it was because they were terrified of The National Front winning. François asked Lempereur if he was a nativist and he admits that he used to belong to a nativist organization years ago. The group fell apart however, because there many different factions within it that could never seem to unify. However, Lempereur explained, a new group of "indigenous europeans" (55) had unified and wanted to start a civil war. The young nativist then went on to talk about how such a war could happen, what countries would initiate it, and that it would probably break out before 2050. By two in the morning the fighting had calmed down enough for François to get a cab and go home.

The following day, François tried to find videos of the fighting but could only find one grainy cell phone video of masked men with assault rifles marching in a V-formation onto Place de Clichy. He realized then that the race war was real and that, because he was white, it would be a good idea for him to formulate an escape plan. He wondered where he would go and realized that he was very much alone now that he and Myriam had split. On his way to buy groceries, he realized that he was lucky to live in Chinatown because the Chinese had kept the neighborhood free of blacks and Arabs.

From this point forward, Part II is divided into dated dated sections like a diary.

Sunday, 15 May was the day of the 2022 primary elections in France. Election day had always been François's favorite television event because of the excitement of the pundits, the crowds, the candidates etc...gave on the feeling that they were watching history in the making. By 9:50 pm the leader of the centre-right party, the UMP, conceded, as it was clear that The National Front had won by a landslide. At midnight the Muslim Brotherhood won a surprise victory over the Socialists.

Three days later, on Wednesday 18, May, François headed to teach his class. As he walked he realized that the faltering political system he had grown up had finally exploded. He noticed that even his most apathetic and apolitical students looked anxious and the girls in burqas seemed to carry themselves with a new confidence. His colleagues, however, displayed a shocking lack of concern. François viewed this as a confirmation of his belief that academics view themselves as untouchable and immune to political changes. At the end of the day he ran into Marie-Françoise who agreed that their colleagues were foolish for not being worried. Her husband, she explained, worked for the DGSI (or the French secret police) and could explain the real situation to François if he would like to come for a drink.

Marie-Françoise's husband told François the the Muslim Brotherhood and the Socialists were making secret deals with one another. The Muslim Brotherhood was willing to cede over half of the ministries including finance and interior. However, the would not budge on their plans for the education system. The Muslim Brotherhood wanted to give

every French child the option of a Muslim education at every level of school meaning: no co-education, women would only be schooled in Home Economics, all teachers would have to be Muslim, the schools would follow Muslim dietary plans, mandatory prayer five times a day, and curriculums would reflect the Koran. They would also instate polygamy. Marie-François's husband explained that the Socialists would have to give into these demands otherwise the National Front would surely win. When François asked if the information he had just been given was classified, Marie-François's husband replied that it had been until a nativist group leaked the information to the public.

François's talk with Marie-François's husband got him thinking about Lempereur and whether or not he had truly severed all ties with nativist groups. The next day, Thursday, 19 May, François went by Lempereur's office at Paris III and asked him out for a drink. Lempereur agreed and brought François to a nice, richly furnished bar off of rue Mouffetard. To test the young man, François asked Lempereur what, given the new political situation, he thoght he should do moving forward. Lempereur responded that he should open a new account with a foreign bank because "It's not clear that the recent actions of the Socialist Party will go down well with their supporters…" (71). Because he referenced the leaked classified information that Marie-Françisoise's husband had told him, François knew automatically that Lempereur was, indeed, still a nativist. The young man then told him to get out of Paris for awhile, as riots and looting would most certainly follow the election results. François decided to stay with Lempereur for another drink because he was lonely and enjoyed the company. Looking at his young colleague, he wondered if he had a girlfriend or if he, too, lived a solitary life.

On Friday, 20 May, François did as Lempereur advised and opened an account in a foreign bank. As he walked home, he remembered an old colleague, Bruno Deslandes, who had passed his dissertation without distinction and left academia. He started work in the marketing department of a mobile company, got married, had children, and moved into a house with a garden outside of Paris. Bruno invited François to a barbeque at his home after the two ran into each other a few years prior. François remembered that when he arrived everyone was already very drunk. It started raining and the party moved inside. Sitting in Bruno's home François looked at his wife, Annelise, and thought about her life and the life of all Western women. He imagined how every morning she must get up early to do her hair and put on a carefully selected outfit. Then she spends her day emailing and doing other professional tasks until she gets home around nine and collapses in a sweatshirt and tracksuit trousers. She and Bruno would then look at one another and realize that their future was nothing more than a slow decline until death. François assumed that Bruno and Annelise were probably divorced by now.

Thinking of all this, François poured himself a glass of wine and thought about Huysmans' book on conjugal love, En ménage. It is a story about the love of a committed elderly couple who followed the traditional family values of the nineteenth century. François mused that in an era when a wife lovingly bought and cooked all the food for her husband a truly nurturing and tender relationship could take place. Huysmans chose the monastic lifestyle over the life of married patriarch. François

realized that monasticism had remained unchanged in France for centuries but marriage was entirely different post-Feminism. He then wondered if over time Myriam could become like the wife in En ménage. Just then, Myriam called and told François that she would like to see him the next day because it was his birthday and she had something to tell him. After he got off the phone, François compared the values of a monastic lifestyle to sexual pleasure and conjugal love.

On his 44th birthday, Saturday, 21 May, Myriam came over wearing an even sexier outfit than she had on the last time. She and François kissed passionately and he noticed that she was wearing stockings and a garter. When he asked her if she had gotten him a present Myriam spread her legs and told him that she was going to give him good oral sex. François then goes into a detailed description of the act. Just as he was about to ejaculate he stopped her. He had ordered sushi in advance this time and the couple ate and drank champagne. Myriam told François that she loved him and through tears explained that she and her family were moving to Israel. They had decided to move because they were afraid of The Muslim Brotherhood coming to power and what that would mean for French Jews. She began sobbing and told him that she did not want to leave her country. He led her into the bedroom and made passionate love to her.

The next morning, Sunday, 22 May, François woke up before Myriam and made coffee. He turned on the television to find that overnight news of the secret negotiations between the Socialists and the Muslim Brotherhood had spread. Ben Abbes held a press conference in which he reminded the people that no one had benefitted more than he from the French republican meritocracy and that he would never wish to undermine a system to which he owed so much. However, he continued, times had changed and the people wanted a school system that incorporated spiritual beliefs be they Muslim, Christian, or Jewish. François described how Ben Abbes' hypnotizing manner of speech left him in a sea of doubt. Marine Le Pen counter attacked later in the day. She appeared looking stylish and beautiful for the cameras in front of the Hôtel de Ville. Her speech compared the Muslim Brotherhood's plan to de-secularize the French education system to the centuries of ignorance that Christianity caused during the dark ages. François muted the television and Myriam told him that she had to go home to eat lunch with her family. François remembered the time he had met her family and how he had been moved almost to tears by their closeness. As she left she told François that she hoped that she would return soon after the political situation calmed down.

After Myriam left, Francois' mind wandered. He thought he could have asked Myriam to marry him but realized that they were both too young and that the best age to get married was around 50 or 60. The thought about writing another article for The Journal of Nineteenth Century Studies but realized that he did not have the energy and turned the volume back on the television. All of the major news channels were talking about Marine Le Pen's speech in which she called for giant march on the Champs Elysée. She declared that the march would take place "by any means necessary" regardless of police permission (93).

In spite of his separation from Myriam and the chaotic political situation, François felt cheerful on his way to class the next morning. However, he was surprised to find that

the entrance gate to Paris III was locked when he arrived. Finally, a Black Senegalese guard, whom François had know for years, arrived and told him that the university was closed. As François walked away the guard grabbed him by the arm and told him that things had gotten really bad and he would be surprised if the university opened within the next few weeks. As Francois walked home he saw that the National Front Protest had already started and remarked that he had never seen such a crowd. The organizers claimed that two million people were in attendance. François watched the protest on television when he got home. He realized that he was out of microwave dinners and decided to go food shopping. The supermarket was strangely empty, and he could hear from the cashier's radios that the protests were still going on, so far without an incidences of violence. François knew that the fighting would start as the protesters dispersed. When he arrived home he saw on the television that masked men with assault rifles were moving amongst the protesters but the image was blurry because of torrential rain.

Analysis

The themes of French complacency, passivity, and anti-feminism put forth in Part I are complexified in Part II. By far the longest part in the novel, this section consists of the dramatic events leading up to Houellebecq's fictionalized 2022 election.

A feeling of secrecy and hiddenness pervades Part II. Central to this theme is the liberal French government and media's attempts to hide the intense fighting occurring throughout France. Throughout the chapter, François expresses frustration at the lack of information on the violent events taking place around him. He and his colleagues hear gunshots and explosions just outside the walls of The Journal of the Nineteenth Century party but afterwards can find no videos or articles on what actually happened. In fact there are only two instances in which François sees videos of "black, hooded" men "armed with machine guns" marching through the city and both times the footage is somehow blurred (58). Houellebecq infers that little attention is paid to the fact that, as the narrator states "boots were on the ground, [and] that the territory was under control" (58) for two reasons: the social democratic agenda and a general disinterest/ passivity on the part of the French people. When he asks Lempereur why he believes that the government and media are instigating an information "blackout" (53), the young man responds that it is because they are terrified that The National Front will win. The National Front, as previously stated, is strongly opposed to the pro-immigration and sexual liberation movements that were born of twentieth-century social democracy. The liberal media and Socialist government, as they are portrayed in Submission, desperately hold on to a system that, in Houellebecq's vision, has miserably failed and, in fact, is taken over by the Muslim Brotherhood in the end. Therefore, they hide the violence perpetrated by Islamic fighters and make policy deals with the Muslim Brotherhood that wildly offset liberal values. In Part II, for example, Marie-Françoise's husband (a member of the DGSI or the 'secret police' force that is partially responsible for the information blackout) explains that the Socialist party is willing to reject two of its foundational values, secularism and gender equality, just to beat The National Front.

Though portrayed as a more logical alternative to the Socialist Party and the Muslim Brtoherhood, The National Front and the ‘nativist’ or “Indigenous European” (55) movements do not escape Houellebecq’s criticism. The first and only nativist that we meet in Submission is Godfroy Lempereur. Young, passionate, and idealistic Lempereur is one of the most attractive characters in the novel. He stands in stark contrast to François who is bland, middle-aged, and frustratingly complacent to the situation in Houellebecq’s France. Lempereur is proud of his cultural heritage though, as he reveals in his conversation with François, he and the other nativists act on that pride in misguided ways. When they arrived at his house the young man revealed that far right political groups secretly instigated violence in Muslim communities to obtain votes. He explained:

“Any images of urban violence mean more votes for the National Front. So now the far right is stirring things up even more. Of course the guys in the banlieues retaliate, but you’ll notice that every time things have got out of hand these last few months, it started with an anti-Muslim provocation: somebody desecrating a mosque or forcing a woman to lift her veil, that kind of thing” (53).

