

The Street of Crocodiles Study Guide

The Street of Crocodiles by Bruno Schulz

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Plot Summary

"The Street of Crocodiles" is a collection of short stories by Bruno Schulz, set in a small city in Galicia, in what is now the Ukraine. With rich metaphor and the juxtaposition of fantasy and reality, the stories explore the different themes of the narrator's boyhood, the members of his family and the characters of the city he lives in. The city itself is an important character in the stories as well, its labyrinth-like streets, its poor and rich neighborhoods and the commercialization of the Street of Crocodiles.

The narrative voice is sometimes overwhelmed by the differences between reality and the mundane. This is a vital symbol in the books, that the mundane is not sufficient enough to understand what is real in the life of a human being. The imaginary, in these stories makes the emotions, the characters and the city much more intense than they actually are, and that much more meaningful.

The majority of the 13 non-chronological stories slice of life stories concerned with the boy's father, Jacob. We watch Jacob fight a losing battle against insanity. Jacob is an exciting and fascinating character whose interests range from the breeding of exotic birds that turn into monsters, to the philosophy of existence. The shame of Jacob's erratic behavior, of his fear and paranoia distances Jacob from his family. The narrator regrets how his father died, and admires him in retrospect.

There are minor characters that appear in many of the stories, such as Touya, the town's mad girl. In the first short story, "August," the destitute life that Touya lives as a homeless and mentally ill girl, is described in rich detail. Touya is someone isolated from the rest of the city because she, like Jacob, lives inside her own head. The surroundings are vivid for the reader, but invisible to Touya. Other minor characters represent failure or lost promise, like Emil. Emil is the narrator's cousin. He is a relatively young man who has traveled outside the city, but he is dull and sickly. Mr. Charles is another character full of the pathos of failure. Mr. Charles is described waking up and getting ready for the day. In the absence of his wife and children, who have left the city for the summer to escape the heat, Mr. Charles little movements have a passion and personality that is promising. Mr. Charles life is wrapped up in the moments he spends sleeping, dreaming and getting ready for work. As soon as Mr. Charles leaves for work, his individuality leaves him.



The Street of Crocodiles

Summary and Analysis

In the first story, August, the narrator reminisces about his boyhood home and some of the people that struck his imagination as a child. The city and his home are portrayed as dark, dull and old. The individuals living in this town are disturbing and unsatisfied.

In the summertime, the narrator's father would leave the city to escape the heat. The apartments that the family lived in were kept dark and shuttered during the day. Adela, the house servant, would bring back food from the market in the morning and the narrator describes the fruits and meats. Food, light and colors are described in detail. These descriptions are what the narrator remembers from his childhood. More than dramatic events, the daily life of the house had more importance in the life of a child. Dialogue is sparse, because what is said between characters is less important than the impressions they left on the boy.

Behind a beautiful overgrown garden in town lies the trash dump. Touya, a mad girl lives on a bed of discarded things. This is symbolic of her being thrown out of society, purposefully ignored. She lives in a state of surreal existence, not quite present in reality. She pleasures herself against a tree.

Right after his description of Touya's life, the narrator returns to life in August, to a time he visits his Aunt Agatha in a quaint, dark little house, that he knew well. His aunt is a very feminine, domineering woman, who complains a lot. Her husband sits quietly, an unimportant figure, that the young narrator pities.

The narrator's eldest cousin, Emil, pulls him aside to show him dirty pictures. The images, as well as the brief passion in his cousin's eyes excite him. Emil has traveled and lived an exciting life. In the boy's eyes, Emil is enticing, exotic, but he notices that there is something vacant and lost in Emil, as if his life were already over.



The Street of Crocodiles

Summary and Analysis

In "Visitation" we see the boy's life is suddenly very different than it was in the simplicity of August. The darkness that seems to be just kept at bay now becomes a part of the family's life. It is written in two parts. The first describes the details of the narrator's father, Jacob, losing his sanity. The rich summertime mood of August is replaced with the somber melancholy of autumn. The narrator introduces the theme of the labyrinth in his description of his house, a dark house, so similar to the other houses in Market Square, filled with staircases, balconies and apartments that one could get lost in. The theme of trying to find one's way in an unfamiliar maze is a way of showing the difficulty of this young boy watching his father sink into madness. The familiar becomes unfamiliar and the imagery is dark, disturbing and fantastical. The narrator watches his father navigate his own labyrinth, imploring god and fighting the invisible. The narrator likens his father's mad episodes to the madness of Old Testament prophets, whose relationship with the divine, and with truth, is characterized by madness, anger and grief.

