

The Schooldays of Jesus Study Guide

The Schooldays of Jesus by J. M. Coetzee

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Plot Summary

The following version of this book was sued to create this study guide: Coetzee, J. M. *The Schooldays of Jesus*. Viking, 2016.

The Schooldays of Jesus takes place in the fictional town of Estrella, which is located in an unnamed Spanish-speaking country. The book's central characters are a man named Simón, a woman named Inés, and a six-year-old boy named David. At the beginning of the novel, Simón, Inés, and David arrive in Estrella from a different town called Novilla. They are fugitives from legal officials who wish to take David away because Simón and Inés are not David's parents or legal guardians. Simón finds work on a nearby farm, and he and Inés discuss what to do with regards to David's schooling. They find a tutor named Sennor Robles, but his teaching style proves far too abstract and impractical. The three sisters who own the farm on which Simón works take a special interest in David, and they say they will pay his education fees once Simón and Inés enroll him in a school.

Simón and Inés eschew the public school system for fear that David will be recognized by legal officials. So, instead, they enroll David in the local Academy of Dance. The teacher, Ana Magdalena Arroyo, espouses a highly spiritual interpretation of the meaning of dance, and it soon becomes apparent that David will receive no general education at the academy. However, because David enjoys the academy so much, Simón and Inés decide to keep him enrolled there. Soon, David says that he wishes to become a boarder at the academy, stating that Ana Magdalena understands him in a way that Simón and Inés do not. Unable to deny David any wish, Simón and Inés allow David to become a boarder. Not long after, Simón learns that Dmitri, the academy's janitor who says that he is in love with Ana Magdalena and who spends much time talking to the students of the academy, occasionally shows pornographic pictures to the students. Simón tells Dmitri to cease this bad behavior at once or he will report Dmitri.

Not long after Simón's meeting with Dmitri, Dmitri and Ana Magdalena are reported missing from the academy. Simón assumes that Dmitri and Ana Magdalena ran away together, but then Simón and David accidentally discover Ana Magdalena's strangled corpse in the academy. A few days later, Dmitri shows up at the police station and files a statement saying that, in his frustrated infatuation, he raped and then strangled Ana Magdalena. Dmitri awaits trial in jail, and he asks Simón to burn the personal papers located in Dmitri's file cabinet at his former workplace. During his trial, Dmitri pleads guilty and demands the harshest sentence, but instead, the judge sentences him to a year in a mental hospital under the study of psychologists and psychiatrists, after which Dmitri's case will be reviewed. Simón obtains Dmitri's personal papers with the intention of handing them over to the authorities, but he finds that they contain love letters from Ana Magdalena to Dmitri. Simón cannot decide what the righteous moral decision is with regards to the letters.

Dmitri then shows up at Simón's house, as the security at the mental hospital is apparently very lax. Dmitri says that he will soon go to the salt mines and demand a



lifetime sentence there to pay off his moral debt while Simón will be left with the maddening moral quandary of the letters. Dmitri goes back to the mental hospital, and Simón soon realizes that the love letters are real, meaning that Dmitri did not kill Ana Magdalena out of frustrated love, but simply because he could and because he felt like doing so. Simón goes to Sennor Arroyo, the husband of Ana Magdalena, and asks if the Academy of Dance will reopen. Señor Arroyo is unsure, and Simón is left in further uncertainty with regards to his responsibilities towards David. A little later, Simón and David attend an academic debate between Señor Arroyo and an academic named Señor Moreno. Dmitri interrupts the debate and demands Señor Arroyo's forgiveness for the murder of Ana Magdalena. Simón sees this as a ploy by Dmitri to avoid the salt mines. Simón calls the police, and they take Dmitri away. At the end of the novel, Simón learns that the Academy of Dance will reopen and will be run by Ana Magdalena's sister-in-law, Señora Mercedes. Simón debates whether or not David should return to the school. In the last scene, Simón goes to Mercedes and asks her to teach him the ways of dance.



Chapters 1 - 5

Summary

At the beginning of Chapter 1, Simón, Inés, and six-year-old David arrive in the town of Estrella, which is located in an unknown Spanish-speaking country. They have fled from legal authorities in the nearby town of Novilla, although the book does not say why. The three of them travel with their dog, Bolívar, and they come to a fruit farm. Simón begins to work as a fruit-picker on the farm, and David spends his time playing with the children of the other farm workers. One of the children throws a rock at a duck, breaking its wing. Simón and David have a conversation about the immorality of this act. Simón says, “If we do a bad deed, we get no joy out of it. Our conscience sees to that” (10).

In Chapter 2, David comes to Simón after playing with the other children. David asks Simón about sex and procreation, as some of the other kids spoke to David about these subjects. David asks if Simón has sexual intercourse with Inés, and Simón says that he does not because he and Inés aren't married. Simón explains that he is not David's biological father, but that he is committed to fulfilling the role of David's father nonetheless. Simón also says that, because he and David and Inés are immigrants to this country, their personal histories may be made up defined by themselves. Simón says that Inés is David's real father, but he also hints that this may simply be a part of the aforementioned made-up personal histories.

In Chapter 3, Simón and Inés turn their thoughts to David's schooling. Inés recalls how a traditional school setting did not work for David in Novilla, as the pace in the classroom was too slow. They learn of a local engineer, Señor Robles, who also spends time tutoring math. When they contact him, Robles says that he would be happy to tutor David free of charge. However, when Robles and David have their first lesson, Robles teaches basic mathematics in a highly abstract fashion. After the lesson, Simón and Inés decide to pursue other options for David's education.

In Chapter 4, David and Simón converse about work and self-reliance. Simón explains to David that it is better to give to society than to take, and that one must work in order to support oneself. Much to Simón's consternation, David says that he would rather not be human in that case. A little later, Simón, Inés, and David are invited to have tea with the sisters who own the farm: Senora Valentina and Senora Consuelo. The sisters say that their other sister, Senora Alma, is in bed because she is feeling unwell emotionally. The sisters speak with David and declare that they think he is a remarkable boy. They say that they are willing to cover any education expenses David may accrue in Estrella. They say that the only alternatives to the public schools in Estrella are the Academy of Singing and the Academy of Dance.

In Chapter 5, Simón, Inés, and David visit the the Academy of Dance, which is located within Estrella's art museum. At the Academy, they meet Ana Magdalena Arroyo, the head dance instructor, and enroll David for classes. Outside, they run into Dmitri, who is



the museum's guard and janitor. Dmitri speaks highly of Ana Magdalena, but something about Dmitri strikes Simón as off-putting. Inés agrees that Dmitri seems unkempt and somehow unpleasant despite his refined speech. As Simón, Inés, and David leave the museum, David says that he likes Ana Magdalena because she is prettier than Inés. Simón explains that outer beauty is not important, and that only inner qualities matter.

Analysis

The prose of the novel takes on a very simple and didactic tone, stylized away from realism in order to take on an allegorical aspect in its narrative. Much of the novel concerns the didactic dynamic between Simón and his surrogate son, David. The nature in which they confront and address problems of morality, such as the young boy's attack on the duck, closely resembles a typical father-son dynamic, but with almost surrealist underpinnings of philosophical logic. Simón appears very concerned with providing morally complete and philosophically satisfying answers for David's childlike inquisitions. When David asks about the duck incident, Simón answers with assured but grand answers such as "His conscience will not let him rest," and "You cannot unmake the past" (10). Even David's questions seem to be tinged with an air of mystery and moral urgency. For example, David believes that the boy who attacked the duck is unrepentant and malicious. For his evidence, David says, "He was shining! I saw it! ...He wanted to kill them all!" (10). David does not explain what he means by "shining," but his urgency reinforces his belief in the supposed evil and malice he has witnessed. These elements of almost surrealist dialogue appear to lend moral weight and urgency to the narrative.

The surrealist and allegorical effect of the tone appears to be partially in service to the narrative's function as an allegory for the young days of Jesus, with many of the characters corresponding to biblical figures in a narrative act of moral and philosophical exploration. In the novel, David, Inés, and Simón correspond to Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, respectively. David's assertion that "Simón is not my real father and David is not my real name" (3) helps to indicate the parallels between these characters and the story of Jesus' nativity, in which Jesus' mother Mary was impregnated by God. This allegorical structure extends to other characters as well: Ana Magdalena corresponds to Mary Magdalene, and Dmitri corresponds to a Satan-like figure, although these two correspondences become clearer as the novel progresses beyond Chapter 5. The purpose of this allegorical structure appears to be the use of traditional Christian iconography and relationships as tools by which to more deeply interrogate how these religious views are formed and used. As a young boy, David is highly inquisitive and impressionable, and while Simón attempts to be the best possible moral mentor for the boy, the narrative creates the sense that David's beliefs and moralities are still very malleable. This creates the primary tension for the novel, as various people and forces essentially fight for the fate of David's soul.