Through his portrayal of the left’s passivity towards and the right’s provocation of the Muslim community in France, Houellebecq paints the country’s political landscape as an irresponsible grab for power at the hands of which the French people suffer. Both political parties manipulate their votership through secretive and underhanded means, preventing the people from making logical democratic decisions about their future. Indeed, as the political tension intensifies François states that “the widening gap, now a chasm, between the people and those who claimed to speak for them, the politicians and journalists, would necessarily lead to something chaotic, violent and unpredictable” (94). François embodies Houellebecq's vision of the complacent French voter: lost in a sea of misinformation, he is stupefied into passivity. The latin root of his name actually means simply ‘Frenchman’ and at one point he says that up until the insurrections, he had “always been convinced that the vast majority of French people would always be resigned and apathetic” (94), because he himself had always been that way.

The ‘native’ French citizens, specifically the academic class, in Submission are almost always congregate in hidden, tucked away places. The opening scenes of Part II take place in the courtyard of the Museum of the Romantics where the professors drink champagnes as shots are fired just outside the walls. Afterwards, Lempereur took François to his lavish hôtel particulier, furnished in the style of a late nineteenth-century Parisian aesthete. Lempereur’s house is removed from the street, protected by a metal gate, and hidden by trees. These two scenes point to what Houellebecq sees as the French intellectual community’s detachment from reality. These academics are acutely aware of and celebrate their country’s history through articles in The Journal of the Nineteenth Century but are ignorant to the violence and political unrest occurring just outside their doors. They, like so many other French citizens, live in a carefully constructed simulacrum of their country’s glorious past, too apathetic to construct its future. François comments on this after the Muslim Brotherhood beat the Socialists in the runoff:

“They seemed completely unworried, as if none of this had anything to do with them. It only confirmed what I’d always thought - that, for all their education, university professors can’t even imagine political developments having any effect on their careers: they consider themselves untouchable" (63).

Their untouchability however, as we shall see in the forthcoming chapters, is as fragile as the the crumbling walls they surround themselves with.

Even when François is alone, which is most of the time, he remains hidden from the outside world. Television is a very important aspect of François’s life; he thinks about it while he lectures, buys microwave meals so he can eat in front of it, and leaves it on almost constantly. Throughout Chapter Two he refers to election coverage as a form of entertainment. Though he is, in his words “about as political as a bath towel” (39), he explains:

“I’d always loved election night. I’d go so far as to say it’s my favorite TV show, after the World Cup finals. Obviously there was less suspense in elections, since, according to their peculiar narrative structure, you knew from the first minutes how they would end, but the wide range of actors (the political scientists, the pundits, the crowds of supporters cheering or in tears at their party headquarters…and the politicians in the heat of the moment, with their thoughtful of passionate declarations) and the general excitement of the participants really gave the feeling, so rare, so precious, so telegenic, that history was coming to you live” (60).

During Marine Le Pen’s speech in which she calls for the biggest political march perhaps in Western, François gets bored and changes the channel to a reality show on obesity. Though François takes pains to research and understand his country’s past, he does very little to grasp the current political reality and form his own opinion. Because François gets his information exclusively from the television (and from a member of the secret police), people around him seem to know a great deal more than he does. He asks Lempereur, a man more than 20 years his junior, for advice. The guard at Paris III, who is most likely significantly less educated that François, tells him the truth about the fighting.

The ‘native’ French people in Submission, furthermore are almost constantly drinking enormous amounts of alcohol. François drinks a few bottles of wine per night, he and Lempereur share an entire bottle of brandy, and at Bruno Deslandes barbeque the hosts are too drunk to even cook. Though drinking fine alcohol is an integral part of the French identity, Houllebecq’s French citizens of 2022 seem to have become alcoholics and binge drinkers. Alcohol in Submission therefore, is a form of escapism. It is important to remember that orthodox Muslims, like the members of the Muslim Brotherhood, do not drink.

François constantly slips into reveries about Huysmans’ life and work throughout Submission. Central to Part II is his 1881 novel En ménage (in English Married Life) which follows a man’s search for conjugal happiness. The main character, André Jayant, marries a dull-minded woman, leaves her for a high-class prostitute, leaves her for a

working class woman, the finally goes back to the dull woman. The figure of the prostitute and the working class woman in Huysmans' novel represent the modern-day French woman; sexually liberated and motivated by their careers. In En ménage for example, the working class woman that André leaves his wife for has to leave him for a job in London. Houellebecq seems to draw a parallel between this figure and characters like Bruno Deslandes wife, Annelise, who works all day and is too tired when she gets home to attend to household duties. Houellebecq seems critical of the modern-day family model in which the wife focuses on her career over creating an environment of conjugal happiness. Looking at Annelise, François imagines what her day, as a modern Western woman, must be like:

" [after] dropping the kids off at daycare, [...] she spent the day e-mailing, on the phone, in various meetings, and once she got home, around nine, exhausted (Bruno was the one who picked the kids up, who made them dinner [...]), she'd collapse, get into a sweatshirt and tracksuit trousers, and that's how she'd greet her lord and master, and some part of him must to have known - had to have known - that he was fucked, and some part of her must have known that she was fucked, and that things wouldn't get better over the years" (76).

In his mind he compares this to the "tepid happiness" of couples in the traditional patriarchal system (77). François believes that "in an era when a wife bought and peeled the vegetables herself, trimmed the meat and spent hours simmering the stew, a tender and nurturing relationship could take root" (77). These statements parallel the Muslim Brotherhood's plan to restrict female education to the study of Home Economics. Marie-François's husband explains that this party cares only about "birth rate and education. To them it's simple-whichever segment of the population has the highest birth rate, and does the best job of transmitting its values, wins" (66). In this model, the 'native' French people of Houellebecq's 2022 have lost miserably.

Though Houellebecq views the traditional family model as the foundation of cultural success, he certainly does not see extra-marital sexual love as degenerative. In fact, François's descriptions of sex acts are the only moments that the character seems to come alive. When he describes making love to his 22-year-old girlfriend, Myriam, his prose moves from bland hyperrealism to soaring ecstasy. These moments, surrounded by bland passivity, incite a moving feeling of relief in the reader; in a world dominated by superficiality, sexual love is perhaps the one thing that the politicians and the media cannot take from humanity. Myriam thus mirrors the figure of the high-end escort in Huysmans' En ménage, representing an incomplete half of conjugal happiness. The other half is of course, the homemaker. However, François's love for Myriam is genuine as he often refers to her as the summit of pinnacle of his love life. This makes her eventual departure to Israel and François's subsequent loneliness one of the few truly emotional plotlines of Submission. But Myriam's departure effectively lays the foundation for the next chapter of François's life in which, as we shall see, his values and lifestyle are changed completely.

Discussion Question 1

How are the academics in Submission detached from the political reality in Houellebecq's vision of France in the year 2022?

Discussion Question 2

How has the traditional family model been undermined in Houellebecq’s vision? What has taken the place of the nuclear family in France?

Discussion Question 3

How does François transform when he talks about sexuality and sex acts?

Vocabulary

incisive, aesthetic, authorial, indigenous, intransigence, virtuosic, banlieue, bewildered, nativist, pluralist, negligible, gendarmerie, ubiquity, tartan, polygamy, carcinogenic, tepid, debauchery, cumulus

Part III

Summary

On Sunday, May 29, François awoke feeling lucid and alert. He packed a bag with camping supplies and basic life essentials and headed to the South West of France in his car. It was election day and François feared that a civil war might break out once the results came in. As he drove he realized that he had never really travelled in France and knew very little about it. After stopping at a service station for a snack, François turned on the radio. The commentators seemed to have no idea how the election would go.

The roads were mysteriously empty as François continued South. He tried to turn on the radio again only to find that every station was offline and full of static. Rattled, François decided that he should drive even further South to Spain, where civil war was slightly less imminent. As he drove he realized that he needed gas and pulled into the next petrol station. When he parked the car he knew instantly that something was wrong; someone had broken the glass window and the door to the drink refrigerator was also smashed. When François approached the counter he saw that the cashier, a young woman, had been shot dead. Unfazed, François went behind the counter to see if he could somehow turn on the gas pumps. On his was out, he took a sandwich, a non-alcoholic beer, and a Michelin Guide.

Looking through the Michelin Guide, François chose a nice hotel, The Relais du Haute-Quercy in the village of Martel, to stay for the night. On his way there, he saw the bodies of two young men of North African descent lying dead on the side of the road. The hotel was mostly deserted and it took François a while to find someone to give him a room. Finding that all the television channels were not working, he decided to go explore the little town, which also seemed deserted. François enjoyed some of the town's historical sites and called Myriam in Israel before finding a bar that seemed open. In the backroom, he found a group of men huddled around a television watching BBC news. Though Fraçois had not practiced his English in a while, he understood that twenty polling stations, across France, had been attacked by groups of armed men that afternoon. These men had stolen the ballots, forcing the government to suspend the elections.

When François woke up the following morning, all the television stations were back on. All of the pundits argued vehemently in one way or another as to how the attacks would affect the election but it was clear that no one actually knew. François decided to go back to the village in the early evening and found that it was slowly coming back to life. Drinking a beer at a local sports bar, he ran into Marie-Françoise's husband, the spy, Alain Tanneur. Alain explained that he had been fired from the DGSI because he predicted the attacks on the polling booths and now believed that the government had wanted it to happen. Alain's parents owned a home in Martel where he and Marie-Fraçoise planned to retire. With Alain's unexpected firing and Marie-Françoise's

precarious employment situation under the potential Muslim Brotherhood regime, this seemed to be happening sooner than planned.

Alain explained to François that the attackers had been half Young Salafists and half nativists. The polls were exactly 50/50 up until that point, so it was impossible to say who would have won had the ballots not been stolen. Alain was certain that the UMP, or the centre-right party, would back the Muslim Brotherhood because they did not want France to leave the Eurozone. After they paid the bill, Alain invited François for dinner at he and Marie-Françoise's home. As he left, the old spy told François to watch the news the next day.

Just after two in the afternoon on Tuesday, May 31, news broke that the centre-right had formed a coalition with the Socialists to back the Muslim Brotherhood. Furthermore, François Bayrou, a famous failure of a politician, had agreed to share the ticket with Ben Abbes and would be the prime minister if he won. In the evening, Fraçois went to the Tanneurs' home for dinner. Marie-Françoise cooked an amazing meal and Alain and François talked about the future of France for hours. Alain explained to François that Ben Abbes was a moderate Muslim who was more concerned with rebuilding the Roman Empire than converting Europe to Islam. Ben Abbes wanted, Alain continued, to turn Europe into a great Muslim superpower by extending the Eurozone to include Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, and eventually Egypt. The leader of the Muslim Brotherhood modeled himself off of the emperor Augustus and hoped to one day become president of all of Europe. As François left, Alain told him that he must visit Rocamadour, known as the Religious City, so that he may truly understand the power of religion.