In the second part of the story we see the family's response to Jacob's insanity is largely to attempt to ignore it. The narrator does not always distinguish reality from the fantastic. He describes the face of the great Demiurge, the Creator, looking in the window at Jacob as he sleeps, a benevolent figure, despite the violence of Jacob's waking state. The effect of putting reality and fantasy together is to make the reader feel uncomfortable. Though life goes on as if everything is normal, the narrator realizes that the family has abandoned Jacob to his madness. Unable to understand him, they pay as little attention to him as they would a child. The story ends with the narrator describing his father's body as being the only part of him left in this world. The narrator compares his father's body to trash, that will eventually be thrown out by Adela.



The Street of Crocodiles

Summary and Analysis

In "Birds" winter has arrived and with it a feeling of numb indifference to life. The narrator's father Jacob putters around the house fascinated by daily chores and taking no interest in the business, now being run completely by the narrator's mother. The narrator describes the new role that Adela has of controlling Jacob by tickling him. Adela's power of him will become very important as time goes on. The father is harmless at this stage. His insanity has taken him out of human life and made him a spectator, but he enjoys this role, is fascinated by the simplest of things. He has returned to a child like state, even as his own son, the narrator is losing his childhood.

But despite his childish behavior, Jacob does not have a child's mind or troubles. He is still struggling with the nature of existence. He is at odds with the very nature of life. His interest spills into the breeding of exotic birds. Jacob sends off to societies in Africa, Holland and Belgium for birds eggs and becomes a zealous breeder. The bright colored birds fascinate the young narrator, taking over the house with their strange shapes and behavior. There is in particular a grey condor, whose ancient ascetic appearance resembles Jacob and uses his chamber pot. This period of the boy's life is filled with the wonder of the exotic birds that have invaded the house. However, Adela, disgusted by the bird droppings everywhere, goes into Jacob's room, opens the windows and chases all of the birds out. It is a pitiable and callous gesture. In the narrator's eyes, it is at that moment that his father becomes a defeated man.



The Street of Crocodiles

Summary and Analysis

The narrator begins "Tailor's Dummies" with a tone of regret for how the family had reacted to his father's exotic birds. He justifies his father's attempt to create magic and beauty. His father's madness was imagination, and his family didn't value it as such. Looking back the narrator applauds his father's efforts to combat the monotony and boredom of their lives with excitement and poetry.

In "Tailors' Dummies" we see a lot more of Adela. After everything that happened with the birds, Adela's position in the house becomes more noticeable. The family is bored with winter. The narrator makes a point to describe the family as empty in contrast to Adela who always has something to do. She is forever moving around the house. She is always cleaning, doing her make-up, bringing them breakfast. Shulz never speaks outright about the role of Adela, but by releasing the birds she has become the person of action in a family that is listless. She also becomes a person of power. The family takes pleasure in the fact that Adela brought Jacob down. The narrator regrets that he did not understand, at the time, what his father was doing with the birds. He was fighting against the monotony and emptiness of life in that town. A common theme running throughout the stories is a vague emptiness in life. People go about doing things with an air of nostalgia. Jacob's madness is the exception to that. But the narrator has to grow up and look back at what happened to understand that.

The seamstress, Polda and Pauline work in the house at night, and bring with them a wooden tailor's dummy. It is made of oak and sits in the corner of the room. The narrator gives it human characteristics. He remembers it as being a stern mistress overseeing the happy conversations of Polda and Pauline. The two young women are free of the cold isolation that seems to surround the other characters in the story. Jacob is drawn to the lively girls, busy in their work. He begins to visit them. They enjoy his odd behavior. Their interest in him acts like a catalyst to his mind and he begins to give long speeches to them about the essence of reality.

Adela discovers that the old man has been visiting the girls. She walks into the room. There is an awkward moment. This is the first time the old man and Adela have faced each other since she released the birds. But the girls begin dancing around Jacob and the moment of extreme tension passes away.

In Jacob's speeches, we finally find out what has been going on in his mind. He believes that the creator put life in all matter. He is saddened by the tailor's dummy, which is fixed forever in a pose given to him by whoever carved the wood. Symbolically, Jacob is saying that the creator of life did something similar to human beings. They are trapped inside themselves. Like the divine creator, human beings desire to create. However, Jacob says that the divine creator loves to hide life inside of things, while humans are



the opposite. Humans love to take things apart. Humans want to understand the mysterious.

Strange things happen during these nightly visits that Jacob makes to the seamstress girls. On one night, the narrator recalls that as his father was speaking, Adela lifts up her leg. Her foot is covered in black silk. Jacob stops talking. Polda gets up and comforts Jacob like she would a naughty child, telling him he must be obedient. Jacob rises, blushing and falls to his knees. All the while, Adela is holding up her silk covered foot. The narrator compares it to the tongue of a snake. It is significant that the narrator sees something dark and dangerous in Adela's control over Jacob. He often feels sorry for his father, but no one stops Adela from controlling him. The family is passive. Adela is a woman of action.