In terms of setting and character, the novel maintains a consistent air of vagueness as a way of investigating ideas of morality and changing identity. Simón, Inés, and David are immigrants to the unnamed country in which they are portrayed. Of this fact, Simón



somewhat enigmatically states, “Davíd, you arrived on a boat, just as I did...When you travel across the ocean on a boat, all your memories are washed away, and you start a completely new life” (17). This statement appears to contain multiple implications. On the most literal level, Simón seems to be implying that immigration is a process of allowing yourself to step into a new identity as necessitated by new surroundings and culture. On a more metaphorical level, the novel appears to portray the process of immigration as analogous to dying and passing on to a new life. Later in the novel, the narrative repeatedly presents the idea that when a person dies, they pass on to a new life, but not before their memories are washed away. In this way, the novel presents immigration as a process of reincarnation.

It is also worth taking note of Davíd’s peculiar lesson with Señor Robles, which although brief and seemingly inconsequential, actually initiates a recurring theme throughout the novel of how people use numbers to relate to and make sense of the world around them. As an engineer and a mathematician, Señor Robles approaches even the most basic mathematical concepts in a highly rational, logical and abstract fashion. Simón and Inés find this to be rather impractical, and when Davíd speaks of numbers in the lesson, he speaks in terms that are less logical and more poetic. Robles’ view of numbers contrasts greatly with the view of numbers as they will soon be presented in the classroom of Ana Magdalena, who speaks of numbers as something mystical and innate to nature and the soul. This juxtaposition between Ana Magdalena and Señor Robles serves as one of the primary philosophical tensions throughout the novel: the tension between the rational and the irrational.

Discussion Question 1

What is the nature of Simón and Davíd's relationship? What appear to be Simón's primary goals regarding Davíd?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss Simón and Davíd's conversation in Chapter 2 about immigration and their last lives. What is the significance and meaning of Simón's view of these subjects?

Discussion Question 3

Why are Simón and Inés so intent on finding a proper educational setting for Davíd? What are the differences between the education they wish to find for Davíd and the educational opportunities they find in Estrella?



Vocabulary

sprawl, provincial, beneficent, cornucopia, veritable, impersonal, transient, galvanize, ablution, frock, intervene, fidelity, prudent, perjure, assailant, physique, stevedore, alibi, acquiesce, embark, superannuate



Chapters 6 - 9

Summary

In Chapter 6, Simón brings David to the Academy of Dance for his first day of school there. One of the first things that Ana Magdalena says to David is, “Just as there are noble metals and slave metals, there are noble numbers and slave numbers. You will learn to dance the noble numbers” (53). As Simón leaves the school, he runs in to Dmitri again. He and Dmitri converse, and Dmitri freely admits that he is in love with Ana Magdalena. Simón remarks that Ana Magdalena is married to Señor Arroyo, the musician at the Academy of Dance, but Dmitri merely dismisses this remark. While David is in school, Simón wanders around town and looks for work. After he brings David home, David explains that, according to Ana Magdalena, numbers exist among the stars, and dance is a way of calling them down to earth.

In Chapter 7, Inés finds a position as a saleswoman in a clothing and department store called Modas Modernas. Meanwhile, Simón finds work as a pamphlet distributor. One evening, Simón and Inés attend a dance recital at David’s school. Before the recital, Ana Magdalena explains her philosophy of dance to the parents. She says that dance is a way of intermingling one’s soul with nature and the numbers that exist therein. She states that everyday interactions with numbers such as counting and arithmetic are mindless, soul-numbing exercises that simply serve to transform people into ant-like beings that spend all their time working without reflection. Simón does not understand Ana Magdalena’s ideas, but the dance recital is impressive. Afterwards, Simón and Inés discuss Ana Magdalena’s speech. Inés is highly wary and believes that Ana Magdalena is more of a religious preacher than a teacher of anything useful. However, they decide to keep David in the school because he appears to enjoy it so much.

In Chapter 8, David asks Simón if their dog, Bolívar, is a member of their family, and Simón says that he is. David asks if it is possible for someone to become less of a part of a family than they are, and Simón says that he supposes it is possible. Later, David states that he wishes to become a boarder at the Academy of Dance, saying that he believes Ana Magdalena understand him better than Simón and Inés do. Simón and Inés ultimately agree to David’s wish, as they find themselves unable to deny David anything he wants. However, when Simón drops David off at the academy so that David can become a boarder, Simón cries and experiences a sense of loss.

In Chapter 9, Simón and Inés go to the academy to pick David up for the weekend, but they learn that the students have been taken on a field trip to a nearby lake. Simón and Inés visit the lake to make sure everything is okay, and they discover that everyone at the lake is walking about in the nude. Inés waits in the car while Simón strips off his clothes and goes to speak with David and Ana Magdalena. David seems content, and Ana Magdalena assures Simón that everything is fine. Simón realizes how beautiful Ana Magdalena is, and on the way home, Inés says, “I suppose you have fallen in love with her” (99). Simón assures Inés that this is not the case.



Analysis

The introduction of important characters outside Simón's family group adds a more volatile layer of philosophy and morality that slowly builds tension within the narrative and adds dramatic turbulence to the initially placid tone of the story. The two most important characters outside of Simón, David, and Inés are Dmitri and Ana Magdalena, although the importance of these characters grows gradually and somewhat unexpectedly. Disregarding David's brief interaction with Señor Robles, Ana Magdalena is the first character who exercises influence over David beyond Simón's own paternal teachings of morality. The differing aims and focuses of these two mentor characters creates tension in the narrative as each mentor instills their own values within David. Simón wishes only for David to develop a solid sense of right versus wrong, and he also wishes for the boy to obtain a useful education. Meanwhile, Ana Magdalena appears far more concerned with somewhat lofty ideas of spirituality and the importance of harmony between one's soul and the world around them. Dmitri's own influence over David has not yet come into play in the narrative, but the establishment of the tension between Simón's influence and Ana Magdalena's influence primes the reader to focus on the tension caused by Dmitri once Dmitri becomes a more active character in the narrative.

One of the most striking aspects of Ana Magdalena's philosophy of dance is its fixation on numbers, which continues the motif of numbers established by Señor Robles and develops this motif into a more trenchant narrative examination of the ways in which people attempt to relate to the world around them. Instead of simply being content with dance as an art form or a spiritual exercise, Ana Magdalena chooses to frame her philosophy of dance as a way of interacting with the heavens, where according to her numbers dwell. This fascination with numbers forces a juxtaposition between Robles' extreme rationality and Ana Magdalena's spirituality, creating tension between two very different ideas of how to perceive the world. While Inés simply wishes for David to gain a practical education so that he is not at a disadvantage in life, David has thus far only come into contact with worldviews in Estrella that are either highly abstract or not based in rationality. This tension culminates at the end of the novel in the debate between Señor Arroyo and Señor Moreno, but for now, it simply serves to create inquisitive tension within David. David's enjoyment and fulfillment at the Academy of Dance seems to suggest that he has adhered very readily to Ana Magdalena's spiritual views, but this irrationality will eventually parley into genuine conflict once it is introduced to Dmitri's reckless and malevolent views of irrational passion.

David's wish to become a boarder and become "less of a family" (82) bespeaks possible problems within the seemingly wholesome dynamic of David's surrogate family, thus crystalizing the seeds of tension created by the various people vying for David's soul and beliefs. David states that Ana Magdalena understand him in a way that Simón and Inés do not, and this appears to be possibly related to Simón and Inés constant pliancy in the face of David's wishes. Later on in the book, it is more explicit and apparent that David is attracted to Ana Magdalena's unrelenting discipline of her students, and therefore Simón and Inés' wish to comply with all of David's wishes is actually serving to drive him away from their benevolent and moral influence. This



creates further danger once David eventually comes under the influence of the corrupt Dmitri.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss Ana Magdalena's philosophy of dance. What appears to be its meaning and purpose? Why does it center around the idea of numbers?

Discussion Question 2

Why does David appear to prefer Ana Magdalena to Simón and Inés? Why does he seem to think that Ana Magdalena understands him while Simón and Inés do not?

Discussion Question 3

What are the significances of Simón's job as a pamphlet distributor? What is his attitude towards the job? How does this attitude reflect upon Simón's character?

Vocabulary

baffle, entrench, frolic, capacious, follicle, alabaster, carnal, abstruse, solace, dissolute, columnar, scrutiny, persecute, syllogism, lambast, revel, burden, heinous, capitulate, eccentric



Chapters 10 – 13

Summary

In Chapter 10, Simón finds that Inés is somewhat offended by his attraction to Ana Magdalena. She decides to send for her brother Diego, despite the fact that Diego dislikes Simón. Simón then decides to visit the Academy of Dance to see how David is doing. Simón finds David with other boys listening to a story as read by Alyosha, one of the employees of the academy. The story concerns a fisherman who finds a genie and wishes to be king of the world. The genie grants this wish, but when the man goes to a nearby village and exercise his will, the villagers do not believe the man is a king, and they beat him. David and another boy argue about the point of the story, with David arguing on the side of the man, and the other boy arguing on the side of the villagers. Later, David tells Simón that Dmitri has been inviting children of the academy into his room and showing them pictures of naked women.