The next day François went to Rocamadour. Surrounded by ancient buildings and religious pilgrims, he fell into a dream-like state, as though he had somehow fallen out of historical time. He did not even notice when on Sunday, Ben Abbes won by landslide. After a week or two in Rocamadour, Myriam sent him an email telling him how much fun she was having in Israel. The email included a picture of her in a bikini that excited François. Since the beginning of his stay, François had gotten into the habit of visiting the the Chapel of Our Lady and standing in front of the famous Black Virgin statue for a few minutes.

After spending over a month in Rocamadour, François realized that he had to go back to Paris. On his second-to-last day there, he listened to a reading of the poet Péguy in the Chapel of Our Lady and fell into another bizarre trance. François realized that he had not eaten in almost two days and decided to get something to eat from the hotel. Just before he left the next day, François visited the Black Virgin one last time.

Analysis

Central to Part III of Submission is François's journey into his country's past. As François flees Paris, he takes mental journeys into previous decades, centuries, and even prehistory. He gets more in touch with his cultural past and, as a result, his own humanity, the farther he gets from the capital. At the beginning of his journey, he

remained the numb, emotionally stunted character that the reader was introduced to in the first two sections. When he sees the dead body of the cashier at the gas station, he does not attempt to help or call the police, he is desensitized to violence. In fact, he takes advantage of the situation by stealing a sandwich, a non-alcoholic beer, and a Michelin guide. The two bodies of young North African men on the side of the road, produce a similar lack of emotion.

However, the unique conditions of the day incite a profound change in François. The empty roads, hotel, and streets coupled with the radio and television blackout create a blank slate upon which his true feelings can be projected. In the village of Martel, and later in Rocamadour, François is able to think and reflect without the distractions of carnal desire and mindless entertainment. When he enters the deserted Martel village, he looks at all the medieval structures and notes that he has only ever "seen things like that on TV" (109). Later, he walks up a dirt path to a scenic view of the Dordogne Valley. Looking out onto the ancient landscape, François reflects on the land's original inhabitants:

"I learned from an information panel that the region had been inhabited since the dawn of prehistory. Cro-Magnon man had slowly driven the Neanderthals out of this valley. They had taken refuge in Spain, the disappeared" (110).

This historical fact mirrors François's decision early in the chapter to head further south to Spain to avoid the upcoming civil war. Here, Francois and the other native French people represent the Neanderthals and the Muslim Brotherhood, the Cro-Magnons. The theme of historical parallels between the past and the present reverberates throughout Part III. The church of Saint-Maur, "had been built to resist the many attacks of the infidels who used to populate the region" (109) and, as Alain explained, Martel was founded by Charles Martel who had "fought the Arabs at Poitiers in 732, ending the Muslim expansion north" (121). These historical anecdotes are intended to stand in contrast to the political situation in Houellebecq's vision of France in the year 2022. The French natives, far from fighting off Muslim 'invaders,' welcome them with open arms. As Alain tells François:

"It's true Christianity and Islam have been at war for a very long time; war has always been of the major human activities. As Napoleon put it, war is human nature. But with Islam, I think, the time has come for accommodation, for an alliance" (122).

Indeed, the very next day an 'alliance' or a "broad republican front" (123) is formed between the two major French political parties and the Muslim brotherhood. One could easily mistake Houellebecq's comparison of a Muslim-ruled France with the country's illustrious past as a criticism. However, the rest of the section reveals that the author believes that such an undertaking could have a positive effect on the French population.

To begin with, Houellebecq's France, 2022 before the Muslim Brotherhood's political win, as we have seen, is a bleak and degenerate place. The French natives seem lost, unhappy, and vapid. However, the return of religion to France seems (even though it is a foreign religion) seems to have an immediately positive effect on the players in Part

III. Alain and Marie-Françoise, both forced into retirement at the hands of the new regime, mirror the gentle happiness of the couple in Huysmans' En ménage. When François arrived at the Tanneurs' home, Mari-Françoise seemed to be "thriving" in her new role as a homemaker (124). The old couple assume the roles defined by the patriarchal tradition: Alain, known previously only as Marie-Francoise's husband, finally becomes the head of the household and she assumes the meaning of her name, translated literally as "married French woman." Similar to the scenes in which he describes moments of sexual intimacy, François comes alive within this setting of conjugal happiness and is deeply moved by the delicious meal that Marie-Françoise cooks. Throughout François and Alain's lengthy conversation, Tanneur reiterates the fact that the Muslim Brotherhood's political takeover would be a positive thing for Catholicism and French spirituality. As he explained:

"In France [...] they won't interfere with Christian worship - in fact, the government will increase spending for Catholic organizations and the upkeep of churches. And they'll be able to afford it, since the Gulf States will be giving so much more to the mosques. For these Muslim, the real enemy - the thing they fear and hate - isn't Catholicism. It's secularism. It's laicism" (127).

As we know, François fears persecution by the new ruling class as a white atheist. Therefore, his spiritual journey in the Catholic city Rocamadour, can be seen as an attempt to save himself because of Alain's statements on the Muslim hatred of secularism. Though François remained in a dream-like, transcendental state throughout his stay in the holy city, he never fully gave himself to faith. He was tempted, like Jesus was tempted by Satan, to give in but never does. Indeed, he stayed in in Rocamadour for "more than a month" (137) which could very well be an allusion to the 40 days Jesus spent in the desert. Two literary figures who converted to Catholicism are referenced throughout the section: Françoise's beloved Huysmans and the poet Péguy. In the final scene of Part III, an actor recites a poem by Péguy in the Chapel of Our Lady the seems to lull François into a strange hallucinatory state. This represents François's (a literary man like Huysmans and Péguy) final temptation. The actor read:

"Mother, behold your sons so lot to themselves.

Judge them not on a bse intrigue

But welcome back like the Prodigal Son.

Let them return to outstretched arms" (138).

François, however, was not convinced by these powerful words. He remembered that he had forgotten to eat the day before (an allusion to religious fasting), and decided that instead of "falling down between the pews in an attack of "mystic hypoglycaemia" he would go back to the hotel and "sit down to a few ducks' legs" (138). The next day, he went back to the famous medieval Black Virgin statue in the Chapel of Our lady and mused:

“What this severe statue expressed was not attachment to a homeland, to a country; not some celebration of the soldiers manly courage; not even a child’s desire for his mother. It was something mysterious, priestly and royal that surpassed Péguy’s understanding to say nothing of Huysmans’” (139).

François’s failed spiritual awakening, as we shall see, continues in Part IV. In fact, his rejection of Catholicism speaks to the progression of the three Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) and lays the groundwork for his eventual conversion to Islam in Part V.

Discussion Question 1

How do François’s trip to the south and the events of the 2022 election mirror the historical events referenced throughout Part III?

Discussion Question 2

Throughout Submission, François is surrounded by violence but never experiences it first hand. How does this theme manifest itself in Part III?

Discussion Question 3

Religion and religious experience is central to Part III. Based on examples from the text, what does Houellebecq think of religion's effect on society?

Vocabulary

picturesque, cro-magnon, anarchist, romanesque, jihadist, populism, fascism, xenophobia, amateurs, entrepreneur, humanism, secularism, laicism, carnal, sparse, diction, sovereignty

Part IV

Summary

As François drove home from Rocamadour, he realized that what lay ahead of him was a joyless, though not necessarily an empty, life. When he got home his mailbox was full of bureaucratic mail. He was surprised to find among it, a series of letters from the coroner's office notifying him that his mother had died. They tried to contact François four times before depositing her body in the common division of the municipal cemetery. François had never imagined his mother leading a particularly vibrant social life, but had no idea that she was so completely alone. It bothered him a bit that she was in the communal grave and he wondered what had become of her french bulldog. Also in his mail was a payslip form the university; he had been paid in full. He wondered when and if the university would open again.

He decided to go for a walk to clear his head and acclimatize himself with Paris under the Muslim Brotherhood regime. He did not notice much of a difference in the city itself. Some shops had gone out of business and the Kosher section at the supermarket had disappeared, but overall things seemed fairly normal. The real difference he remarked was the change in women's dress: all of them were wearing pants. Sexy skirts, dresses, and low-cut tops had been replaced by long tunics and trousers.

Two weeks after his return he received a letter from the Paris III informing him that according to the new statutes of the Islamic University of Paris-Sorbonne, he was no longer eligible to teach. The letter stated that he could either continue teaching at a secular university or collect his full retirement pension effective immediately. François chose the latter, and after having filled out the necessary paperwork, decided to walk through the market on rue Mouffetard. As he wandered through the stalls, he ran into his colleague Steve. The two sat down for a drink at a nearby café and Steve told François that he had decided to continue teaching at the university. They offered him 10,000 euros a month (over three times François's retirement pension), an apartment in a chic area, and allowed him to continue teaching Rimbaud. As the two parted ways, Steve divulged that he had gotten married to one of his young students and planned on getting another wife the following month.

Over the passing weeks Myriam's emails grew more infrequent and François knew that it was only a matter of time before she told him that she had met someone new. He realized that his retirement from teaching meant an end to his contact with female students, and that he would have to find a new way of meeting women. François decided to begin seeing escorts as he had done from time to time over the years. He ordered two women over the following weeks and was disappointed to find that though he could perform sexually, he felt no pleasure. During this period he considered dying, but decided that it was too soon.

A few weeks later, François's father died. Sylvia, his father's second wife who François had never met, called him with the news. He traveled to Briançon (where his father had lived) to divide up the estate. His father had divided his assets equally between François and Sylvia, a fact which François knew bothered his stepmother. After meeting with the lawyer, Sylvia invited François back to her and his father's home for a drink. He looked at her and realized that though she was young, 25 years younger than his father, the best part of her life was now over. Sylvia had truly loved his father, seeing something in him that neither François or his mother had. He also realized that his father's final years had been far more pleasant than those he had spent with François and his mother.

When François returned to Paris, he finally received the email he had been expecting from Myriam: she had met someone, and was no longer in love with him. He felt a dull, numb pain that worsened by the realization that his retirement pension would not be enough to sustain him through a serious illness. To console himself, François bought himself an evening with a prostitute duo named Luisa and Rachida. Though his time with them started off in the same way as with the other prostitutes, he had a moment towards the end where he felt the same pleasure he used to with Myriam. François was so excited by this that he tipped each escorts 100 euros before he left.

Meanwhile, France was enjoying a period of optimism at the hands of its new government. Ben Abbes's plan to expand the EU to include Morocco, Turkey, Tunisia, Algeria, and Egypt, was well underway. Crime rates had reduced by 90% even in the roughest areas. Unemployment also plummeted when the Muslim Brotherhood government offered a large subsidy to mothers who left the workforce, creating thousands of new jobs for men. In fact, France's economic and social systems were undergoing deep and rapid changes. Ben Abbes changed the economic system of France to Distributism, or a mixture of capitalism and communism that favors the small-business model. Under this new system, the budget for welfare benefits would be cut by 85% over the next three years. The transportation and education sectors also suffered major cuts.