Jacobs' interest in matter begins to torment him. He is horrified by the idea of matter being trapped in cloth and wood. He hears the tailors dummy crying out like a prisoner. Adela approaches him as he sits terrified by his own ideas. She tells everyone to look away from what she is going to do. The narrator does not say what Adela says to make his father behave. The effect of not knowing what she does to subdue him is very disturbing.

Eventually, Polda and Pauline grow tired of Jacobs lectures. He frightens them by telling them his own brother turned into rubber tubing. They ask Adela to send him away. She threatens to tickle him and he retreats, terrified from her outstretched hand.

The Street of Crocodiles

Summary and Analysis

In the short story "Nimrod," we return to summertime and a more carefree side of the narrator's young life. In particular we see the joy of a young boy and a dog. Early in the morning, a charwoman brings the puppy to the house along with her. The immediate love that the boy feels for this dog is almost romantic. It fills him completely. The dog in turn returns that joyous abandon. The narrator describes the dog experiencing emotions for the first time, his curiosity and the strong instincts in his blood that tell him how to behave. Unlike the majority of the characters that inhabit the stories in "The Street of Crocodiles, the puppy and the narrator are fresh in life. The puppy discovers how to bark when confronted with a cockroach. Filled with rage and longing, the puppy begins to howl. The puppy and the boy are similar. They are both curious and observant. Even bad emotions, turn into good ones, because life is full of joy and mysteries to be uncovered. The dog symbolizes the essence of childhood.



The Street of Crocodiles

Summary and Analysis

Pan is a mythological figure associated with boyish pranks and nature. In the back of the family's courtyard, behind the toilet, there is a hole in the fence, where the narrator could escape the house into a field. In contrast to the decorum and society represented by the house, the field is a symbol of freedom. The narrator and his friends enlarge the hole and place a wooden plank over the murky river that flows out of the privy. On the other side of this makeshift bridge is a whole world to explore. One day, when out by he, the boy encounters a man he calls Pan.

Pan is crouched in the grass, filthy. He looks like a vagrant or a drunk. The boy pauses, terrified or fascinated. The man is sweating. His body is tense. His has a pained expression on his face. Suddenly the man begins to laugh. He rises slowly. Then, he runs off into the meadow.

This story is one in which the line between reality and fantasy is blurred. Did the boy actually see the god Pan, or was it actually a drunk that reminded him of the story of Pan. In childhood, the fantastical and the real are sometimes intertwined. The narrator purposefully does not show us through the narrative where the boy's imagination has taken over his memory.

The Street of Crocodiles

Summary and Analysis

The narrative in "Mr. Charles," unlike the narrative that follows the boy's memories, is more straightforward. The metaphors that the writer uses to describe what is happening are stated as metaphors, and so when thoughts are compared to tumors, we know that it is a way of describing a thing. Where the boy would see metaphors taking shape and overwhelming reality, the sensible Mr. Charles does not indulge in fantasy to that degree.

We see Mr. Charles, left by his family for the summer, returning home after work. He is exhausted, filled with the mechanical monotony of work. He goes to bed and tosses and turns in a dream world where the pillows and sheets come to life. When he wakes, the ecstasy of the night before is forgotten. Mr. Charles groans, worries about finances and dresses slowly. A mirror opposite the door shows Mr. Charles' back walking away into an identical but non-existent world. The image plays with the imagination. It plays with the notion of potential in life. Mr. Charles is resigned to a certain, fixed routine. But all the time there is another Mr. Charles living a different existence in the mirror. This image serves to illustrate the isolation of the individual.



The Street of Crocodiles

Summary and Analysis

In "Cinnamon Shops" we return to the narrator's memory of the city he grew up in. Like "August" it indulges in the senses that are so influential to memory and childhood, but the tone is much more sinister. The father is so far gone from reality that his senses are heightened. This is an instance in which the narrator blurs the lines of reality and fiction. Jacob has a superhuman sense of smell and hearing and is compared to a fox and a cockroach. Jacob and the cat look at each other as if they know things that the humans cannot hear or smell.

The story begins with the family going to the theatre. Jacob believes he has lost his wallet and the narrator is sent home to find it. The story then takes a fantastical turn. The narrator decides to go and look at what he calls the cinnamon shops. These shops are rich with mystery and romance, selling strange things from far off places. The merchants are secretive and discreet. They captivate the narrator's sense. However, despite having been that way before, the shops are no longer where they used to be. Going down a familiar street, the boy is suddenly, completely lost.