In Chapter 11, Simón goes to speak to Dmitri and repeats what David told him. Dmitri says that he has not done anything beyond showing pornographic pictures. Simón threatens to report Dmitri if he does not cease doing so. Dmitri says that he interacts with the children because they make him feel young and alive, and this gives him strength in his pursuit of Ana Magdalena. Simón strongly advises Dmitri to cease his pursuit of the married woman, but Dmitri says he cannot. While speaking to Dmitri, David begins to understand that David is captivated by Dmitri energetic and emotional personality. Later, David arrives at the farm from the academy, saying that Dmitri and Ana Magdalena have run away together. Simón brings David back to the academy, where they accidentally find Ana Magdalena's body, apparently killed by strangulation.

In Chapter 12, Dmitri turns himself in for the murder of Ana Magdalena and files a statement saying that, in his frustrated love for her, he asped and then strangled her. A little later, Inés brother Diego arrives in Estrella. Simón takes David to the Academy of Singing for possible enrollment. The administrator there says that David must apply as there is limited space in the school, and he emphasizes that David must have a true passion for singing. David later asks if passion is what drove Dmitri to kill Ana Magdalena, and Simón says that it was. He says that Dmitri harbored passion without love, which is dangerous.

In Chapter 13, Simón receives a communication from Dmitri requesting a visit from him. In the jail, Dmitri asks Simón to go to his desk in the art museum, find his personal papers, and burn them without looking at them. Simón says that the only thing he can do is to alert the museum director to the papers' presence. During Dmitri's trial, he pleads guilty to the crime of Ana Magdalena's murder and demands the harshest sentence, which would be forced labor in the salt mines for the rest of his life. However, the judge says that things are not so simple. He says that, regardless of Dmitri's confession, it is the duty of the law to determine whether or not Dmitri was sane at the time of the crime, so the judge decrees that Dmitri will spend the next year in a mental



hospital under the observation of psychologists and psychiatrists, after which time case will be reviewed.

Analysis

The parable of the fisherman and the genie serves to both underline the allegorical nature of the novel and to develop David's role as a leadership figure in his childhood stages of education. The ethical crux of the parable exists in the fact that the genie makes the fisherman the king of the world, and yet the fisherman is unable to command the local villagers, because they do not recognize him or his authority. David argues that the man's status as king is undeniable because the story states that the genie is all-powerful. However, the other boy argues that the fisherman was not really a king because the villagers did not obey him. The story thusly raises where the king's power ultimately comes from and what his responsibilities are as king. The parable appears to imply that the title of king has no meaning without the loyalty of the people who are supposedly the king's subjects. David's interpretation implies that he sees the king's position of power as innate and deserved, and that the villagers are in the wrong for not recognizing the king's authority. When considered in relation with David's status as an allegorical representation of a young Jesus, David's interpretation indicates a disconcerting lack of sympathy for the position of followers and common people.

David's impressionability and lack of sympathy are taken advantage of by Dmitri, who is revealed to be an increasingly malevolent character, fulfilling his role as an allegorical representation of Satan. After Dmitri's first appearance in the novel, Simón and Inés note how off-putting he seems to be. As the narrative progresses, Simón and Inés' and impression of Dmitri becomes increasingly fulfilled as the dark aspects of his personality are slowly revealed. Dmitri's first notable offense is the fact that he shows pornographic images to the students of the academy. This is made even more disconcerting by the fact that David seems very affectionate and loyal towards Dmitri. Simón notes that David seems to be entranced by Dmitri's confident and emotionally vibrant personality. Dmitri's insidious is affirmed by his murder of Ana Magdalena. This insidiousness is complicated by Dmitri's apparent remorse and noble desire for punishment, but this nobility is slowly destroyed as a façade over the course of the rest of the novel. While Simón is not taken in by Dmitri's words or personality, the impressionable young David appears to have a great affinity for Dmitri's passion and emotional freedom. By murdering Ana Magdalena, Dmitri forcibly takes over the role of principle mentor in David's life, thus establishing the main tension in the novel as between Simón and Dmitri's attempts to influence David and educate him in their own ways.

In contrast with Dmitri's charismatic, enigmatic, and passionate affect, Simón's own calm and hyper-rational personality is cast in sharp relief as a literary foil. When faced with the myriad personal and ethical problems presented by Dmitri, Simón maintains the same dry and rational approach that he assumes when speaking to David, thus revealing that Simón is an almost surrealistically principled, moral, and rational being. When Dmitri admits to his wrongdoings within the academy or asks Dmitri to burn his papers, Simón is never threatened or emotional. Instead, he simply assesses the



situation from a rational, moral standpoint and always frankly states his thoughts and opinions. This acts in direct opposition to Dmitri's immorality and duplicity, and both characters assume enact their opposing moral roles in a surrealistic fashion, never abandoning their opposing ideals for a single moment. This portrayal becomes complicated by the fact that the reader only has access to Simón's thoughts and not the thoughts of Dmitri, who is the dishonest and duplicitous character rather than the honest and moral one. Regardless, these moral oppositions form the philosophical substance of the mentors between which David finds himself.

Discussion Question 1

What appears to be the true moral of the fable of the genie and the fisherman? What is the narrative function of this story within the narrative of the novel?

Discussion Question 2

Why does David appear to be so captivated by Dmitri? What is the significance of this captivation, and how does it affect Simón's relationship with David?

Discussion Question 3

What is the thematic significance of the trial scene? What is the difference between the judge's philosophy and Dmitri's desire, and how is this difference significant?

Vocabulary

pretext, extravagant, calamity, clientele, elegant, pretentious, intransigent, remedial, infatuated, sentimental, discreet, denigrate, consign, inept, baize, exculpate, mitigate, scrupulous, postpone, reluctant



Chapters 14 – 17

Summary

In Chapter 14, Simón goes to the director of the art museum and locates Dmitri's collection of pornographic pictures. The director of the art museum leaves them with Simón to dispose of. However, when Simón looks at the pictures, he finds several letters at the bottom of the stack. They are love letters written by Ana Magdalena to Dmitri. Simón cannot decide what to do with the letters, because if they're real, Dmitri may want them destroyed and if they're fake, Dmitri may want them publicized to besmirch Ana Magdalena's reputation. When Simón goes home, he finds Dmitri there with David. Dmitri has apparently escaped the mental hospital with David's help. Dmitri says that he will go to the salt mines soon to pay his moral debt, and he says that Simón will be left to try to sort out the morality of the situation and the truth or falsity of the letters. Dmitri then leaves.

In Chapter 15, Simón enrolls in a writing composition course as a way of preparing him to look for other work. He proves to be adept at the technical aspects of writing, but in his compositions, he writes about the moral struggles of his position. He writes of the position he has assumed as David's guardian and of the conflict in David between Simón's influence and Dmitri's influence. Simón wonders if perhaps Dmitri is a more suitable mentor for David, as Dmitri appears more in touch with his emotions and David appears to be far more drawn to Dmitri than to Simón. Simón's writing teacher fears that Simón is appealing for her help through his writing, but Simón assures her that this is not the case.

In Chapter 16, Simón and Inés discuss how to proceed with David's education now that the Academy of Dance has apparently closed. Simón and Inés discuss hiring a private tutor for David, but David says that he wants to be with Señor Arroyo. Later, Simón goes to the academy to see Señor Arroyo. There, he meets Señora Mercedes, who is a dancer and the Señor Arroyo's sister-in-law. Mercedes asks if Simón was in love with Ana Magdalena, and though he says he was not, Mercedes wonders why so many men fell in love with Ana Magdalena. Alyosha and Mercedes discuss Dmitri and say that he must have killed Ana Magdalena because she would not reciprocate his love. However, Simón remembers the letters and thinks to himself, "Dmitri was no thwarted lover...her killed her because he felt like it" (193).

In Chapter 17, Simón meets with Señor Arroyo and asks if the academy will reopen. He speaks of David's assertions that Señor Arroyo knows who he is and Simón and Inés do not. Señor Arroyo says that he plans to reopen the school as an academy of music, and then he engages in an abstract conversation with Simón about the nature of identity and what it truly means to know someone. Señor Arroyo says that if David thinks that Señor Arroyo truly knows him, then that is merely David's perception, as true knowledge is a hard thing to locate and pin down. Simón, confused, also asks Señor Arroyo to explain



the philosophy of dance to him, and though Arroyo tries, Simón is still unable to comprehend.