Due to unseasonably cold weather, François suffered an acute attack of dyshidrosis. This was followed by an equally painful bout of hemorrhoids. During this period, François though about his profound loneliness and the fact that he had no reason to live. On the night of January 19th he burst into uncontrollable and unexpected tears. The next morning he decided to return to Ligugé Abbey, or the monastery where Huysmans took his vows. After a difficult train journey, he arrived at the monastery and was greeted by Brother Joel, a monk who he had met when he visited 20 years prior for his dissertation. Though the life of the monks seemed peaceful, serene, and genuine, François was not moved. On his third day there, François decided that the whole thing had been a mistake and that he must leave. He had an hour to spare before his train left for Paris and spent in the bar across the street from the monastery. Sitting amongst loud drunk and mindless drinking beer, François was unhappy to once again be around people like himself.

Analysis

Part IV of Submission opens on the successive deaths of François's mother and father. Francois has not spoken to either of his parents in years and news of their death comes through distant and impersonal means. The most striking of two is François's mother's passing; she dies utterly alone and is buried in the mass grave where all unclaimed bodies go. François's reaction to this news is shockingly nonchalant; he says merely that it "bothered him" to think of her in a mass grave before moving on to the rest of his bureaucratic mail. Furthermore, he expressed no incentive to have the body exhumed and moved to the family plot. His reaction to his father's death is similar though slightly more thoughtful. He traveled to his father's home, met his new wife, and learned about the man's life prior to his death. Though François exhibits some sadness over his mother's lonely death and happiness over the joyful final chapter of his father's life, his muted reactions remain almost grotesquely inhuman. Both scenes serve to illustrate the perversity and the essentially mutated nature of modern Western culture. When compared with the exoneration of the mother figure in traditional French Catholicism, as we saw in the figure of the Black Virgin in Part III, the neglect François's mother suffered at the end of her life seems almost criminal. The essential corruption of the modern French population in Submission is outlined in a popular article called "One Day, Son, This Will All Be Yours: Towards a Reason-Based Family" by the fictional critic, Daniel Da Silva. François explains that this article was the first to truly articulate the change that Ben Abbes's reformation of the family model and the economic theory of Distributism, brought to France. Here, Da Silva called for a return to marriage based on reason instead of love:

"Da Silva maintained that family ties, especially the tie between father and son, cannot be based on love, only the transmission of practical knowledge and on inheritance. The transition to a salaried workforce had doomed the nuclear family and led to the complete atomisation of society, and that society could only be rebuilt if industry was based on a small-business model" (168).

On the next page, François admits that his "own family history was a perfect illustration of Da Silva's arguments" (169). Indeed, in Houellebecq's vision, the French people have become 'atomized' under capitalism and social democracy; they are highly individual, selfish, and above all, alone. Here Houellebecq's argument that feminism has done more to oppress women rather than liberate them, can perhaps be seen. François describes his mother as a "neurotic bitch" (189) who never fully assumed her role as a matriarch. Furthermore, the freedom to divorce (and also perhaps, as we shall see, the condemnation of polygamy) left her to die alone and forgotten.

François's solitude and his longing for a more conventional life, themes that are more discreetly present in the previous sections, are central to Part IV. His resignation from the university, causes him to spiral into a deep and crushing depression. He finally loses Myriam after she breaks up with him via email. Even sexual pleasure, once his only respite, is lost during this period. Separated from his female students, Francois turns to high-end escorts for pleasure. However, he is dismayed to find that though he can

perform with these women, he feels no pleasure. The only time that he feels “shivers of a forgotten pleasure” is with a prostitution duo, Luisa and Racida (163). This scene, the first in which we see François with two women, is symbolically and thematically significant in the context of Submission. For one, the Spanish Luisa’s and the Moroccan Rachida’s ‘union’ speaks to the centuries-long conflict between the indigenous Spaniards and the Moors. Their partnership is emblematic of France’s ‘union’ with that Arab word after the election of Ben Abbes . For almost all of European history the Moors, who were North Africans like Rachida, were seen as an invading force. The Spanish, and indeed the French, fought virulently for centuries to defend the land of their birth. François’s pleasure with the Spanish and Moroccan prostitute and the general feeling of optimism in France post-election can, therefore, be read as the feeling of relief that comes with submission. Just as France finally submitted to ‘invaders,’ so too did François submit to sexual ecstasy. François’s encounter with Luisa and Rachida is furthermore an allusion to polygamy. Polygamous marriage is one of the central themes in Section IV, and as we shall see becomes a personal issue for François.

Biblical themes are also present in Section IV. Following his trysts with the escorts, François suffers from severe dyshidrosis and hemorrhoids. Both of these afflictions cause boil-like growths to form on the body and are extremely painful. François’s ailments, for their extremity and long duration (François states that they lasted for months), seem to be an allusion to the Biblical plague of boils. Indeed, it is during this period that François decides he must go to Ligugé Abbey or the monastery where Huysmans took his vows. This decision can be read as an allusion to religious revelation, in which the saint is called to duty by God after a long period of suffering. However, when François arrives at Ligugé Abbey he realizes that the monastery no longer has the same power that it did in Huysmans era. Looking out onto the landscape François muses:

“I no longer knew the meaning of my presence in this place. For a moment it would appear to me, weakly, then just as soon it would disappear. In any case, it clearly had little to do with Huysmans any more” (179).

Later on he mused that things had gone downhill since Huysmans’ day citing the fact that the TGV tracks lay just beyond the monastery grounds. The “roar” of the trains as they went by “shattered the meditative silence several times an hour, every hour” (181). Overall, François’s trip to the Abbey represents his definitive desertion of Catholicism. To François, Catholicism seems to represent the sexually restrictive faction of the three Abrahamic religions. He refers often to Huysmans decision to forego sex as a monk, and the Black Virgin of Rocamadour is central to his exploration of Catholicism. He associates Judaism with Myriam, or the woman who gave him the most sexual pleasure of his life. As we know, sex is an extremely important aspect of Françoś life and he reiterates that he is unwilling to give it up for religion. However, it is clear through his experiences in Rocamadour and Ligugé Abbey that he wants to undergo a religious conversion. As we shall see, in Part V, Islam provides both religious and sexual satisfaction for François.

Discussion Question 1

How does the way that François talks about sex in Part IV differ from previous sections? How does this signify a change in his mental state?

Discussion Question 2

How does François's blasé reaction his parents' deaths reflect Houllebecq's vision of a corrupt modern reality?

Discussion Question 3

How is Catholicism depicted ins Part IV? How does it compare with the depiction of Islam throughout the novel?

Vocabulary

bureaucratic, triage, pursuant, euthanasia, proselytizing, statutes, rubric, tribune, arrondissement, bourgeois, Tyrollean, lenticular, stupor, aphasia, distributism, atomization, dyshidrosis, degradation, exoticism, apace, monastic, subsidiarity, cloister, litany, aesthete

Part V

Summary

On his way home from Poitiers, François had to upgrade his train ticket to first class. An Arab business man dressed in traditional clothing sat across the aisle from him wit his two young wives. The two girls ate candy and giggled at comic books while the man had a stressful business conversation. François watched them intently, musing to himself that under an Islamic regime, beautiful women could remain children for nearly their entire lives. He decided that if he had to choose between the position of the man and that of the girls, he would choose the girls' even though they do not have autonomy.

When François arrived back in Paris, he found a letter from Bastien Lacoue of the the Pléide catalogue asking him to edit Huysmans' work. François knew that accepting the position would mean renouncing all intellectual and social ambition; it would simultaneously be the apex and the end of his academic career. Nevertheless, after an enthusiastic meeting with Lacoue, he decided to accept the position. On his way out of the meeting, Lacoue told François that the President of Paris III, Robert Rediger, had been sad to see him go. Lacoue invited François to a reception at the Institute of the Arab World that evening, adding that Reedier would be happy to see him there. At the reception, François noticed that something was amiss with the evening, but did not know for sure what it was. After a few glasses of wine, he realized that it was because only men were present. On the other side of the room, François saw a group of Arab men and a group of French men arguing on either side of who he assumed was the Saudi Prince. The Prince, who had funded the new Sorbonne, was deeply offended that that the minister of education was not present. Lacoue explained to François that the minister had meant to come but that Ben Abbes himself had intervened to humiliate the Saudis. Under the Muslim Brotherhood regime, efforts were being made to establish independence from Saudi oil. Robert Rediger entered the room at that moment looking tan, strong, and handsome. He was very happy to see François and at the end of the evening invited him for tea that Wednesday at five.

François was impressed by Rediger's home: situated in the expensive fifth arrondissement, it was a historic maison particulier. Francois was greeted at the door by a butler who ushered him into a waiting area. As he waited, a young girl wearing a Hello Kitty tee shirt and jeans came out of a side door. When she saw François she screamed and ran out of the room. Rediger entered at that moment, and explained that the girl was his wife and that she would be very embarrassed that he saw her without her veil. François commented that she looked very young, and Rediger replied that she had just turned 15.

In Rediger's study the two colleagues drank Mersault wine and talked about their respective dissertations. Rediger told François that his dissertation was a masterpiece and compared it to Nietzsche. Rediger's second wife, an older woman named Malika, brought them canapés to eat. Rediger told François that he wanted him to come back to

work at the Sorbonne, offering him a major salary increase. However, if François accepted the offer, he would have to convert to Islam. For the rest of the evening, Rediger talked to François about the beauty of the universe, the certainty of intelligent design, and the positive influence that Islam would have on France. Rediger believed that nations needed religion to hold them together and that the disappearance of Christianity from Europe, had led to its destruction. He admitted to François that before converting to Islam, he was a member of the nativist movement. Before François left, Rediger gave him a copy of his book titled Ten Questions on Islam.

When François got home he could not fall asleep and stayed up drinking rum and thinking about Rediger's arguments on Islam. The next morning, he realized that he had left his bag at Rediger's house and went to retrieve it at 10 a.m. On his way back, François walked pas the Paris Mosque and then decided to visit Paris III. While there he noticed that all the female students were wearing white veils, and he thought of Myriam. Later that day, François began reading Ten Questions on Islam. As he assumed all men did, he skipped straight to the chapter on polygamy. Here, Rediger argued that because men have an infinite capacity to breed and women became infertile at a certain age, it made sense for a man to have multiple wives. Furthermore, polygamy aided natural selection in that it prevented the weaker or less intelligent males from breeding. When he finished reading the book François was convinced that it seemed more political than religious. Indeed, Rediger was far less conservative and accommodating to Western sensibilities in his other published works, in which he argued that Islam was destined for global domination. François also found an article that Rediger had written when he was still a nativist claiming that the nativist concerns and those of Islam were perfectly aligned.

After reading Ten Questions on Islam, François felt an inexplicable desire to go to Brussels. While there he realized that, though Huysmans wrote a great deal about sexual debauchery, chastity had never been a problem for him once he became a monk. Over the several months after the election, François noticed that he would go whole days without thinking about sex. He attributed this transformation to the fact that women's dress had become more conservative under the new regime. He concluded that if you removed sexual stimuli (i.e. short skirts and low cut blouses), desire disappeared. Two weeks later, he finished the preface for the Pléide collection of Huysmans' work. François knew that it was the best thing he had ever written, and that now his intellectual career was truly over.