The theme of the labyrinth is revealed through this experience. Being lost as a child is terrifying, and the idea that the city that you live in can suddenly turn into a place that is unfamiliar and strange is disconcerting. The narrator has a dreamlike adventure. He realizes that a building is familiar to him; he is just looking at it from the wrong side. This is significant. Perspective is very important in judging what reality is. The boy goes through the building, the local high school, and hails a horse drawn cab to get home. The cabdriver jumps out to speak with friends, leaving the narrator at the mercy of the horse's sense of direction. He travels up and down the city and then out into the country side. The narrator remembers the beauty and freedom of that night, being out under the dark sky.

Finally, the boy gets out of the cab and notices the horse is wounded and crying. The boy cries and hugs the horse, full of guilt. The horse tells him that he suffered for the boy. Then, the horse and carriage shrink and become a small wooden toy. This is a moment when childhood is left behind for something more exciting. The boy is choosing life, but is grateful to the figures of his imagination that have helped him through childhood.



The Street of Crocodiles

Summary and Analysis

The narrator recalls a map that was kept in his father's study. It was originally a giant wall covering, but had been folded up and put away. The map showed the entire city from above, with extreme attention to detail and artistry. It is a map that represents the boy's love for the city where he was raised. It is a representation of someone else's love for the city, as it once was. It also symbolizes how that love was packed away rather than being displayed. Like childhood is put away and forgotten. The neighborhood called the Street of Crocodiles is drawn economically, bare but for a few streets. In contrast to the rich detail of the old city, the relatively new district, called The Street of Crocodiles, is cheap, industrial and commercial. The story is a reproach to that new district.

The cinnamon shops represented mystery and age. They are described as rich in color, dark and enticing. In contrast, "The Street of Crocodiles" is a place of mannequin like people, where everything is dull redundant. The narrator compares this district to a black and white photograph. The shops are disturbing and labyrinth like, like those in the rest of the city, but they lead to nowhere. The shop girls are compared to cockroaches, flitting about in ungraceful movements. The cabs have no drivers and people drive in them for no reason. Everything in the Street of Crocodiles is manufactured and meaningless. The tragedy of the Street of Crocodiles district, says the narrator, is that nothing can succeed there. It is a place where one feels passion as if it were nostalgia. The street of crocodiles makes one wants things, but one is unable to get them. The Street of Crocodiles is a fake copy of modernization, as if it was built to represent a changing world but one that had no roots in the city.



The Street of Crocodiles

Summary and Analysis

In "Cockroaches" Jacob is dead, and in his absence the room that he kept for himself, where he had raised the birds, is kept very clean and organized by Adela. This is a reflection of the war between Adela and Jacob. Jacob loses his sanity and then his life. Adela keeps on. A stuffed condor rots on the wall. The narrator believes that it is his father. He questions his mother about it. She is embarrassed and shy with her answers. She doesn't want to tell the truth, or speak about his father's madness.

The narrator then recalls the way his father died. The exciting man who had bred birds and flirted with Poldá and Pauline, slowly disappeared. Jacob was overwhelmed by paranoia. He was terrified of cockroaches and slowly started turning into one. The narrator once saw him in the middle of the night, lying on the floor. The anatomy of a cockroach is just visible beneath his skin. The narrator wonders if his father isn't still alive as a cockroach and living in the floorboards, but he is convinced that the condor is also his father.

His mother refuses to tell the truth. She claims that Jacob is away at a new job and only comes home after the boy is in bed.



The Street of Crocodiles

Summary and Analysis

"The Gale" is set before Jacob dies. It is told from the narrator's perspective as a boy, so has elements of imagination told at the same time as actual events. In the winter the clutter of discarded things that live in the attics of the city rise up and march on the city. The empty attics open up their roofs to the sky and a great wind takes over the city.

After this creative introduction, we see the narrator being kept in for the day from a storm. Jacob is trapped in the shop, and the narrator's older brother and a servant, Theodore, go out into the storm to bring Jacob food.

Aunt Perasia comes to visit. She is a talkative, energetic women. Together with Adela, Aunt Perasia begins to cook a cockerel she brought, but it is still alive when put in the flames. The narrator doesn't understand why, but Aunt Perasia gets angry and begins to scream and gesture. She gets so angry that she seems like she will burst, but instead she shrinks. The boy watches as his aunt shrinks and withers like a piece of paper burns until it is nothing but ashes. After this display, the family quietly goes back to its chores. Mother begins talking again. Adela continues to cook, and Theodore has returned from the storm and sits listening to the sounds coming from the attics.