Analysis

The introduction of the letters creates a highly problematic moral quandary for Simón, representing the further encroachment of Dmitri's moral bankruptcy into Simón's sphere of extreme moral rectitude. The original reason that Dmitri gave for murdering Ana Magdalena was because he was driven mad by his thwarted love for her. However, the letters reveal that Dmitri and Ana Magdalena may have been conducting an illicit affair behind Señor Arroyo's back. This theory is later confirmed, but regardless, Simón's discovery of the letters irrevocably involves him in the morally volatile matter of Dmitri's crime and his motivations for it. Whether Simón decides to give the letters to the authority, keep them secret, or destroy them, Simón is unable to extricate himself from having to make some decision or other regarding the letters. Even after Simón decides that the letters are real, he is unable to bring himself to take any action, because his only wish is to allow the justice system to have its way with Dmitri regardless of the truth of his relationship with Ana Magdalena. The burden of this new knowledge weighs heavily on Simón's conscience and complicates his previous status as a representative of pure and uncorrupted morals. Thus, Dmitri's growing influence over David and Simón represents a corruption and confusion the earlier moral strictures laid out by Simón, thus demonstrating the antagonistic and destructive nature of Dmitri as a Satan-like allegorical figure.

Dmitri's role as an allegorical representative for Satan is further developed in the course of the rather unsettling conversation in Simón's apartment, where Dmitri not only demonstrates his control over David, but also the slipperiness and deceptiveness of Dmitri's own logic and language. Firstly, Dmitri's mere presence in the apartment is shocking because he was confined by legal decree to the mental hospital. Dmitri's ability to freely leave from the mental hospital demonstrates his rather sinister freedom from outside influence. Moreover, the fact that Dmitri was able to escape in part due to help from David helps to emphasize the large degree of influence Dmitri now has over the boy. Dmitri tends to speak in terms that sound noble and astute, but Simón (and thus the reader as well) is able to see past Dmitri's lies and attractive platitudes to the malevolent and self-serving core of Dmitri's character. Dmitri's supposed wish to go to the salt mines and repay his moral debt acts as a powerful smokescreen for his malevolent and immoral nature, but Simón's knowledge that Dmitri killed Ana Magdalena out of sheer whim helps Simón to see past Dmitri's deceptive words. As a convincing talker with a morally bankrupt core, the narrative further reveals Dmitri's devil-like qualities and further raises the stakes of his malevolent influence over David.

Because Simón's interaction with Dmitri serve to unsettle the foundations of Simeon's relationship with David, Chapters 15 and 17 consist Simón's internal and external struggles with regards to this relationship and how to proceed. In Simón's writing class, he uses his essays as a medium in which to struggle with the reasons against and in support of his guardianship over Dmitri. When speaking to Señor Arroyo, Simón



attempts to uncover the roots of David's true desires and needs. However, in both of these cases, Simón's attempts to discover a singular and unshakable truth are thwarted. His essays come to no solid conclusions, and his conversation with Señor Arroyo provides no further evidence or philosophical basis for any type of true knowledge with regards to the boy David. In this way, the narrative appears to promote the idea that true morality must come from one's own beliefs with regards to reality, and when those beliefs are shaken, it is impossible to decide how to proceed with one's life.

Discussion Question 1

What is the significance of the letters that Simón finds in the museum? What are the possible moral implications of these letters, and how do these implications affect Simón?

Discussion Question 2

What are the significances of the writing course in which Simón enrolls? How do Simón's essays develop his character and his moral quandaries?

Discussion Question 3

What are the most significant things that Senor Arroyo says to Simón in Chapter 17? How do Senor Arroyo's statements interact with the themes of the novel?

Vocabulary

divert, exasperation, converge, magnanimous, censure, refectory, imbue, aquiline, perturb, thwart, heterodox, augment, skeptical, integral, parch, indolent, conjuror, immerse, homily, fatuous, candid



Chapters 18 – 23

Summary

In Chapter 18, Simón and Inés prepare for David's birthday party. Before the party, David speaks to Simón about life and death. David asks why people cannot remember their previous lives, and Simón says that it is because they are "immersed in the waters of forgetting" (206). David's party goes well, apart from the magician who did not arrive until very late. Later, Simón goes to see Señor Arroyo again. They speak of David, and Arroyo assures Simón that David actually admires Simón. Arroyo says that David's true struggle is that David wishes to hold on to his previous life, before he arrived in the country where he now lives.

In Chapter 19, Simón comes home to once again find Dmitri there. Dmitri says that he has resolved to bring himself to the salt mines the next day, but he first wishes to express his inner feelings to Simón. He says that Ana Magdalena was the greatest thing in his life, and he says that he truly does not know what drove him to kill her. He says that he believes only the cruel labor of the salt mines will cure him of whatever disease ails him. He then requests to stay the night before he goes to the salt mines the next day. He says that he promises to never see Simón again if Simón does him this favor, so Simón assents.

In Chapter 20, Simón reflects over all of the past events of the novel, and he struggles to decide what moral message he should take away from it all. He converses with David about Dmitri, saying that Dmitri was touched by malevolent insanity. David states that Don Quixote was crazy as well, and Simón agrees but says that Don Quixote's "craziness led him to do good deeds" (227). Simón tells David to forget Dmitri, and Simón tries to forget Dmitri as well.

In Chapter 21, Simón and Inés learn of an upcoming academic debate between Señor Arroyo and an academic named Señor Moreno. The debate is to concern numbers and their significance in human history. Simón, Inés, and David decide to attend. However, before Simón leaves for the event, he is met once again by Dmitri, who says that he was unable to work up the nerve to go to the salt mines. Simón, frightened, threatens to call the police, and he runs away to the institute where the academic debate is being held.

In Chapter 22, Simón arrives at the institute where the debate is in progress. Señor Moreno argues that numbers and measurements are the only way to truly understand anything about the universe. Señor Arroyo counters with a dance performance and states that numbers exist not in human thought, but in nature itself. Arroyo argues that spiritual involvement with the world is the only way to truly understand it. The debate is interrupted by Dmitri, who demands forgiveness from Señor Arroyo. Simón recognizes this as a ploy by Dmitri to avoid the salt mines, but he nonetheless finds himself



somewhat moved by the display. However, the police soon arrive and take Dmitri back to the mental hospital.

In Chapter 23, Simón and Inés hide David while officials of Estrella conduct the annual census. After the census, Simón and Inés learn that the Academy of Dance will be reopened under the management of Señora Mercedes. They thus consider sending David back to continuing his education there. The novel ends with Simón going to Señora Mercedes and asking her to teach him the art and mystical secrets of dance.

Analysis

Simón and David's conversation about the afterlife and "the waters of forgetting" (206) serve to strengthen the allegorical connection between the main characters' immigrant journey and the religious ideas of the afterlife. Simón, Inés, and David arrived in this unnamed country via boat, and thus the water they crossed to on their journey appears to share an allegorical connection with these "waters of forgetting" (206) of which Simón speaks. This also bears a connection to Simón's the repeated idea in the book that when one immigrates to a new country, one sheds one's past and takes on a new identity. This is an idea put forth by both Simón and Señor Arroyo. Thus, the narrative compares idea of immigration to the idea of reincarnation, whereby one is remade by new surroundings. Over the course of the novel, Simón, Inés, and David attempt to adapt to their new surroundings and discover their new identities, even taking on new names. The narrative presents such actions as a necessity, as the water over which the immigrants travel wash away both their past in both figurative and literal ways.

However, as Señor Arroyo states in Chapter 18, David appears to be unique in that he actively struggles to hold on to his past life; this specific tension serves both to further develop David's status as a Christ-like figure and to explore the tension that exists between David and Simón. As stated in the previous paragraph, the novel uses the idea of immigration as an allegory for reincarnation or the metaphysical travel between different lives. In Christian mythology, Jesus is an incarnation of God, and thus he bears a unique connection to the supernatural realm that exists beyond Earth itself. Similarly, David seems to bear some special connection with his previous life that urges him attempt to recall that life. The nature of this connection is unclear in the novel, but it seems to be connected with the fact that so many people seem to be morally and emotionally invested in the boy's fate. Perhaps the narrative is suggesting that David will grow up to be a savior figure similar to Jesus. Regardless, David's connection to his previous life appears to be somewhat spiritual in nature. Moreover, this connection seems to explain some of the factors causing friction between David and Simón, as Simón always urges David to focus on the exigencies of the present time and place rather attempting to think about the past. Meanwhile, Dmitri's emotionally vibrancy appears to attract David because it allows for a wider scope of moral freedom and focus.