Shortly after he finished the preface, François received an invitation to a ceremony welcoming Jean-François Loiseleur into his new position as a professor at the Sorbonne. Francois knew and respected Loiseleur; in fact, it was Loiseleur who introduced François to The Journal of Nineteenth Century Studies. After helping himself to a few mezes and some wine, François found himself face-to-face with the short, scraggly figure of Loiseleur. Loiseleur told him that the university provided him with a wife, a young second-year student. The idea of Loiseleur with a wife surprised François, as he had always seen the man as asexual or a virgin. François saw Rediger across the room, who had just been appointed as the minister of education, and approached him. François asked him about polygamy, confiding that he did not feel like a dominant male.

Rediger assured him that academics, though not always the strongest male specimens, were important to the future of the human race because of their profound intelligence. He added, that should François accept the position at the Sorbonne, they would provide him with up to three wives because of his status.

Francois realized through his conversation with Rediger that, though his intellectual career was over, life might still have more to offer him. Here, the narrative voice shifts from past-tense to future-perfect. In his mind he saw what his future might look like: a few weeks would go by, and he would call Rediger to tell him that he would be accepting the position at the Sorbonne. His conversion ceremony would take place at the Paris Mosque and would be followed by a lavish reception at the Sorbonne. There, Rediger himself would take time out of his busy schedule to give a speech and all of his colleagues would be there (after all, François thought, he was not the kind of acquaintance one would neglect). François would think briefly of Myriam who, no doubt, would have a much harder life than he would. A few months later, classes would begin and wives would be selected for him. These girls would know he was famous and would feel honored to share his bed no matter how pretty they were. Like his father before him, François would begin a new life with little connection to his old one, and he would have nothing to mourn.

Analysis

Part V of Submission is the book's climax and focuses on François's conversion to Islam. Significantly, the section opens on a quote by Ayatollah Khomeini: "If Islam is not political, it is nothing" (185) This quote sets the tone for the entire section which approaches religion as a route to power. To begin with, there is the figure of Mohammed Ben Abbes, who as Alain Tanneur explained to François, models himself off of Emperor Augustus and wishes to revive to the Roman Empire. Indeed, subtle hints in Part Five reveal that Ben Abbes is more concerned with the construction of a new Empire than with the proliferation of Islam. For example, as François explains, "[h]e was about to propose they move the European Commission to Romae and the Parliament to Athens." (241) If indeed Ben Abbes' primary concern was Islam, he perhaps would have moved the seats of European power to Mecca or another place of of religious significance. His obsession with the Roman Empire supports Rediger's claim that:

"Europe had reached a point of such putrid decomposition that it could no longer save itself, any more than fifth-century Rome could have done. This wave of new immigrants, with their traditional culture - of natural hierarchies, the submission of women and respect for elders - offered a historic opportunity for the moral and familial rearmament of Europe. These immigrants held out the hope of a new golden age for the old continent" (231).

For this reason, Rediger supports Islamic global domination and, like Ben Abbes has wild vision of future grandeur and world domination. Here, Houellebecq brilliantly sets another 'trap' for the contemporary reader who, living in an era of real decline, might feel hopeful when presented with such a concept. François himself becomes completely

swept up in visions of power and empire. Houellebecq undermines these lofty visions by interweaving them with subtle, yet pervasive references to nihilism and cosmic indifference. Indeed, every empire in human history fell at one point and was replaced by another; it is a vicious and bloody cycle that in the end is futile. For example, Rediger claims that European civilization, died after the “senseless slaughter” of the First World War (215). François disagreed with him on that point sighting that:

“the war of 1870 had been fairly absurd too [...] and had already seriously eroded patriotic feeling of all kinds. Nations were a murderous absurdity, and after 1870 anyone paying attention had probably figured that out” (215).

François then admits that he does not really know anything about the older civilizations, alluding that perhaps they, too, knew the bloody truth about nations and illusions of global empire. Rediger’s fascination with Nietzsche is another allusion to nihilism and human futility. Indeed, though Rediger wrote his thesis on the works of Nietzsche, it is clear that he, like Hitler during World War Two, wildly misunderstood them. In The Will to Power (1901), Nietzsche argues that the advent of nihilism or the collapse of meaning and cherished belief systems, would lead to the destruction of European culture. Rediger believes that if Islam succeeds in replacing Christianity as Europe’s spiritual outlet, Western civilization will be saved from annihilation. Rediger’s mission seems to be to revive the corpse of God who Nieztsche proclaimed “dead” in 1882 (Nietzsche, “The Parable of the Madman,” 260). This is made evident through his conversations with François, all of which are designed to convert him to Islam. Rediger’s office is covered in photos of nebulas, stars, and galaxies. He uses the photos to support his claims on intelligent design, explaining to François:

“At the end of the day, isn’t there something ridiculous about some puny creature, living on an anonymous planet, in a remote spur of an ordinary galaxy, standing up on his hind legs and announcing ‘God does not exist?’” (211).

Rediger’s photographs and this claim have double meanings. Of course, one could choose to read them as evidence for God, but perhaps the most obvious reading is that of human insignificance. If it is absurd for human beings’ to claim that God does not exist, it is equally, if not more, absurd to assume that their efforts have any universal meaning. This of course, also applies to the building of empires and the pursuit of political power.

Ben Abbes, and men like Rediger, use Islam, to amass followers for their political movement. In one of the most important quotes in Submission, Rediger explains that the joy of Islam is the realization “that the summit of human happiness resides in the most absolute submission” (219). Though François does eventually submit to Islam, his real submission is of a political nature. Rediger wants to recruit respectable faculty to the new Saudi-run Sorbonne; those who comply, would have to reformulate their curriculum to reflect the university’s backers’ values. These academics would have to compromise their intellectual integrity in exchange for money and, most significantly, women.

The submission of women is very present throughout Part V. Rediger's conversion speech is riddled with references to the "necessary submission of women" and "the return of the patriarch" (230). In the first sections of Submission, women play central roles in French society: the president of Paris III (before Rediger is appointed to the position) is a feminist named Big Delouze, Marine le Pen is set to become the future president of France, and figures like Marie-Françoise are more vocal than their husbands. This stands in stark contrast to Part V, in which women are barely present. Indeed, all of the university functions that François attends in this section are filled exclusively with men. Women are hidden behind veils, flowing clothing, and doors; Rediger has four wives, and yet François only saw two, assumingly because they were hidden away somewhere. The opening scene of Part V consists of François's musings as he looked at two young brides on the train. Here, he outlines the trajectory of a woman's life life in a highly patriarchal society:

"Under an Islamic regime, women - at least the ones pretty enough to attract a rich husband - were able to remain children nearly their entire lives. Their children grew up, then they became grandmothers, and so their lives went by. There were just a few years where they bought sexy underwear, exchanging the games of nursery for those of the bedroom - which turned out to be very much the same thing" (188).

François commented that given the choice, he would choose to be in the position of the young wives over the husband, as a life without autonomy is also a life without stress. François's decision to finally convert to Islam mirrors the submission of these women. Rather than fighting for independence and autonomy from the new regime, he chooses a life of a stress-free political prop.

In the end, François submits to the new Sorbonne's demands, not for the sake of spiritual enlightenment, but to gain respect, power, money, and, above all, to avoid loneliness. The concept of polygamy and François's eventual acceptance of it, is central to Part V for this reason. Without his post at Paris III and Myriam, François became totally isolated. Throughout the rest of Submission, François is presented as a lone figure; both apolitical and nihilistic, living his life in a state of bored passivity. The death of both of his parents, makes him realize that he does not want to die alone, and Rediger's offer presents him with perhaps his only chance to avoid such a grim future. Though François is attracted to the fame and respect that would come with accepting the position, it is really the promise of wives that finally sways his decision. The chapter on polygamy in Rediger's book seems designed to stroke the ego of and subsequently convert lonely men like François:

"In the case of mammals, if you compared the female, with her long gestation period, to the male, with his essentially limitless capacity to reproduce, it was clear that the pressures of selection would fall principally on the males. If some males enjoyed access to several females, other would necessarily have none. So this inequality between males should be considered not a negative side effect of polygamy but rather its goal. It was how the species achieved its destiny" (225).

For most of the book, François feels as though he is somehow outside of society. He does not identify with a political group, a religious group, or even his own family. Rediger's concept of a superior male breeding pool, makes François feel as though he is a part of something powerful, important, and larger than himself. Furthermore, it coincides with his preoccupation with sexual pleasure. The title of the book, therefore, is a reference, not to France's submission to foreign ideology, but submission to society as a whole.

Discussion Question 1

In Part V, the titular term Submission is used multiple times. What is the significance of the the word 'submission' in each of these instances?

Discussion Question 2

How does the submissive role of women in Part V mirror François's eventual submission to the new regime's demands i.e. his conversion to Islam?

Discussion Question 3

How is Islam depicted as a political tool in Part V? How do people like Rediger use Islam as tool to gain political power?

Vocabulary

reproach, autonomy, Calvados, apparatus, appeasement, meze, samboussek, trellis, canapé, revolt, briouats, boukha, apogee, eternal, Koran, aesthetics, polygamy, mouldering, putrefying, scholia, colloquia, mourn

Characters

François

François is the main character and narrator of Submission. He is a 44-year-old literary academic who teaches at the Sorbonne Paris III. François is highly respected for his work on the author Joris-Karl Huysmans, and his dissertation, “Joris-Karl Huysmans: Out of the Tunnel” is considered a masterpiece of literary criticism. François’s internal monologue stands in stark contrast to people’s perception of him. He speaks in bland, everyday prose and is more concerned with television and microwave dinners than his career. François, whose name means simply “Frenchman,” is representative of Michel Houellebecq's vision of the average French citizen; bored, selfish, without empathy or a moral code. As an academic, he thinks only about his chosen subject and little else. He is an individualist to the point that he does not care about the radical political changes taking place in Houellebecq's fictional France in the year 2022. As he says he is “about as political as a bath towel” (39).

Throughout the novel, François struggles against isolation and loneliness. He has no friends to speak of, and cherishes the brief moments when he can have conversations. For this reason, François is the only major character in Submission. François is very easily influenced by others, as he has no opinions of his own.

To remedy his loneliness François seeks out women and later, religion. At the beginning of Submission he is presented as somewhat of a womanizer, dating a new student at the start of each school year. That all changes when he is forced into retirement under the Muslim Brotherhood regime. His time of unemployment is a period of transition, in which he tries and fails to find pleasure and meaning through escorts and Catholicism. In the end, François emerges as at once a powerful and submissive figure, converting to Islam and reaping the benefits that the regime offered him in exchange.

Robert Rediger

Robert Rediger is the president of the Sorbonne Paris III in Submission. Though he does not appear until the final part of Submission, Part V, he is extremely significant because it is Rediger who converts François to Islam, effectively changing his life. Rediger is described as very handsome: “quite tall and solidly built [...] with his broad chest and his muscles, he looked more like a rugby tackle than a professor. His face was tanned and deeply lined, and although his hair was completely white, it was very thick” (198).