The Street of Crocodiles

Summary and Analysis

"The Night of the Great Season," describes the hectic day of buying and selling that comes to the markets before winter. In his shop, Jacob wanders up and down, reluctant to sell the things he has made. A mob grows in the streets and fills the little shop, demanding merchandise, haggling prices and fighting with one another. Jacob reacts in anger. The description of the event is surreal and exaggerated. Jacob sees the mob as sinful. Looking out of the shop window, Jacob notices people pointing to the sky. The birds that Jacob had bred, and that Adela had turned out, fill the sky. They are beast like and terrible. Jacob tries to call the birds to him, but they have gone wild and do not know him. Then one by one people begin to throw stones and kill the wild birds. Jacob yells to warn the birds, but they are slaughtered. When Jacob goes to examine them he sees how grotesque they are. Their heads are misshapen, their feathers reek. Jacob returns home saddened. Everything in the house seems normal and mundane.



The Street of Crocodiles

Summary and Analysis

"The Comet" begins with a description of the town. Winter is finally dying out. Touya, the mad girl from August is teased by boys; Adela looks out from the balcony with nothing to do. The fashionable people show off their style in the streets. The narrator's brother brings an electro magnet home from school. Everyone is fascinated except for Jacob, whose sees it as evidence of what he already knows: that all matter has life.

A comet is visible in the sky over the narrator's hometown. Surrounding this entertaining event, the narrator recalls his father's attempts at invention and science. Inspired by various inventions that are popular in the community, Jacob begins experimenting with wires, zinc and copper. His obsession with matter and the essence of being takes a more scientific turn. The narrator says that while the world looked at science as man controlling nature, his father felt that nature had enticed and drawn people under control. Some of Jacobs' inventions are simple wires and useless gadgets, but others are fantastical. The narrator describes how his father was able to make the carvings in the dining room chairs come alive and contort into different facial expressions. He was able to turn one into their Aunt Wanda. The narrator is embarrassed by his father's experiments. The most disturbing experiment involves reducing his Uncle Edward to the simplest form of his psychology. Over a period of time, through psychoanalysis, Jacob takes Uncle Edward apart. The pieces he lays out in display. Everyone is impressed and pleased by the new Uncle Edward, who without the complications of emotion and soul is simple pure matter.

The coming of the comet is thought to be the end of the world. The whole city is wrapped up in the coming of the comet, except for Jacob who thinks he understands some secret. The townspeople gather outside each night to watch the comet go across the sky, excited and afraid. Jacob climbs into the chimney and uses it like a microscope to observe the comet. At first, he sees a human brain, but then realizes that is also an embryo, a life curled up in a ball.



Characters

Mother

The narrator's mother takes over the business when Jacob loses his sanity. She has little dialogue, except when the narrator confronts her about his father. She lies and says that Jacob is not dead, but traveling. She suffers from migraines. Mother is an important background character in the life of the house. She is written as a capable woman, but not nearly as capable as the lower class servant, Adela, who is the real woman of the house.

The Narrator

The narrator relives his childhood with nostalgia and acute observation of details. His memories are a combination of reality and imagination. Though as a child he sided with his family against the embarrassment of his father's exuberant insanity, as a man he looks back with compassion and shame at the way his father was dealt with. He also understands better what his father was going through in a way he couldn't really as a child. He sees courage in his father's madness. He has some adolescent desire for Adela and is resentful of his mother.

Touya

Touya is a mentally ill or handicapped young woman that sleeps in a garbage dump. She is known throughout the town and tormented by some children. The narrator describes her as an enigma. He remembers being brought to Touya's mother's house when she died and how much it disturbed him. Touya's life is lived separate from the rest of society. Trapped inside her own mind, Touya seems indifferent or unaware of her surroundings. Her significance in the narrator's boyhood is partly due to the parallel drawn between Touya's situation and his father's own mental illness. He sees in her discarded life the same reaction that his family has to his father, an embarrassment, and a desire to pretend he is not there.

Emil

Emil is the narrator's older cousin. He is a disturbing character that the young narrator idolized. He is described as being somewhat vacant or washed out. Emil is older when the narrator introduces him, but having traveled the world, Emil fascinates the young narrator. Like the Cinnamon Shops and Professor Arendt, in Emil the young narrator glimpses the promise of the future and the possibilities that fill the world. Yet there is also a negative side to Emil. He has returned to the darkness of his life in town with only pictures to show that he had lived a full life. He seems to be one step away from the



grave, though he is not old enough to die. He is a symbol for how short life is, and how meaningless it can seem in comparison to what one feels, imagines or remembers.

Polda and Pauline

Polda and Pauline are the tailor girls. These young women work in the house at night. They fascinate Jacob, and are an audience when he rants about matter, reality and life. They both enjoy Jacob's company at first and pity him. But the heretical things he says about creation frighten them. Polda and Pauline represent the world outside the house, where everything is lighthearted. The ominous tone of the stories lifts a little in the scenes with Polda and Pauline. It is symbolic that even Polda and Pauline get dragged into the madness of Jacob's thoughts.