By the end of the novel, Dmitri's role as an allegorical representation of Satan comes to a conclusion with the revelation—at least to Simón—of the truly self-serving motives



that lie beneath Dmitri's false nobility. Dmitri repeatedly says that he wishes to go to the salt mines to receive his punishment for murdering Ana Magdalena, and yet at every turn, Dmitri instead takes some new action to avoid this fate. In the end, Dmitri publicly begs Señor Arroyo's forgiveness as a possible method of regaining his freedom, but this plan is foiled by Simón's intervention. Dmitri maintains his rather convincing deceptions throughout the novel, and even Simón finds himself somewhat moved, but he still decides to call the police and have Dmitri taken away. This appears to conclude Dmitri's storyline, but in some ways, Dmitri's involvement is not necessarily concluded. For instance, Dmitri has repeatedly demonstrated how easily he is able to escape from the mental hospital where he is kept. In addition, David still seems to maintain some loyalty to Dmitri. Therefore, the narrative appears to indicate that Dmitri's deceptive brand of evil may still be a danger for David in the future. Simón's realization of this fact seems to make him realize that he is still needed by David's side in order to guide the boy towards morality and protect him from evil influences.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss Simón and David's conversation about the afterlife in Chapter 18. How do Simón's thoughts on death and the afterlife connect to his and David's personal stories?

Discussion Question 2

By the end of the novel, what appear to be Dmitri's true motivations? Is Dmitri portrayed as an entirely dishonest character? Explain.

Discussion Question 3

What morals does Simón appear interpret from the events of the novel? What resolutions does he appear to make to himself in light of these morals?

Vocabulary

boisterous, approbation, malign, prate, caustic, aspersion, peripatetic, appeal, excoriate, fluctuate, archaic, commence, glimpse, contrition, disconcerted, hebephrenic, rigmarole, relent, devotee, aria



Characters

Símon

Símon is a middle-aged man and the self-appointed protector of the young David. Símon is an allegorical figure representing the biblical Joseph. Before the events of the novel, Símon immigrated to the unnamed country in which the novel takes place, and he found David lost and alone. Símon helped to reunite David with his mother, Inés. During the events of the novel, Símon continues to guide and protect David. One of Símon's main goals in the story is to find a suitable school or tutor for the young boy. Símon is a highly rational and principled man, and in the face of David's many questions, Símon attempts to answer as honestly and as wisely as possible. Símon sometimes struggles with his role as David's protector, but he remains loyal to the boy.

David

David is a six-year-old boy under the care and protection of Símon and Inés. David is an allegorical figure representing Jesus. He is highly inquisitive and very strong-willed, often able to bend his guardians to his to his own wishes. He is very impressionable, and his relationship with Símon is sometimes strained. David attends a special school for dance, and it is there that he feels truly understood. He attempts to distance himself from his guardians and spend as much time as possible at the Academy of Dance. David grows quite attached to Dmitri, a janitor at the school who ends up murdering David's teacher. However, Símon ultimately manages to save David from this dangerous attachment.

Inés

Inés is the mother of David. However, there is some ambiguity in the narrative as to whether or not Inés actually gave birth to David or if she simply adopted him. Inés is an allegorical figure representing the biblical Mary. Inés and Simón do not have a romantic or sexual relationship. Instead, their relationship is entirely built upon their mutual interest in guiding and protecting David. In order to support herself and David, Inés takes a job working in a clothing store, where she is well-liked by the customers and her employers. Inés is strong-willed, but she still often finds herself unable to resist David's wishes and commands.

Ana Magdalena Arroyo

Ana Magdalena Arroyo is the head teacher at the Academy of Dance in Estrella. She is an allegorical figure representing the biblical Mary Magdalene. Ana Magdalena teaches a peculiar philosophy in conjunction with dance. Specifically, she teaches dance as a spiritual expression of numerology, by which numbers are expressed through the



movement of the body and of the soul. After David enrolls in the Academy of Dance, he becomes quite infatuated with Ana Magdalena and says that she truly understands her in a way that his guardians do not. Ana Magdalena is ultimately murdered by her lover, Dmitri.

Dmitri

Dmitri is a janitor at Estrella's art museum, although he also does janitorial work for free for the Academy of Dance. He is 44 years old and is in love with Ana Magdalena, and it is later revealed that he has carried on a long-term secret affair with her. In the midst of a sexual encounter with her, he gives in to an impulse to strangle her, and he ends up killing her in this way. Dmitri is an allegorical figure representing the devil, and David becomes quite infatuated to Dmitri. Dmitri's speeches and lies and twisted logics manage to win over David, but Simón is able to see through Dmitri's lies. Simón thus works hard to protect David from Dmitri's corrupting influence.

Juan Sebastián Arroyo

Juan Sebastián Arroyo is the husband of Ana Magdalena and the head musician for the Academy of Dance. He is a kind man and is devastated by his wife's death. Señor Arroyo remains oblivious to the fact that his wife had had an ongoing affair with Dmitri. After his wife's death, Señor Arroyo attempts to reopen the Academy of Dance as a school for music. Señor Arroyo has multiple conversations with Simón regarding David, but he is ultimately unable to give any helpful advice.

The Three Sisters

Señora Valentina, Señora Consuelo, and Señora Alma are the three sisters who own the farm where Simón briefly works as a harvester. They are wealthy and well-educated. The sisters take a keen interest in David and believe him to be a special and gifted boy. Thus, they offer to pay for his school fees in Estrella. The three sisters are virtually indistinguishable in terms of personality or narrative function, aside from the fact that Señora Alma occasionally suffers from bouts of debilitating depression.

Alyosha

Alyosha is an employee of the Academy of Dance. He works as a teacher and as an attendant for the students who board at the academy. Alyosha is kind and didactic, and his most important scene in the novel involves Alyosha facilitating a discussion among the students regarding a fable about a genie and a fisherman. Although Alyosha is not a major character, he acts as a foil for Dmitri, who is a far less wholesome influence on the students of the academy.

The Judge

The judge is an unnamed judicial official who presides over Dmitri's trial. Although the judge is only present in the novel for the trial scene, he represents the nuanced nature of law and morality. Dmitri pleads guilty and demands to receive the harshest sentence possible, but the judge does not give in to these demands. Instead, he takes it upon himself to interrogate Dmitri, and to provide didactic counsel on the nature of law, morality, and even identity.

Señor Robles

Señor Robles is an engineer who also works as a private tutor. Before sending David to the Academy of Dance, Simón and Inés arrange a lesson for David with Señor Robles. Robles attempts to teach David about numbers using highly abstract definitions. David, Simón, and Inés find this to be far too abstract and impractical, and thus they resort to their only other option for David's education: the Academy of Dance.



Symbols and Symbolism

Don Quixote

Don Quixote symbolizes morality and bravery. Don Quixote is a 17th-century Spanish novel featuring a protagonist of the same name. Don Quixote is widely considered the first novel in the modern sense of the term. The story follows a knight named Don Quixote on a series of valorous (although often misguided) quests. In *The Schooldays of Jesus*, David has read an abridged children's version of the novel. Simón uses the stories of Don Quixote as referents for moral and ethical behavior. Although Simón never references specific parts of the book, he often speaks to David of virtues that are contained within the book.

Numbers

Numbers symbolize human efforts to understand the world around them. The motif of numbers recurs throughout David's education, from Señor Robles' lessons of abstract mathematics to Ana Magdalena's idea of dance as a way of summoning numbers from the stars. At the end of the novel, Señor Arroyo and an academic named Señor Moreno have a debate as to whether numbers are a tool of human invention or whether they are a part of nature. Either way, the symbol of numbers recurs throughout the book in association with human attempts to understand and come into harmony with the world around them.

Dancing

Dancing symbolizes spirituality and detachment from the exigencies of modern life. While Simón and Inés work mundane jobs and attempt to find a suitable practical education for David, David finds fulfillment at the Academy of Dance. Ana Magdalena's ideas of dance are highly spiritual, and she refers to dance as a natural expression of the soul rather than something that is learned. Although dancing does not have any practical purpose that Simón or Inés can see, they allow David to pursue his dance lessons because they make the boy happy and fulfilled. David appears to believe and be fulfilled by the idea of dance as a spiritual exercise.

Education

Education symbolizes maturity, independence, and self-reliance. One of the main arcs of the novel concerns Simón and Inés' desire to find a proper source of education for David, as they wish for him to have a secure and stable future. Throughout the novel, David receives many types of education from many different sources. He receives moral education from Simón, mathematical education from Señor Robles, and artistic education from Ana Magdalena. Even Simón receives education—both formal and



informal—form the characters around him. The novel presents these types of education as possible paths to fulfillment and self-determination.

Work

In the novel, work symbolizes both purpose and survival. On one level, Simón and Inés pursue various jobs in order to support themselves and David. On another level, they pursue these jobs in order to give themselves a sense of purpose after David enters the Academy of Dance and finds mentors in the adults he meets there. As a pamphlet distributor, Simón finds a degree of fulfillment simply in having a job and being able to explore Estella in the course of his work. Similarly, Inés finds fulfillment working in a clothing store because she quickly becomes so valued by her employers. While education provides David's purpose, work provides Simón and Inés' purpose.