Though Rediger wrote a best-selling book called Ten Questions on Islam and is a vocal proponent of the Muslim way of life, he is first and foremost a politician. Rediger uses Islam to gain the Muslim Brotherhood’s favor and climb the political ladder. In a matter

of months he goes from a normal academic, to the president of the university, to the Minister of Education.

François has a few other long conversations in Submission, but his encounter with Rediger is the most meaningful. Everything about this meeting is calculated and designed to entice François to convert to Islam, come to work at the the Islamic University of Paris-Sorbonne, and thus make Rediger look good for recruiting a respected academic. As François waits for Rediger at his home, his new 15-year-old wife 'accidentally' enters the salon without her veil. Later, Rediger's second wife, a middle-aged woman who is subservient and cooks well, brings the men food and wine. Though Rediger presents these encounters as haphazard, they are clearly orchestrated to entice a lonely man out of retirement. Rediger's office, where he and François meet, is also covered in awe-inducing photographs of outer space. This, too, is designed to convert sceptical academics by forcing them to question their laic certitude.

As a character, Rediger represents the establishment and the powerful elite. His conversion of François demonstrates how easily the general populous 'submits' to the will of ruling powers when offered venal comforts; in this case, money, women, and an escape from loneliness.

Myriam

Myriam is François's 22-year-old girlfriend and former student. François often describes her as the summit of his love life and his greatest sexual partner. Though Myriam does not speak very much in Submission, she is significant because of her centrality in François's life pre-conversion. As a sexually liberated and highly educated woman, she is also representative of all modern-day women. François describes her as "a very classy young woman, with her bobbed black hair, her very white skin, and her dark eyes. Classy, but quietly sexy" (28).

Myriam, as a Jew, is forced to leave France after the Muslim Brotherhood come to power. She and her family flee to Israel, leaving François very much alone. Myriam becomes an even more important character in her absence, haunting François's thoughts and inciting his depression.

Alain Tanneur

Alain Tanneur is the husband of François's colleague, Marie-Françoise. He engages in two conversations with François that effectively change the narrator's outlook on life. Tanneur works for the DGSI or the French secret police, and, therefore, had access to information kept from the general public. François describes Tanneur as "a neat, smiling man, with a skull so smooth it looked polished" (65).

When François is first introduced to Tanneur, he is not given a name and is described just as Marie-Françoise's husband. However, after the Muslim Brotherhood begins to gain power, he is identified as Alain. This transition signifies the return of the patriarchy

to France: Tanneur moves from being a hidden figure known only in relation to his wife, to a strong central player in the novel. Marie-Françoise's forced retirement from the University where women are banned from teaching, gives Tanneur back his power as the family patriarch.

Mohammed Ben Abbes

Mohammed Ben Abbes is the leader of the fictional Muslim Brotherhood party who become the president of France in Houellebecq's 2022. Described as having "the kindly look of a neighborhood grocer" (88) he, like Robert Rediger, uses Islam as a tool to gain political power. Though Ben Abbes does sincerely want France to return to traditional, patriarchal values, his real goal is to reconstruct the Roman Empire.

Tanneur tells François that Ben Abbes models himself after Emperor Augustus and envisions an empire that extends far into North Africa. As Tanneur explains: "Ben Abbes's true ambition, I'm sure of it, is eventually to be elected president of Europe - greater Europe, including all the Mediterranean countries" (129).

Godfroy Lempereur

Godfroy Lempereur is François's young nativist colleague. He specializes in nineteenth century author, Léon Bloy, and is extremely nostalgic for France's glorious past. Lempereur, whose name is very posh-sounding and uncommon, lives in a lavish hotel particulier in Montmartre. This character represents the opinions, presented by Houellebecq as delusional, of proponents of isolationist/nationalist policies. During their meeting, Lempereur tells François that he believes the National Front will win the election and that France will secede from the European Union. He also explains, that nativists, like himself, are responsible for inciting violence and unrest within Muslim communities. Lempereur's politics form a mirror between nativists and jihadists: both are extremists whose actions lead only to pointless violence.

Marie-Françoise Tanneur

Marie-Françoise is Francois's friend and colleague. When she first appears in Submission, she is a high-powered literary academic with strong political opinion. After the election however, she becomes a demure housewife, cooking a lavish meal for François and her husband, Alain. Her transition from a working feminist to a submissive housewife signifies the re-establishment of the patriarchy under the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Steve

Steve is François's colleague at Paris III. François does not like Steve and is twice forced to speak with him because of chance encounters. He is described as a lazy,

sham academic who wrote a mostly plagiarized thesis on Rimbaud. As a character, Steve is used to highlight François's superficiality and disingenuousness. Steve's character also represents the essentially broken nature of literary academia, a system in which people can rise to the top with very minimal effort.

Marine Le Pen

Marine Le Pen is a real French political figure that Houellebecq fictionalizes in Submission. She is the head of the far-right National-Front party. In real life as in the novel, Le Pen is anti-immigration and is concerned with the preservation of the indigenous European race.

Sylvia

Sylvia is François's father's second wife. François meets Sylvia for the first time after his father dies and he travels to Briançon to divide the assets. Sylvia is only a few years older that François. As a character she represents the fact that men can essentially live two lives throughout their lifetime. In the case of François's father, he lived a miserable life with François and his mother and a joyful one with Sylvia. This meeting has a profound effect on François, giving him hope that he will not die alone like his mother. In fact, his father's 'second life' is referenced in one of Submission's final sentences. Here, François envisions his life after his conversion to Islam stating: "Rather like my father a few years before, I'd be given another chance; and it would be the chance at a second life, with very little connection to the old one" (250).

Symbols and Symbolism

Clouds

Throughout Submission, the clouds François notices and describes reflect either his mood or social unrest. For example, just before the protest that Marine Le Pen calls for on the Champs Elysées and the subsequent riots, François notices, “A giant, anvil-shaped cumulonimbus cloud hovered over the north of Paris, all the way from the Sacre-Coueur to the Opera, its sides a dark sooty grey” (97). Later, this cloud unleashes a violent storm on the protestors and obscures the news cameras' view of the riots. After Myriam breaks up with Francois, he sees “A single lenticular cloud, its edges tinted orange by the setting sun, hovered high above the Charléty stadium, as immobile and indifferent as an intergalactic spaceship. I felt a dull, numb pain, that’s all but it was enough to keep me from thinking clearly" (161). This cloud seems to symbolize both François's growing isolation (he feels like an alien, completely separated from others) and the 'invasive' forces of the Muslim Brotherhood in France.

Microwave Dinners

Microwave dinners (François's main source of food throughout the novel), portioned only for only one person, symbolize François's loneliness and France's movement away from the nuclear family model. François, as an unmarried middle-aged man, stands in stark contrast to his ancestors who were married and had children in their twenties. The microwave dinners that François eats are also all foreign cuisine -- Indian food is his favorite. This symbolizes the dissipation of French culture, central to which is cuisine, because (in Houellebecq's view) of immigration.

The Black Virgin

The statue of the Black Virgin that François visits each day while in Rocamadour symbolizes the essentially feminine nature of Christianity. It stands in stark contrast to the drastic decentralization of the woman under the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood. It is a relic to what Alain Tanneur and Robert Rediger see as the greatness of Medieval Christianity. On his final day in Rocamadour François mused that: "What this severe statue expressed was not attachment to a homeland, to a country; not even a child's desire for his mother. It was something mysterious, priestly and royal" (139).

The Arena

Robert Rediger's house is situated just in front of an ancient Roman arena. As he speaks to François, the narrator's attention is intermittently drawn to this ancient structure inciting such musings as "The sun vanished behind the terraced steps; night washed over the arena. It was amazing to think that fights between gladiators and wild

beasts had actually taken place here, two thousand years before" (208). The arena symbolizes the rise and fall of empires and highlights the futility of Rediger and Ben Abbes' plan to reconstruct the Roman Empire.

Neanderthals

As François looks out onto the Dordogne, he thinks about how the Neanderthals were pushed out of the area by Cro-Magnons hundreds of thousands of years earlier. The Neanderthals in this situation symbolize indigenous Europeans, who in Submission are pushed out of their role as the rulers of Europe by Muslim immigrants.

The Bouguereau Painting

This painting symbolizes the French vision of the female form as something that is not automatically correlated with sexuality.

While in Godfroy Lempereur's study François notices a painting by Bouguereau above his fireplace. The painting "showed five women in a garden, some in white tunics, others half-nude, surrounding a nude infant with curly hair. One of the nude women hid her breasts with her hands. The other couldn't - she was holding a bouquet of wild flowers. She had lovely breasts, and the artist had executed her drapery to perfection" (54). The unabashed nudity of these nymphs is meant to contrast the burqas and veils that become commonplace at the end of the novel.

Tracksuit trousers

When François looks at his friend Bruno Deslande's wife, Annelise he images her coming home each day exhausted from work and putting on a pair of tracksuit trousers and a sweat shirt, symbolizing the women's movement away from homemaking and the destruction of the nuclear family model. It is meant to contrast the fact that "[h]idden all day in impenetrable black burkas, rich Saudi women transformed themselves by night into birds of paradise with their corsets, their see-through bras, their G-strings with multicolored lace and rhinestones. They were exactly the opposite of Western women, who spent their days looking sexy to maintain their social status, then collapsed in exhaustion once they got home, abandoning all hope of seduction in favor of clothes that were loose and shapeless" (74).

Television

François's television symbolizes misinformation and the French public's passivity in Submission. Television is central to François's life: he eats dinner in front of it, gets almost all of his information from it, and leaves it on almost constantly. Throughout the novel, François expresses frustration at the fact that the major news channels do not cover the violence occurring in Paris. They instigate this information "blackout" because

they are terrified that the National Front will win the election, a thus are attempting to sway the election in the Muslim Brotherhood's favor.

The Statue of Maréchal Moncey

The destruction of The Statue of Marechal Moncey in the novel symbolizes the collapse of France's defenses.

After François and Godfroy Lempereur leave the party at the Museum of the Romantics, they see Place de Clichy completely enveloped in flames. As François recounts: "The statue of Maréchal Moncey, black and imposing, stood out in the middle of the blaze" (50). This is significant because, as Lempereur explained to François, Moncey "served under Napoleon. He won distinction defending the Clichy barrier against the Russians in 1814..." (50). Moncey, defended France from invaders, therefore the destruction of his statue symbolizes the collapse of such defenses.

The name "François"

François himself, symbolizes the average modern-day French male: isolated, impotent, and depressed. The etymology of the name "François" translates simply to "Frenchman."

Settings

Paris, 2022

Most of Submission is set in Paris, France in the year 2022. Paris in Houellebecq's vision of 2022 is the epicenter of a civil war between Nativist Nationalist and the pro-European Union left/ Muslim immigrants. The narrator, François, lives in Paris during this time of unrest, witnessing the violence through his Television screen.