Jacob

Jacob is the narrator's father. He is the only member of the narrator's immediate family that is given a name. After a period of sickness, Jacob begins to lose his interest in reality. He is a merchant, but also an inventor, a breeder of exotic birds and an amateur philosopher. As he loses his sanity, he questions existence. The family does not know how to handle the change in his character. Only the servant Adela has influence over him. He is terrified of her.

Adela

Adela is the, ever present, live-in maid who torments and controls Jacob by threatening to tickle him. She has a lot of power in the house. She is pragmatic and willful, shown by her decision to let the birds Jacob had so carefully bred escape. There is a lot of symbolism in Adela, a feminine figure to be desired and feared. She is sometimes a sinister witch-like presence.

Mr. Charles

Mr. Charles is the narrator's uncle, who is left in the city to work during the hot summers when his wife and children go on holiday at a resort. His life is tiring and monotonous. Great detail is given to the simplest of Mr. Charles' routine. His every movement, the way he sleeps and the things he dreams are all recounted in vivid description. Like the other characters of the stories, Mr. Charles is an island, his thoughts are his own. When he leaves his home for the day, a mirror facing the door shows the reflection of Mr. Charles walking in the opposite direction. This is symbolic of how people can live in ways that are nothing like who they are. People must leave behind their true identity to belong in the world. Most people are in opposition to their true self. Mr. Charles is the exact opposite of Jacob and Touya, who live outside the conventions that dictate other people's life.

Uncle Edward

The teacher of a night class on art, Professor Arendt inspired the young narrator with the beguiling tales of mythology, old books and engravings. Many of the boys went there to socialize or sleep, but the narrator loved the experience. The class was a time of safety, inspiration and happiness, in a life otherwise full of complications and sadness.

The narrator's older brother is unnamed, but occasionally referenced in the stories.



Objects/Places

The Street of Crocodiles

The street of Crocodiles is a new commercial district on the edge of town. It is described as an ugly place lacking purpose or imagination. In a detailed map of the city that the narrator liked to look at as a boy, The Street of Crocodiles is a sparse landscape, with few streets. This is different than the rest of the city which is old, crowded and sprawled out.

Market Square

The narrator's home is off Market Square, which is near the center of the city. It is a well to do area. The houses are described as being full of apartments and confusing, labyrinth-like passageways. Often rooms are forgotten for years at a time, or if you are not paying attention, a familiar passage turns unfamiliar and you find yourself suddenly lost. Market Square is a façade of respectability, behind which lie the confusing realities of people's lives.

The Cinnamon Shops

The cinnamon shops is a name that the narrator gives to a street of shops that sell exotic merchandise, like the eggs of strange insects, ancient books, binoculars and parrots. These shops intoxicate the young boy. When sent home from the opera to look for his father's wallet. The narrator makes a detour for a chance to walk by the Cinnamon Shops. Though they are not particularly dangerous, it is understood that the narrator wasn't supposed to go near the Cinnamon Shops, which only draws him more.

The High School

In the short story "Cinnamon Shops" the narrator recalls getting lost in the winding streets of his city at night and ending up behind the high school. The school is full of memory for him. In a story full of confusion and darkness, the high school represents somewhere safe and inviting. The narrator remembers a night class that he would sometimes attend, where Professor Arendt would show them old texts and artwork, teaching them about history and exotic locations. The moment the boy finds the high school that night the tone of the story changes from one of confusion to one of familiarity and adventure. But, true to form, the narrator gets lost in the high school and creeps around in the dark, like he is the last living person on earth.



The Textile Shop

The narrator's family owns a textile shop. In "The Night of the Great Season," the narrator recalls the neatly placed goods, the colorful materials, and the organized efficiency of the shop. It is a place of nostalgia and the comfort of labor. When the shop fills with customers and the great season begins, there is a sense of loss that the things so carefully made and arranged should be bought and sold in such chaos and greed.

The Tailor's Dummy

When the young seamstresses bring a tailor's dummy to work with it fascinates Jacob and the narrator. The dummy is an example of Jacob's belief that all matter is vividly alive and that the fashioning of things into shapes or carvings is cruel and unjust. The narrator, partly influenced by his father's imagination, sees the dummy as a mistress overseeing the seamstresses' work.

The Stuffed Condor

The stuffed bird appears in multiple stories. In the beginning of Jacob's sickness, he imitates the bird. Sitting perched beside it for long periods of time. Because of Jacob's ill health, he begins to resemble a bird of prey, misshapen, with overly large features and a thin bony frame. After Jacob's death the narrator is convinced that his father has turned into the stuffed bird and is watching them, trapped inside the creature.