Passion

In the novel, the concept of passion symbolizes the dual-sided nature of humanity. David is introduced to the concept of passion after Dmitri states that passion drove him to kill Ana Magdalena. Simón then tries to explain to David that there are both good and bad kinds of passion. Simón states that passion without love is at best meaningless and at worst destructive, as in the case of Dmitri. Simón recognizes that David is not yet capable of feeling any type of passion because David is so young. Therefore, Simón attempts to give David guidance in order to protect the boy from developing destructive passions later on.

The Letters

The secret letters from Ana Magdalena to Dmitri symbolize truth and secrets. Despite his consistently earnest demeanor, Dmitri is a highly dishonest person, and the secret letters in his possession stand as a testament to that. Dmitri asks Simón to burn the letters and not read them, but Simón does read them. He finds that they are love letters from Ana Magdalena to Dmitri, thus disproving Dmitri's story that he murdered Ana Magdalena out of rage for being rebuffed. Although these letters contain previously unknown truths about the murderous Dmitri, Simón cannot bring himself to show them to anyone, as both the truth and the lie are horrific.

Bolivár

Bolivár symbolizes loyalty, family, and innocence. Bolívar is the dog that is taken care of by Simón, David, and Inés. Bolívar is a highly loyal and kind companion, and Simón uses Bolívar as a referent for his lessons to David regarding the nature of family. Simón states that family is based on love and mutual obligation more than it is based upon biological relationships. Simón states that Bolívar is a member of their family based on their mutual love and care between themselves and the dog. In addition, Bolívar is free



from the ethical and moral struggles that occur between the human characters of the novel.

The Census

The census symbolizes the dangerous and impersonal nature of bureaucracy. The action of the novel is initiated by Simón, Inés, and David's flight from officials of the town of Novilla. These officials wish to separate David from Simón and Inés because they cannot legally prove any parentage over David. In Estrella, Simón and Inés wish to hide David from the census and keep him out of public schools for fear that he will be identified and taken away from them. While Simón and Inés' legal claim over David is dubious, they are very devoted guardians, and the census poses a possible threat to their protection of David.

Ants

Ants symbolize unthinking compliance to social norms and societal expectations. In her teachings, Ana Magdalena uses the image of ants to discuss the effects of being out of touch with oneself and out of harmony with the true nature of existence. Ana Magdalena argues that simply following social norms without introspection is a dangerous and dreary path to follow. Ana Magdalena therefore prescribes dance as the best method of putting social norms into perspective and finding a connection with true fulfillment.



Settings

Estrella

The town of Estrella is the setting for the entirety of the novel. It is a small town in an unnamed Spanish-speaking country. Simón, Inés, and David arrive in Estrella at the beginning of the novel. There, the adults look for work for themselves and schooling for David. These characters have come to Estrella after fleeing the town of Novilla, and both of these towns are located in the same unnamed country to which these characters have recently immigrated. These characters do not speak of their previous lives, and they have each assumed new names since coming to this new country. Estrella is a small town, but it seems to have a robust economy, encompassing farmland, shops, several schools, and an art museum. David attends school in Estrella while Simón and Inés work in town.

Novilla

Although the characters never spend in time in Novilla in the course of this novel, it is an important setting that greatly affects the narrative. Before the events of the novel, Simón meets David by chance and resolves to reunite the boy with his mother, Inés. In Novilla, Simón and Inés resolve to take care of David, and they enter him in a public school. However, because Simón and Inés have no proof of parentage or legal guardianship over David, the officials wish to take the boy away. Thus, the three characters flee from Novilla and arrive in Estrella, where the narrative begins. In Estrella, the three characters still must take precautions to make sure that David is not spotted or recognized by any government officials.

The Academy of Dance

The Academy of Dance is a school in Estrella. It is run by dance instructor Ana Magdalena Arroyo and her husband, musician Juan Sebastián Arroyo. After feeling unsatisfied with a private tutor, Simón and Inés decide to send David to the Academy of Dance, thinking that he will receive a formal education in addition to dance training. However, it turns out that Ana Magdalena's dance and teaching philosophies are quite alternative. Simón and Inés decide to keep David in the school because it appears to make David happy and fulfilled. David decides to become a boarder at the academy, as he feels like Ana Magdalena understands him in a way that his guardians do not. The academy closes after Ana Magdalena is killed by Dmitri.

The Farm

When Simón, Inés, and David first arrive in Estrella, they come to a farm, where Simón gains temporary employment as a fruit harvester. The farm is owned by three sisters:



Señora Valentina, Señora Consuelo, and Señora Alma. These three sisters take a great interest in David, believing him to be a special and gifted child. They agree to pay for David's tuition at the Academy of Dance. Before Simón, Inés, and David move into their own apartments, they live on the farm, and David plays with the children of the other farm workers. These children are somewhat rough and aggressive, and Simón uses the opportunity to teach David about some of the differences between kindness and aggression.

Modas Modernas

Modas Modernas is the clothing and department store where Inés finds work. Its name is Spanish and translates to "modern fashions." Inés takes on a position there to support herself and David, but she finds that she enjoys the work and is quite adept at it. She quickly becomes a favorite of her employers. Towards the end of the novel, the department store holds a large commercial festival, and Simón takes David to see it. The highly commercialized atmosphere of Modas Modernas contrasts sharply with the rather barren and impoverished surroundings to which Simón, David, and Inés are accustomed.

The Courtroom

Although the courtroom is only the setting for one scene in the novel, Dmitri's trial is a pivotal scene in the narrative. After Dmitri turns himself in for the murder of Ana Magdalena, he is put on trial, and many residents of Estrella arrive to watch the proceedings. Dmitri, attempting to appear valiant, demands the harshest possible punishment for his crime, but he receives only a one-year term in a mental hospital, after which his case is set to be reviewed. The dialogue between Dmitri and the judge acts as a dialectic of justice, morality, and identity. In addition, Dmitri's supposed valiance in the courtroom later becomes apparent, at least to Simón, to simply have been part of Dmitri's manipulative nature.



Themes and Motifs

Morality

In many ways, the narrative of the novel is defined by exploration of morality, and one relationship that is central to this exploration is the relationship between Simón and David. Although he is not David's biological father, Simón feels responsible for David's protection, wellbeing, and moral education. From very early on in the novel, Simón and David's relationship is defined in highly didactic terms, with Simón often speaking to David about moral and ethical issues. Simón relays such moral lessons as "If we do a bad deed, we get no joy out of it. Our conscience sees to that" (10) and "You should learn to judge people by their inner qualities" (48). In this way, Simón represents the main force of positive morality in the novel, and he seeks to exercise a positive moral influence over the young David.

However, the morality of both Simón and the narrative is complicated by the introduction of Dmitri, who represents a very convoluted type of immorality that seeks to deceive both the reader and the characters of the novel. Dmitri is a very eloquent speaker and convincing deceiver, and his main functions in the novel are to exercise a negative moral influence on David and to confuse the strict moral principles of Simón. From their first meeting, Simón dislikes Dmitri, and Simón helps the reader to see through Dmitri's acts of false nobility. However, Dmitri is able to create a moral trap for Simón with the letters hidden in Dmitri's desk, Simón's discovery of which leaves Simón floundering for a proper moral path forward. Ultimately, however, for all of Dmitri's false nobility and eloquent but false logic, Dmitri is revealed as nothing more than an immoral coward who seeks to deceive and negatively influence those around him.

Ultimately, the allegorical nature of the novel allows it to function as a moral parable for the reader, much like the story of the genie functions as a moral parable for David. Like the story of the genie, the morals of the novel are somewhat abstruse and unclear, but both stories serve to spark debate as to what counts as true and proper morality. After hearing the story of the genie in Chapter 10, David and another boy have a debate as to what the true moral of the story is. Both boys seem to make valid points that approach the stories' true lessons, and similarly, the surprisingly complex story of Simón, David, Dmitri, and Ana Magdalena serves to spark contemplation as to what counts as true justice and morality.

Immigration

Simón, David, and Inés' identities as immigrants play a major part in their self-perception, interpersonal dynamics, and overall story arc, as the novel presents this facet of their stories as integral to their identities and experiences. In Chapter 2, Simón says to David, "When you travel across the ocean on a boat, all your memories are washed away and you start a completely new life... There is no before. There is no



history.” Simón, Inés, and David have come to the unnamed country in which the novel takes place by traveling across the ocean on a boat, and as such, they appear to have no past and no identities separate from their present surroundings. Simón and Inés never speak of their pasts, and only David seems to acknowledge that their current names and identities are not their original selves. As such, the novel draws an irrevocable connection between one’s surroundings and one’s identity.

This connection is further developed by the ways in which Simón, David, and Inés acclimate to their new surroundings. Simón acquires a job delivering advertising pamphlets on bicycle, and Inés finds work in a clothing store. Despite these occupations being new to these characters, they come to enjoy these occupations with surprising gusto. Simón feels more connected to the city, and Inés discovers that she is a quite adept saleswoman despite never having had much of an interest in clothes. Meanwhile, David discovers something of a new home in the Academy of Dance and even wishes to become a boarder there. With no connection to their respective pasts, Simón, Inés, and David naturally embrace the opportunities that are presented to them in Estrella, thus organically redefining their identities.