Martel

On election day, François fleas Paris and ends up in the historic town of Martel. On his first day there, the town is almost entirely deserted due to attacks carried out by nativist and Jihadist on polling stations throughout the country. It is here that François reconnects with Marie-Françoise's husband, Alain Tanneur. Tanneur explains to François that Martel is named after Charles Martel who fought the arabs at Poitiers in 732 ending Muslim expansion to the north.

Rocamadour

Rocamadour is one of the most important settings in Submission. It is a Catholic city that houses the Black Virgin, a statue of great significance for Medieval Christianity. François spends over a month in this city, walking about in a hazy state of religious frenzy. The description of François's visit to Rocamadour can be found in Part III.

Ligugé Abbey

Ligugé Abbey is the monastery where Joris-Karl Huysmans took his vows. François visited Ligugé Abbey while writing his dissertation and decides to go again in 2022. During his second visit François realizes that Catholicism is a dead religion and that the lifestyle of the monks are merely a beautiful, but deeply irrelevant relic of the past. François's second visitation of the monastery is detailed in Part IV.

Briançon

François comes to Briançon to divide up his father's assets after his death. It is in Briançon that François realizes that his father led two separate lives: one with him and his mother, and one with his young stepmother, Sylvia.

Themes and Motifs

Islam in France

Submission argues that overarching value systems, like Islam, prevent a culture from becoming too individualistic and apathetic. At the beginning of the book, France, and indeed all of Western Europe, is depicted as a decaying relic of its glorious past. With the rise of social democratic movements like feminism, anarchism, and secularism, it lost its sense of identity and, therefore, collapsed. Submission argues that the rejection of Catholicism and its traditional values, was the starting point of such movements.

The author, Michel Houellebecq, draws a direct line between the values of the nationalist French movement to those of Islam. Indeed, he presents them as one in the same. Nativists, like Godfroy Lempereur, believe, like the Muslim Brotherhood, that a return to a patriarchal value system is necessary for a nation to survive. Lempereur agrees with the Muslim Brotherhood's opinion that the most powerful portion of society is always the portion with the highest birth rate. Monotheistic societies have "less education among women, less hedonism, and individualism" and therefore couples have more children.

France's past, before the rise of social democracy, is depicted throughout the book through historical sites, most importantly the Catholic city of Rocamadour. Alain Tanneur promised François that at Rocamadour he would realize "what a great civilization Medieval Christendom really was." (131) Though Catholicism is, for the most part, portrayed in a positive light throughout Submission, it is not the means for the nation of France's salvation. François's disappointing trip to Ligugé Abbey in Part IV paints Christianity as a once great, but now irrelevant, religion. Characters like Robert Rediger, see the proliferation of Islam as a chance for Europe to return to a traditional, unified culture. Furthermore, Islam is not depicted as a force bent on erasing French culture. On the contrary, as Alain Tanneur explained to François, French Catholics have "everything to gain!" under the Muslim Brotherhood (127). He elaborated that they would increase funding for Catholic churches as "the thing they fear and hate - isn't Catholicism. It's secularism. It's laicism." (127)

The nation of France, is therefore revitalized when Islam takes the place of Catholicism as its religious/moral center. Not only are both women and men happier, but France enjoys an era of economic prosperity and global influence. This is because Mohammed Ben Abbes uses Islam in the same way that native Franch rulers used Christianity in Medeival times: as a unifying, empire-building force. As Alain Tanneur explained to François, Ben Abbes modeled himself after the Roman Emperor Augustus, and through diplomacy "was trying to accomplish, in one generation, [...] what had taken the Romans centuries." (241)

The Role of Women in Society

Women, the essential rulers of France in the first two sections of Submission, are presented as having a negative influence on society in Houellebecq's work. At the beginning of the novel, women occupy positions of power and men occupy the submissive role. For example, the ultra-feminist Chantal "Big" Delouze is the president of Paris III and Marine Le Pen is the head of the most successful political party in France, The National Front. During this period, France is in the midst of a civil war, the general populous is depressed, and the family model is in complete shambles. François voices his concerns over the feminism and the presence of women in the public sphere on multiple occasions. During a conversation with his young girlfriend, Myriam, François stated the he'd "never really been convinced that it was a good idea for women to get the vote, study the same things as men, go into the same professions etc." (31). He elaborated that at least the patriarchy worked as a social system and that "[t]here were families with children, and most of them had children [...]whereas now there aren't enough children, so we're finished" (31).

Male characters become more important in Submission as their female counterparts are pushed out of the public sphere by the Muslim Brotherhood. Alain Tanneur, one of the most important characters in the book, is introduced first only as Marie Françoise's husband. In fact, it is not until Part III, in which the Muslim Brotherhood win the election, that he is given a name. Much like Robert Rediger's secluded wives, François meets Alain hidden away in the Tanneur's home. As the novel progresses, Alain takes Marie-Françoise's place as a central player in the novel. In Part I, Marie-Françoise is François's colleague and friend, partaking in political discussions with him and occupying a position of power within the university. When François reconnects with the Tanneur's in Part III, the dynamic has changed entirely: Marie-Françoise barely speaks and merrily bustles about the kitchen cooking the two men dinner as they discuss current events. François paints the Tanneur's new lifestyle as one of conjugal happiness, as though everything has returned to the way it should be.

In Part V, women are all but absent from the public sphere. In fact, no female character in this final section speaks a word of dialogue. They are spoken of by male characters, only as commodities: professors like Robert Rediger, Jean-François Loiseleur, and François himself receive wives as part of their salary from the Saudi-run Islamic University of Paris-Sorbonne. Women under the Muslim Brotherhood's rule are trained specifically to be wives: they are only allowed to study home economics until the end of Junior High School at which point they are expected to marry immediately (67). François never relays women's opinion of their new submissive role in society because the result of their exclusion from the public sphere speaks for itself: France enjoys a time of economic prosperity, crime and unemployment rates plummet, and the nation is on track to become the most powerful country in the world.

Isolation

For the vast majority of Submission, the main character, François, is presented as a lonely and isolated figure. He barely leaves his apartment, has very few conversations, and relies primarily on his television for company. Unlike his ancestors who spent hours communing over long homecooked meals, François buys single-portion microwave dinners that he eats alone in front of the TV. As an academic, François often gets lost in his thoughts and is acutely aware of the chasm that exists between two minds. For example he mused in Part I that teaching was an exercise in futility as "the transmission of knowledge was generally impossible, the variance of intelligence extreme, and that nothing could undo or even mitigate this basic inequality" (11). François's isolation grows through Parts I - IV. In these sections he recounts he and his girlfriend Myriam's separation and his forced retirement from Paris III, both events that led to an existence of extreme solitude. François began seeing prostitutes, left the house only to buy TV dinners, and slowly stopped receiving phone calls and emails from friends and colleagues.

François (a name that translates to "Frenchmen") represents all citizens living in a highly individualist culture. He stands for nothing, cares for no one, and as a result falls into a deep and hopeless depression. His mother, who dies alone and is buried in an unmarked, communal grave, is also representative of, what Houellebecq sees, as the madness of liberal individualism. The same can be said of François's ex-girlfriends Aurelie and Sandra who, rather than getting married, decided to remain single well into middle age. François envisioned Sandra's life trajectory as such:

"In one or two years she would give up any last matrimonial ambitions, her imperfectly extinguished sensuality would lead her to seek out the company of young men, she would become what we used to call a cougar, and no doubt she'd go on this way for several years, ten at the most, before the sagging of her flesh became prohibitive, and condemned her to lasting solitude" (14-15).

These two women represent the sexually of liberated modern woman: independent yet utterly alone.

Isolation also extends to Houellebecq's depiction of the views of the Nativists and the far-right party, the National Front. These groups want France to exit the European Union and focus on the French bloodline. Their views stand in stark contrast to goals of Mohammed Ben Abbes and the Muslim Brotherhood, who wish to extend their influence and, eventually, create an empire.

Conjugal Love And Marriage

Throughout Submission, François struggles with the concept of marital partnership and love. His 22-year-old girlfriend, Myriam, provided him with a great amount of sexual pleasure but not the comfort of conjugal love. After Myriam moves to Israel, Francois is no longer able to achieve sexual ecstasy. He tries to recreate what he felt with Myriam

through high-end call girls to no avail. François's love life in the opening sections of Submission, is thus defined by sexual love alone.

The women in Houellebecq's vision of France in the year 2022, all have careers and no longer want to get married and have children. When these career women do get married, their refusal to submit to the traditional patriarchal family model inevitably leads to disaster. Take for example François's ex-colleague Bruno Deslandes' relationship with his wife Annelise: both he and his wife work all day and in the end have no time for love or romance. Looking at Annelise, François imagines that each night Bruno comes home to her lying on the couch in her sweatpants and they both look at each other and realize that it is a slow decline until death (76). François muses that the couple is probably divorced now but "[a] century ago, in Huysmans' time, they would have stayed together and maybe they wouldn't have been so unhappy after all" (76).

Conjugal love therefore, remains an elusive concept until Part V of the novel when François is introduced to polygamy. His first encounter with a polygamous marriage occurs at Robert Rediger's house where he meets two of the university president's wives: Aicha and Malika. These two women represent, what Houellebecq sees, as the two necessary components of conjugal love: the beautiful young Aicha (Rediger explains to François that she has only just turned 15) embodies sexual desire while the middle-aged Malika, who brings the two men food and drinks while they talk, signifies the importance of homemaking. It is truly his encounter with these two women, and not Rediger's long speech on the value of Islam, that converts François in the end. Furthermore, Rediger assures him that the Islamic University of Paris-Sorbonne will provide him with up to three beautiful young wives based on his prestige. In the book's final pages, François imagines his future as a prominent professor at the Islamic-University of Paris-Sorbonne. He realizes in the end, that polygamy and ultimately, the submission of women, is the true key to marital happiness.

Joris-Karl Huysmans

The life and work of decadent author Joris-Karl Huysmans provides the structure for Submission's narrative. François wrote his PhD dissertation on Huysmans and is singularly obsessed with the author throughout the novel. Part One opens on a quote from Huysmans' novel En rade and François continually digresses into long analyses of his work. Huysmans vision of marital happiness in the novel En ménage, informs François's pursuit of a mate. En ménage follows the story of a man, André, who marries a simple-minded woman and leaves her for a high-class prostitute. He then meets a working-class girl who, in turn, leaves him for a job opportunity, and he returns to his first wife. François's seems to attempt to mirror this trajectory in his pursuit of conjugal love. For example, after Myriam leaves for Israel, Francois begins seeing high-end prostitutes. Quoting Huysmans, François describes his longing for a relationship in which he and his partner "felt nothing but blessed tenderness, maternal satisfaction, at sharing the same bed, at simply lying close together and talking before they turned back to back and went to sleep" (77).