Aunt Agatha's house

The narrator's mother takes him out walking on the weekends and visiting. They go to his Aunt Agatha's house and the narrator sees it as a manifestation of the family that lives there. The house is small and dark, surrounded by a verdant, happy garden. Inside the walls are covered with fading photographs and mildew. The damp decaying house is symbolic of the decaying individuals, like the cousin Emil and stands as a symbol of finality in the face of their attempts to live and thrive.

The Attic

In "The Gale," the contents of the attics disperse into the city. The attics, left empty come alive and stretch free of the houses. The roofs disappear and the attic is open to the sky. The writer is concerned by the lives lived out behind walls and locked in rooms. This moment when the attics open up to the sky is a moment that represents the desire for freedom for the human soul. Attics are generally places where things are discarded, hidden or forgotten. The boy feels trapped and forgotten, by liberating the contents of the attic, he is also liberating himself and his father.

Maria's House

The majority of these stories take place in the narrator's family home. But in Touya's mother Maria's house we get a brief look at a different side of society. The narrator is taken there when Maria dies, by Adela. It is appropriate that the son of a merchant would only find himself in a poor woman's house when accompanying a servant. The house is small, the walls blue with mud floors. When he sees Maria's body, the narrator imagines that the soul imprisoned in her life has been released and is chattering demonically in the room.



Themes

Labyrinth

The theme of the labyrinth is very important in these stories, we often see the narrator getting lost in familiar or would-be familiar places. When the narrator goes looking for the Cinnamon Shops, he ends up in an unfamiliar part of the city. It is the familiar feeling that most children have felt at being lost, panic. The narrator then realizes he is actually on the back side of the high school, but did not recognize it. It is the nature of a labyrinth to confuse the familiar so that it is unrecognizable. All the labyrinths describe in the story are in familiar places. The rooms of his family's house are often described as being a maze of passageways where rooms get forgotten for years at a time. When the narrator imagines his father as a cockroach, he imagines that his father knows the labyrinth of the cracks in the walls and holes in the floor.

Describing people as animals or bugs

Describing people as animals or bugs runs throughout the stories. It is linked to the ideas that Jacob has about the connected nature of all living things. When the narrator sees someone as disturbing, or angry he gives them the characteristics of a cockroach. The narrator Aunt Perasia is also described as looking like she could burst into a hoard of cockroaches when she is angry. In the final stories, we see Jacob becoming obsessed with cockroaches. He spends time hunting them, but is also deathly afraid of them. The narrator too takes on this fear, because he imagines that his father has turned into a cockroach. The verbs and adjectives used to describe peoples movements, or the sounds they make are often associated with animals or bugs.

Children's imagination

Children's imagination, and the unique ways they interpret the world is a prevalent theme throughout the stories, where imaginary figures are real, tangible and often dangerous. For example, in the beginning of "The Gale," the narrator says that the storm began because the forgotten contents of the attic rose up and marched like an army in the city streets, until a great wind began to blow. Imagination and memory are important themes in this book. All the stories are a form of memory. The narrator is remembering his boy hood, but in memory the fantasy of the boy's imagination sometimes overtakes the reality. Did a horse really speak to the young boy? Probably not, and yet the narrator's memory of that fantasy is still vivid and moving, just as if it had happened. Children and the insane share the ability to live in their imaginations just as much as the real world. There are many parallels between Jacob's madness, and the narrator's imagination.

Isolation

The characters of the town are mostly described as isolated. Emil is alone in his disappointment, Touya and Jacob in their madness. The narrator is also isolated. He is always observing the comings and goings of the people around him, but is separate and alone. Though childhood is described as a rich experience, Shulz also expresses the isolation of being a child surrounded by adults. The world depicted in these stories is both vibrant and dull. There is a spirit of passion within the characters, but they are trapped within their passions. Much like Jacobs compassion for inanimate objects—trapped in form, not free to move, breathe or live—the reader feels a certain pity or compassion for the lonely individuals that populate the stories.

Style

Point of View

All thirteen stories in "The Street of Crocodiles" are set in and around the narrator's home city. He and his family live in Market Square. Other streets and neighborhoods are mentioned such as the Street of Crocodiles and Stryjska Street.

Setting

The setting plays an important role in the themes of the stories. The city itself is mentioned in almost each telling. It is described as a place full of mystery, danger and magic. By using a mythological creature, in "Pan," the narrator conveys a sense of a very ancient history and magic. The city, which is described by the narrator as a boring and monotonous, is painted a very different way in the boys' life. The setting is larger than life. At once a conventional European city and a place where horses talk, stores move and people turn into bugs.

The setting is also a reflection of Jacob's ideology and his obsession with matter. The personification of inanimate things makes the setting come alive. In "Tailor's Dummy," the wooden model oversees the sewing process with a mysterious authority. In "The Comet," a chair makes facial expressions. The background in these stories is often very active and has its own point of view. Mr. Charles feels as if the furniture is condemning him, judging him. And after Jacob dies, the decorative condor watches the room as though Jacob himself had been imprisoned in its stuffed body.