However, one of the major sources of tension between Simón, Inés, and David is the fact that David is less willing to shun his past than Simón and Inés are. As stated above, David constantly acknowledges the fact that the names they have are not their birth names and that they were not born in the country where the novel takes place. As Señor Arroyo says to Simón, “Your son is an exception. He feels with unusual intensity the falsity of his new life. He has not yet yielded to the pressure to forget” (215). In David’s youth, he seems inordinately attached to his previous life, which he does not even seem to be able to remember, and though he easily acclimates to his post-immigration life, the divide between his past and present lives causes tension within himself and his family relationships.

Spirituality

Mixed among the book’s many discussions of practical morality are metaphysical ideas that help develop the characters’ relationships with spirituality, religion, and the world at large. One of the most salient and prominent examples of this is the recurring idea of an afterlife that pervades the characters’ ideas of spirituality. Although the book functions in many ways as a Christianity-based allegory, the afterlife is never referred to in Christian terms such as “heaven,” but instead as “the next life” (171), which could denote either heaven or simply the next stage in an ongoing chain of incarnations. This idea connects closely with the book’s presentation of immigration, as both reincarnation and immigration are presented as processes by which one’s life is erased completely from one’s being and identity. Therefore, the book draws an inextricable connection between the perceived movements of one’s life and the supposed movements of one’s soul.

However, the novel also acknowledges some possible tension between ideas of spirituality and ideas of practical rationality, thus causing friction between the rational and spiritual aspects of David’s education. As Ana Magdalena states of her school, “Our



Academy is dedicated to guiding the souls of our students toward that realm, to bringing them in accord with the great underlying movement of the universe...the dance of the universe” (68). Ana Magdalena stands as the main arbiter of spirituality in the novel, and this causes some tension with Simón and Inés, whose main goal for David is for him to acquire a practical education. However, these two concerns ultimately seem to be reconciled as Simón and Inés acknowledge the fulfillment that David derives from his dance training; Simón and Inés also seem to accept that David has time to acquire practical skills in the future if necessary, but his happiness and morality seem to be provided for in the meantime.

On the other hand, while the novel acknowledges some possible points of tension between spirituality and practical morality, the novel also uses its allegorical nature to illustrate a codependent relationship between these two spheres of thought. Spirituality appears to be so integral to the philosophical explorations of the novel because the allegorical nature of the narrative relies on Christian ideas and iconography. In light of that dynamic, the novel discusses matters of practical morality in close proximity to ideas of spirituality. The moral states of the characters are presented as parallel to the states of the characters’ souls. For example, Dmitri represents a character of corrupt morality and spirituality. Meanwhile, David’s moral education and spiritual education appear to be codependent in forming David’s entire identity.

Numbers

The motif of numbers recurs throughout the entire novel and serves as a symbolic platform to demonstrate the different ways in which people interact with and attempt to understand the world around them. The first appearance of numbers as a prominent idea in the novel occurs during David’s lesson with Señor Robles, and this encounter helps to establish the tension between different worldviews as expressed through numbers. Señor Robles attempts to teach David the basics of mathematics in a highly abstract fashion. After David’s lesson, Simón and Inés decide that Señor Robles will not be a suitable tutor, deciding instead that David only needs to be able to do simple arithmetic necessary for everyday life. This tension between Robles’ ideas of numbers and Simón and Inés’ ideas presents a fundamentally different view of the use of numbers and their relationship to the world, thus demonstrating how numbers may serve as a platform for the exploration of one’s relationship to the world.

The next major use of numbers in the novel appears in Ana Magdalena’s philosophy of dance, which demonstrates yet a far more spiritual way of interacting with the world and presents yet another way in which numbers serve as a platform for reconciling one’s place in the universe. Ana Magdalena views dance as a spiritual exercise by which one comes into harmony with the universe, and she declares that “noble numbers” are the key to this spiritual exercise. Ana Magdalena and Señor Arroyo view numbers as existing innately in nature and thus separately from human thought. In this way, the novel demonstrates how numbers can also represent spiritual viewpoints that differ greatly from practical viewpoints that are concerned only with matters of everyday life.



Ana Magdalena's ideas of number-based spirituality thus serve as yet another way in which a person may determine their relationship with the world.

Towards the end of the novel, the narrative attempts to place these different ideas of numbers in conversation with each other, and it thus comes to the conclusion that human consciousness may be divided into two distinct spheres: modern (as represented by the use of numbers for measurements) and primal (as represented by the use of numbers in pre-measurement exercises of spirituality.) In the debate between Señor Arroyo and Señor Moreno, Moreno argues that numbers are crucial for one's understanding of the world insofar as they allow humans to measure fluctuations and differences around them. Meanwhile, Señor Arroyo argues that numbers exist separately from human thought and therefore human understanding is not reliant on such practices as mathematics or measurement. Through this debate, the narrative attempts to resolve the function of numbers in the story as a way of representing differing beliefs about the ways in which humans should attempt to understand their world.

Education

One of the main focuses of the novel is the education of the young David, through which narrative arc the novel attempts to explore the various salient factors that help to form a person's identity. David is surrounded by adults who have become set in their ways over time, but David is still very impressionable in his youth and open to new ideas. The development of David's values and identities is therefore subject to the various influences of these adults and the respective ideas that they espouse. David's own values are somewhat directed by his own sensibilities and desires, but the raw moral material from which David forms these values comes from the adults around him who supply differing ideas. At the end of the novel, it appears that David's identity is in the hands of Simón, Inés, and Mercedes, as they are the remaining adults in David's life, but his development has also been indelibly marked by Dmitri and Ana Magdalena.

The many sources and types of education that David receives over the course of the novel demonstrates that a person's identity is affected by many different factors and types of learning. For example, David receives a rather formal education from Señor Robles, he receives moral instruction from Simón, he receives spiritual and artistic instruction from Ana Magdalena, he receives lessons in immorality from Dmitri, and he appears to have received lessons in rote memorization in a school in Novilla. These types of education all serve different purposes in David's development and appear to have varying levels of effectiveness in influencing David's values and worldview. Thus, the book emphasizes how a person's education may take many unexpected forms and affect them in unpredictable ways.

The novel appears to present the most valuable function of education as being the creation of proper morality and a sense of fulfillment within a person. Although Simón and Inés do not appear to be very educated, they find fulfilling occupations in Estrella. Meanwhile, they wish only for David to be happy and to not be at a great disadvantage



with regards to general life skills . Thus, David's education appears to culminate with the complementary nature between his moral education and spiritual education. David derives a sense of right and wrong from Simón's counsel, and he derives a sense of personal fulfillment from Ana Magdalena's discipline and philosophies. Thus, while the novel presents education in general as the formation of a person's ideas and values, it presents a good education as the creation of a well-adjusted and moral person.



Styles

Point of View

The novel is told in third-person present-tense narration, but it is told strictly from Simón's perspective. Every event that the narrative relays directly is something that Simón directly observes, and everything that the narrative relays secondhand is information that Simón has become aware of through secondhand sources. Because Simón is the main point-of-view character, the drama of the novel centers around Simón's struggle to mentor David, protect David from dangerous influences, and decide whether or not he (Simón) truly is the best person to act as David's main guiding influence. In many ways, David is the central character because he is the object of so much focus from those around him. However, if David were also the point-of-view character, the reader would be deprived of Simón's many insights into the events surrounding David and the true motivations of those who wish to influence David. Moreover, Simón's struggles appear to bear equal importance to David's education in the narrative, and Simón's story would be lost almost entirely if David were the point-of-view character.

In addition, Simón and David's perspectives differ in two key ways that necessitate the narrative to utilize Simón's perspective as the filter for the narrative as a whole. Firstly, Simón is far more developed in terms of experience and moral principles, and it is important for the narrative to be able to compare Simón's moral principles with the relatively unformed state of David's own morality. Simón acts as the narrative's central moral compass, and the drama of the novel comes from David's tendency to stray from the Simón's moral mentorship. Additional drama comes from Simón's own momentary doubts regarding his own moral choices. The second key difference is Simón's willingness to forget his old life versus David's desire to reclaim his forgotten past. With the help of Señor Arroyo, Simón discovers this difference by the end of the novel, and the tension between these viewpoints raises salient philosophical questions regarding the validity of one's desire to hold on to the past.