Huysmans converted to Catholicism and became a monk after living a life of debauchery. The majority of Submission consists of François trying to recreate and understand this decision. He stays in the Catholic city of Rocamadour for over a month and decides to revisit the monastery, Ligugé Abbey, where Huymans took his vows. However, François only stays at the abbey for a few days realizing that it is now empty of the meaning that Huysmans had found there. Indeed, much of François's obsession with the Decadent author signifies the French people's longing for their once glorious past. Huysmans was alive before what Lempereur described as the twentieth century's "mediocrity, its moronic 'engagement', its cloying humanitarianism" (47).

François's obsession with the author ends when he finishes the preface to the Pléide edition of Huysmans' work. He is finally able to conclude his decades-long relationship with the author when he realizes that his decision to enter into a life of monastic chastity had never been a problem for Huysmans because when women were removed from the public sphere, as was the case in the nineteenth century and under the Muslim Brotherhood, the distraction of sexual desire went away. This realization brings to light Houellebecq's apparent call for a return to morality and a general value system (i.e. the patriarchy) in France.

Styles

Point of View

Submission is told from the perspective a middle-aged French literary academic named François. It is written in the form of a first-person memoir and consists of François's memories of the year 2022. François reiterates throughout the novel that he does not believe in or stand for anything, making his observations of the political situation in Houellebecq's vision of France, 2022 very neutral in tone. He, like the rest of his compatriots, is a passive observer of a system beyond his control. François embodies the modern-day human being: desensitized by constant stimuli (in his case the media circus, reality television, and YouPorn), he goes through life unmoved by turmoil in violence. The narrator's desensitized perspective is most clearly illustrated when he recounts finding the body of a murdered cashier as he fled Paris. François saw the blood and the terrified look on the young woman's face, but did not react. Instead, he stole a sandwich, a non-alcoholic beer, and a Michelin Guide.

The novel is written mostly in the past-tense but, significantly, changes to future perfect in the final pages. From pages 247-250, François envisions his conversion ceremony at the Paris Mosque, the reception at the Sorbonne, and his future in a polygamous marriage. This shift is significant because, for the first time, François envisions a future beyond simply waiting around to die or suicide. Furthermore, this tense shift signifies François's movement from a solitary intellectual recluse to a member of the establishment. Though on the surface these final pages envision François's conversion to Islam, the really signal his movement from hype-individualism to shared experience.

Language and Meaning

Submission is written in the Naturalist style. Naturalism is a nineteenth century literary movement originating in France. Considered a branch of the realist movement, it focuses on fact, logic, and scientific observation over imagination and flights of fancy. Authors like the movement’s founder, Emile Zola, used this style to critique ignored faults in society such as poverty, violence, disease, corruption etc. Works of naturalism are written using common diction, or the language that people speak on a daily basis.

In Submission, the narrator, François, references naturalism several times. Specifically, he focuses on J.K. Huysmans’s (the focus of his academic research) stylistic movement from naturalism to decadence and then from decadence to monasticism. Michel Houellebecq himself writes in the naturalist style using first-person narration and every-day speech. François describes the world around him in mundane detail. For example, while in his doctoral seminar the narrator states:

“Doctoral students tended to exhausting. For them it was all just starting to mean something, and for me nothing mattered except which Indian dinner I’d microwave

(Chicken Biryani? Chicken Tikka Masala? Chicken Rogan Josh?) while I watch the political talk shows on France 2" (27).

Details such as these serve to highlight what Houellebecq sees as the wretchedness of modern existence. François's bland rhetoric adds an element of believability to his critiques on French society; the observations he makes are said in a tone of nihilistic disinterest and, therefore, seem neutral and lucid.

Structure

Submission is divided into five sections, the length of each section varies from between about 30-60 pages. Each section is divided into smaller sections that look like the beginning of a new chapter but are not numbered or named. These smaller sections are dated from page 60 to 123, starting with Sunday, 15 May and ending on Tuesday, 31 May. The addition of the dates, make the novel suddenly take on the appearance of a diary, or a war journal. They are significant because of they count down to the election of Mohammed Ben Abbes. After the Muslim Brotherhood is voted into power, the dates stop.

Submission's five sections, coupled with the novel's religious themes, seem to be an allusion to the Five Books of Psalms in the Bible. These Biblical chapters begin with the story of Creation in Genesis and end with Israel's entrance into the Promised Land in Deuteronomy. François's life, as recounted in Submission, follows a similar trajectory: in Part I he tells of the completion of his dissertation or the 'creation' of his life as an academic and Part V ends in a hypothetical account of his entrance into the destiny that Robert Rediger 'promised' him.

Quotes

Like literature, music can overwhelm you with sudden emotion, can move you to absolute sorrow or ecstasy; like literature, painting has the power to astonish, and to make you see the world through fresh eyes. But only literature can put you in touch with another human spirit, as a whole, with all its weaknesses and grandeurs, its limitation, its pettinesses, its obsessions, its beliefs; with whatever it finds moving, interesting, exciting or repugnant. Only literature can give you access to a spirit beyond the grave - a more direct, more complete, deeper access than you'd have in conversation with a friend. Even in our deepest, most lasting friendships, we never speak as openly as when we face a blank page and address a reader we do not know."
-- François (I paragraph 3)

Importance: This quote is meant to illustrate the bravery of literature and the futility of literary analysis. It is meant to show that François truly does understand the importance of literature and is not merely a lazy, sham academic like his colleague, Steve.

The way things were supposed to work (and I have no reason to think much has changed), young people, after a brief period of sexual vagabondage in their very early teens, were expected to settle down in exclusive, strictly monogamous relationships involving activities (outings, weekends, holidays) that were not only sexual, but social. At the same time, there was nothing final about these relationships. Instead, there were though of as apprenticeships - in a sense, as internships (a practice that was generally seen in the professional world as a step toward one's first job). Relationships of variable duration (a year being, according to my own observations, an acceptable amount of time) and of variable number (and average of ten to twenty might be considered a reasonable estimate) were supposed to succeed on another until they ended, like an apotheosis, with the last relationship, this one conjugal and final, which would lead, via the begetting of children, to the formation of a family."
-- François (I paragraph 2)

Importance: The narrator's curious, almost scientific tone when talking about courting and relationships is significant because it alludes to a great change. It is important to remember that the novel is written in the point of view of François many years in the future reminiscing on the year 2022. Assumingly, under the Muslim Brotherhood such dating practices were forgotten long ago, replaced by arranged marriage and matchmaking. This quote also highlights the cyclical and highly predictable nature of dating patterns.

[...] I'm not for anything, but at least the patriarch existed. I mean, as a social system it was able to perpetuate itself. There were families with children, and most of them had children. In other words, it worked, whereas now there aren't enough children, so we're finished."
-- François (I paragraph 3)

Importance: In this quote, François outlines, without knowing it, the Muslim

Brotherhood's argument against women's education and social democracy. It also represents Michel Houellebecq's real opinions on feminism and the death of traditional values.

Bloy was the ultimate weapon against the twentieth century, its mediocrity, its moronic 'engagement,' its cloying humanitarianism; against Sartre, and Camus, and all their political play-acting; and against all those sickening formalists, the nouveau roman, the pointless absurdity of it all.
-- Godfroy Lempereur (II paragraph 4)

Importance: This quote, spoken by a nativist, outlines the concerns of the far-right. Lempereur's references to formalism, Sartre, and Camus are significant because they represent a movement away from traditional values. Nationalists see twentieth century critical theory as a corrupting force that destroyed any Western sense of identity.

I'd always loved election night. I'd go so far as to say it's my favorite TV show, after the World Cup finals.
-- François (II paragraph 1)

Importance: Here, François compares elections to entertainment alluding to the French populace's detachment from reality. He, like his compatriots, is a mindless drone, easily distracted and controlled by the powers that be. This quote also represents the superficiality of politics.

André and Jeanne soon felt nothing but blessed tenderness, maternal satisfaction, at sharing the same bed, at simply lying close together and talking before they turned back to back and went to sleep."
-- François quoting Joris-Karl Husmans (II paragraph 1)

Importance: This quote, taken from Huysmans' novel En Menage, represents François's vision of an ideal partnership. It also is meant to stand in contrast with short-term, sex-driven modern relationships.

Below me flowed the Dordogne, encased between limestone cliffs some fifty meters high, obscurely pursuing tis geological destiny. I learned from an information panel that the region had been inhabited since the dawn of prehistory. Cro-Magnon man had slowly driven the Neanderthals out of this valley. They had taken refuge in Spain, then disappeared.
-- François (III paragraph 3)

Importance: In this quote the Neanderthals represent the indigenous Europeans and the Cro-Magnon represent Muslim immigrants. It aligns with Robert Rediger's vision of natural selection, in which weaker specimens are replaced by stronger challengers. At the beginning of Part III François thinks about fleeing to Spain to avoid the civil war, similar to how the Neanderthals fled the Cro-Magnons.

If Islam is not political, it is nothing.
-- Ayatollah Khomeini (V paragraph n/a)

Importance: This quote, spoken by the deceased Shia Muslim religious leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, opens Part V. This quote is important because it sets the tone for François's conversion to Islam. François is motivated to convert, not because of any spiritual revelation, but for power, money, and women. It also reflects Robert Rediger's (a vocal proponent of the expansion of Islam) obsequious political motivations.

The only true atheists I've ever met were people in revolt. It wasn't enough for them to coldly deny the existence of God - they had to refuse it [...]"
-- Rober Rediger (V paragraph 3)

Importance: Here, Robert Rediger begins to sew seeds of doubt in François's mind. Throughout the book François reiterates that he believes in nothing and is, therefore, an atheist. This quote defines atheism not as a lack of belief but as a reaction against it.

All intellectual debate of the twentieth century can be summed up as a battle between communism - that is, 'hard' humanism - and liberal democracy, the soft version. But what a reductive debate. Since I was fifteen, I've known that what they now call the return of religion was unavoidable."
-- Robert Rediger (V paragraph 1)

Importance: This quote sums up the twentieth century's rejection of organized religion. Here. Houellebecq fascinatingly postulates how religion might return to the West after a century of - what he sees as - a broken secular ideology.

How could anyone argue that Europe wasn't in decline? That Europe, which was the summit of human civilization, committed suicide in a matter of decades. [...] Throughout Europe there were anarchist and nihilist movements, calls for violence, the denial of moral law. And then a few years later it all came to an end with the unjustifiable madness of the First World War. Freud was not wrong, and neither was Thomas Mann: if France and Germany, the two most advanced, civilized nations in the world, could unleash this senseless slaughter, then Europe was dead.
-- Robert Rediger (V paragraph 2-3)

Importance: This quote outlines what Rediger sees as the decline of the West. The destruction caused by World War I (and subsequently World War II) alludes to the end of one great civilization and the potential for another one to take its place.

We feel nostalgia for a place simply because we've lived there, whether we lived well or badly scarcely matters. The past is always beautiful. So for that matter, is the future. Only the present hurts, and we carry it around like an abscess of suffering, our companion between two infinities of happiness and peace.
-- François (V paragraph 3)

Importance: Quotes in which François departs from his bland, naturalist manner of

speaking are always significant in Submission. They are moments of sincerity that burst through Houellbecq's typically sardonic tone.