Language and Meaning

Schulz's writing is filled with metaphors and rich descriptions. The stories are given life not by a traditional story line, but by the animation given to everyday things. The narrator's father, Jacob, is described as a bird and as a cockroach. Because there is a recurring theme of science in the house Jacob often uses a scientific vocabulary: the narrator's father talks about flora and fauna, uses Latin terminology and old fashioned words that are not commonly used. Metaphors for Old Testament stories and historical figures are also commonly used to describe a situation. The buyers in "The Night of the Great Season," are described as the Israelites worshipping Baal. And Jacob is described as godlike, wandering among his shop as if it were the promised land of Old Testament myth.

The use of language is very important because of the highly emotional content. Rather than tell the reader that something is ominous or heartbreaking, it is described as ominous and heartbreaking. The language is sometimes difficult to read and slows down the pace of the stories. It is not always important exactly what happened in the



plot, but it is very important that the emotions of the characters come alive through metaphor and description.

Structure

The structure of "The Street of Crocodiles" is episodic. It is a collection of thirteen stories that describe the boyhood of the narrator. There is not a single plot, but various narratives filled with digressions and memories associated with the main story. The stories themselves lack a strong plot as well. The stories are slices of life, that convey different aspects of the narrator's childhood, and different moments that were memorable. The town and the characters that live in it are the main subjects of these stories as well as the narrator's family, his father Jacob and the maid, Adela.

The stories are not written in chronological order. For this reason, it is hard to determine exactly when things take place. Jacob's father quits working in the first story, but in the "The Night of the Great Season," Jacob is running the mercantile shop once again. However, the collection gives a broad telling of how Jacob changed over the years and how his changes effected his son.



Quotes

"But, even at the time, I could not tell whether these pictures were implanted in my mind by Adela's tales or whether I had witnessed them myself"(75).

"Only now do I understand the lonely hero who alone had waged war against the fathomless, elemental boredom that strangled the city" (25).

"It seemed that in her paroxysm of fury she might disintegrate into separate gestures, that she would divide into a hundred spiders, would spread out over the floor in a black, shimmering net of crazy running cockroaches" (81).

"Reality is as thin as paper and betrays with all its cracks its imitative character" (67).

"Adela rose from her chair and asked us to avert our eyes from what was to follow. Then she went up to Father and, with her hands on her hips in a pose of great determination, she spoke very clearly" (36).

Adela, leaning against the balcony rails, bent over the distant, stormy roar of the city, caught from it all the louder accents and, with a smile, put together the lost syllables of a song, trying to join them, to read some sense into the rising and falling gray monotony of the day" (97).

"Matter never makes jokes: it is always full of the tragically serious" (35).

"Demiurge, that great master and artist, made matter invisible, made it disappear under the surface of life. We, on the contrary, love its creaking, its resistance, its clumsiness. We like to see behind each gesture, behind each move, its inertia, its heavy effort, its bearlike awkwardness" (33).

"She had never loved him, I thought, and as Father had not been rooted in any woman's heart, he could not merge with any reality and was therefore condemned to float eternally on the periphery of life" (73).

"Once now, from nearby, did Father notice the wretchedness of that wasted generation, the nonsense of its second-rate anatomy. They had been nothing but enormous bunches of feathers, stuffed carelessly with old carrion" (93).



Topics for Discussion

Why does Adela tell the others to avert their eyes when she goes to quiet Jacob? Why does the writer not tell us what Adela says, but just describes her body language? What is the effect of the writer's lack of detail here? What mood does it create?

Why does Adela terrify Jacob?

The narrator describes his father imitating a bird, but as the story progresses he is often described as a cockroach. Why this devolution?

What is the narrator's relationship to his father? Where do we see them interact, if at all?

How does the young narrator interpret his father's madness?

Do the fantastical passages of the book actually happen? Is the writer asking us to believe that the narrator spoke to a horse? If not, what purpose do these imaginary passages serve? What is he telling us about reality, if fantastical things next to ordinary things?

This story is told from memory. How reliable is the narrator's telling of events? Does the writer acknowledge the unreliability of his own memories?

Why does the narrator accuse his mother of lying about his father? Why does he doubt his own memory against what she tells him he remembered about the cockroaches?

Why does the narrator's mother keep up the pretense that Jacob has a new job, when he is actually dead?

What is the difference between the narrator's point of view and the writer's point of view? Can you find any examples of where the writer may be trying to say something or make a point, through his narrator?

Why does the narrator resent his mother, after his father's death?

Identify three passages where the narrator describes people as bugs.

All of the stories have quite obvious names, except for Visitation. Why does the author choose that name for his story? What does it make you think of?