Language and Meaning

The novel uses a very straightforward, almost dry tone throughout, apparently deriving this tone from the personality of Simón, the character from whose perspective the story is told. Simón is a very rational, morally principled, and emotionally reserved character, and these characteristics appear to affect the tone of the narration as well. As a character, Simón is not prone to drama, hyperbole, or high emotions, instead choosing to control his emotions and remain in a straightforward and rational head space. Similarly, the narration of the novel does not utilize dramatic or baroque language, instead maintaining a spare and simple tone to mirror the nature Simón's thoughts and personality. Another piece of evidence that substantiates the connection between Simón and the tone of the novel is the fact that Simón's perspective and personality are drawn



in clear contrast to the characters around him, such as the worried and energetic Inés, the spirited Ana Amgdalena, or the malevolent and impassioned Dmitri.

Additionally, the almost unsettling simplicity of the novel's prose helps to highlight the allegorical nature of the narrative. As people without pasts, the characters of the book function as representations of various biblical figures involved with the stories of Jesus. David represents a young Jesus figure, Simón represents Joseph, Inés represents Mary, Ana Magdalena represents Mary Magdalene, and Dmitri represents a Satanic, devil-like figure. If these characters were bogged down in excessive personalized details, the extraneous information would obscure the book's allegorical function and its statements on things like spirituality, identity, and reality. Therefore, the stripped-down nature of the prose serves to remind the reader that the novel's central characters serve specific functions in terms of morals and allegory. Just as Simón attempts to educate David as to proper morals, the novel appears to function as a didactic allegorical exercise for the moral edification and contemplation of the reader.

Structure

The novel is structured in a strictly linear fashion and spans from the main characters' arrival in Estrella to the reopening of the Academy of Dance. The story centers around Simón's relationship with David and the struggle to acquire a proper education for David. By focusing on the main characters' time in Estrella and the events concerning the Academy of Dance, the story places narrative emphasis on the importance of David's education. The main characters come to Estrella to flee legal officials, and they are thus unable to make use of the public school system. Therefore, the Academy of dance is there only alternative. The spiritual education that David receives at the academy and the moral education David receives from Simón add up to a rather unconventional form of education, but the novel's structural focus on this education appears to function as a way of demonstrating that a person's education may cover many atypical subjects and take many forms.

The linear structure of the novel also helps to emphasize the tension caused by the erasure of the main characters' pasts. The novel repeatedly raises the idea that immigration is a type of reincarnation process by which a person shed their past, and thus the narrative features no flashbacks of any kind. This is symptomatic of Simón's complete acceptance of the erasure of his past. However, David's desire to remember and hold on to his past creates tension with regards to Simón's character and the very structure of the novel. The characters seem to have no choice but to move forward with their lives and shun all hope of returning to their past lives. However, David refuses to forget that David is not his original name and that he originally came from elsewhere. This creates tension in his relationship with Simón, but David's desire is not enough to shake the structure or trajectory of the narrative.



Quotes

If we do a bad deed, we get no joy out of it. Our conscience sees to that.
-- Simón (chapter 1)

Importance: This quotation helps demonstrate one of the foundational ideas of Simón's moral viewpoint and Simón's relationship with David. Simón sees himself as one of David's primary guardians, as well as David's main source of moral wisdom. Therefore, Simón takes it upon himself to make sure David is exposed to as much proper moral insight as possible, the center of which contains this idea that bad deeds will not be abided by one's conscience or by the world at large.

When you travel across the ocean on a boat, all your memories are washed away and you start a completely new life... There is no before. There is no history.
-- Simón (chapter 2)

Importance: One of the main recurring ideas in the narrative is the concept that immigration is essentially a process of reincarnation in which a person is created anew by their new surroundings. This quotation helps to articulate the idea with specific imagery of the ocean that Simón, David, and Inés had to cross during their journey of immigration. This helps connect the idea of immigration to the book's recurring idea of spiritual waters that was away a person's past before the afterlife.

He only needs to be able to do sums...so that he won't be at a disadvantage in life.
-- Inés (chapter 3)

Importance: In this quotation, Inés speaks to Simón after David's lesson with Señor Robles, who attempted to teach David mathematics using highly abstract concepts. Inés' wish for David to acquire a practical education is one of the driving motivations in Inés and Simón's quest for a proper teacher for David. However, this quest is repeatedly thwarted throughout the novel by teachers with far different ideas regarding the use of education.

Our Academy is dedicated to guiding the souls of our students toward that realm, to bringing them in accord with the great underlying movement of the universe...the dance of the universe.
-- Ana Magdalena (chapter 7)

Importance: This quotation comes from the speech that Ana Magdalena gives to the parents of her students prior to the dance recital in which David participates. Although Simón and Inés enrolled David in the Academy of Dance in the hopes that he would receive a traditional education in addition to dance training, Ana Magdalena appears to view dance as the only education necessary for children. She appears to view dance as a spiritual exercise that helps children find harmony with the natural world around them.



You love the boy. It broke your heart to see him turn his back on you like that.
-- Dmitri (chapter 8)

Importance: This quotation, stated by an outside observer, helps to further define the almost enigmatic relationship between Simón and David. Simón appears to feel responsible for David in the fashion of a surrogate father, and though Simón's affect often seems detached and overly rational, Simón's heartache at seeing David leave is quite telling of the profound attachment that Simón has formed towards the boy.

It is the soul that brings grace to the dance, the soul that follows the rhythm, each step instinct with the next step and the next.
-- Señor Arroyo (chapter 9)

Importance: This quotation helps further develop the Arroyos' philosophy of dance, which seems to fascinate David so completely. Ana Magdalena and Señor Arroyo both speak of dance in spiritual terms, which contrasts sharply with the purely rational education that Simón provides for David. The contrasting (or complementing) nature of these educations seems to explain why David forms such a strong attachment to the Arroyos and their ideas.

Your salvation is not a matter that rests in your hands...We have an equal responsibility to save you the accused from yourself.
-- Judge (chapter 13)

Importance: This quotation comes from the courtroom scene, in which Dmitri pleads guilty and demands the harshest sentence, while the judge states that the point of the law is to determine guilt objectively, without the influence of the accused. This quotation helps to articulate the objective and rational philosophies of the court, which greatly contrast with the highly emotional—and, as it later turns out, deceptive—declarations repeatedly put forth by Dmitri in the scene.

[Simón] should never have involved himself in Dmitri's affairs...If he turns the letters over to the police, he becomes an accomplice in a plot whose purpose is dark to him...If he burns them or conceals them he becomes an accomplice in another plot.
-- Narrator (chapter 14)

Importance: This quotation from the narration represents Simón's inner thoughts upon discovering the letters that Dmitri asked him to burn. The letters present a great moral quandary that traps Simón irrevocably, thus demonstrating the encroachment of Dmitri's malevolent ways into Simón's personal world of extreme moral rectitude. Dmitri has apparently used Simón's fidelity to morality against him in the moral trap.

I will be free to go to the salt mines and pay my debt and clear my conscience, while you will have to stay behind with this mess on your hands.
-- Dmitri (chapter 14)

Importance: This quotation presents further acknowledgement of the moral trap that



Dmitri has set for Simón, and it also sets up the narrative basis for Dmitri's ultimate revelation as a completely devious and immoral character. Dmitri's strange but seemingly noble determination to pay his own moral debt is sharply dissonant with his delight in seeing Simón struggle painfully with the moral dilemmas that Dmitri represents. However, Dmitri's nobility is ultimately deconstructed when he does not follow through on his supposed wish to go to the salt mines.

Don't believe everything I say. It is just air. Air that blows where it listeth.
-- Dmitri (chapter 14)

Importance: This quotation follows a long and supposedly earnest series of professions from Dmitri to Simón. However, the clear amorality represented by this quote helps to inform the reader as to Dmitri's true nature. Dmitri—who is so verbose and who seems so convincing by way of articulate speech—subtly states in this quotation that his words have no true value or meaning, as he is dishonest and unreliable.

Your son is an exception. He feels with unusual intensity the falsity of his new life. He has not yet yielded to the pressure to forget.
-- Señor Arroyo (chapter 18)

Importance: This assessment of David by Señor Arroyo helps develop the novel's enigmatic view of immigration and reincarnation. As previously established, the novel draws a strong connection between immigration and reincarnation as processes by which a person sheds their past. This quotation introduces the idea that David has an unusually strong desire to hold on to his past, perhaps both in a literal and more spiritual or metaphorical sense. This idea also helps recontextualize the tension between Simón and David as a result of this desire of David's.

Of course the man is fake through and through. Of course his remorse is confected, part of a scheme to save himself from the salt mines. Nevertheless, when Simón tries to imagine how this man...could have crushed the life out of Ana Magdalena, his imagination fails him.
-- Dmitri (chapter 22)

Importance: This quotation functions as the final pronouncement on Dmitri's profound duplicitousness, as well as on Dmitri's unsettling aptitude for deceiving those around him. By this point in the novel, Simón is sure that Dmitri is nothing more than a habitual deceiver who wishes only to follow his various whims and self-interests. However, Dmitri still seems able to dazzle Simón's senses with a display of false yet convincing contrition to the point where Simón cannot fully imagine Dmitri committing the evil deed of murder that he has undoubtedly committed.