

The Sympathizer Study Guide

The Sympathizer by Viet Thanh Nguyen

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Plot Summary

"The Sympathizer," by Viet Thanh Nguyen, is the story of a communist spy who is conflicted about where he stands within his political beliefs and in the world itself. His efforts to survive in two worlds at once lead him to make mistakes that end in his capture and torture at the hands of one of the people he most trusts.

When the story begins, the narrator, who remains unnamed throughout the novel, is being held captive and forced to write his confession for the commandant. He begins his confession at a point in time when he is still in Vietnam and Saigon is about to fall. The narrator lives in Vietnam with the General, whom he has been assigned to spy on. He lives in the General's villa with the General's wife and children.

When the General decides it is time to leave Vietnam, he asks the narrator to compile a list of evacuees that will leave with them, but the list must be limited to a certain number since there will only be so much room on the plane. The General isn't happy about the limit because he would like to take his entire staff with him. The narrator's handler, Man, one of his two best friends, orders the narrator to go with the General, so the narrator includes his own name on the list as well as that of his other best friend, Bon. Man is a communist while Bon is a patriot. Bon does not know that Man and the narrator are communists.

As the evacuees prepare to board a plane to leave Vietnam they are attacked and Bon's wife and young son are killed, leaving him despondent. The evacuation is delayed, but the refugees eventually fly to Guam where they stay at a refugee camp. From there they travel to America and the narrator and Bon live in an apartment together in Los Angeles. The General and his wife, Madame, also live in Los Angeles.

The General opens a liquor store and hires Bon to work there. The narrator works in the Department of Oriental Studies at a university. While working at the college, the narrator begins a casual sexual relationship with Ms. Mori, a Japanese-American who works with him. (The reader should note the use of the term "Oriental" in this guide is to be consistent with the time period in which the story is set before the term was no longer politically correct.)

The General becomes worried that there might be a spy among them and asks the narrator which of the men around them could be a spy. In an effort to hide his own identity as a spy, the narrator reaches for a name and gives the General the name of the crapulent major. In time, the General becomes convinced that the major is indeed a spy and orders the narrator to kill him. Bon helps with the assassination and it's the first time Bon has seemed happy since coming to America.

The General begins to rebuild his army and makes plans to return to Vietnam to fight the communists. He forms an organization referred to as the Fraternity to help fund the movement. He and his wife also open a restaurant to help with the funding. The General



enlists the help of the Congressman, who supports the Vietnamese refugees, to garner funding.

One of the Congressman's pet projects is closer monitoring of movies. The Congressman invites the General to review the script of a new movie about the war in Vietnam. The General assigns the task to the narrator. The narrator reviews the script and tells the Auteur that the script is not authentic. There are no speaking parts for Vietnamese characters. The Auteur is at first angry, but then accepts the criticism and invites the narrator to come to the Philippines where the movie is being shot so that he can manage the Vietnamese people who will be extras. The narrator goes to the Philippines where he hires the extras from among the boat people. Although the Auteur does add three speaking parts for Vietnamese characters, the actors playing these characters are not Vietnamese. They are from other Asian cultures. The narrator does not feel like he's made any real change in the movie and he and the Auteur again argue. When the final scenes of the movie are about to be shot, the narrator goes to the realistic cemetery set one last time to visit a tombstone he has marked as his mother's. There is an explosion and the narrator is injured. He is certain the Auteur is responsible for the explosion. He returns to America and gives the money he made working on the movie to the crapulent major's widow.

Before going to the Philippines, the narrator is reunited with his college acquaintance, Sonny, a Vietnamese man who is a newspaper reporter. While the narrator is in the Philippines, Sonny begins a romantic relationship with Ms. Mori. Sonny writes stories about the death of the major and the war that anger the General. The General orders the narrator to assassinate Sonny, which he does.

When the General decides it is time to send troops back to Vietnam, the narrator volunteers to go along so that he can try to keep Bon, who has also volunteered, from getting himself killed. His return to Vietnam is against Man's orders since Man has told him to remain in America to continue watching the General. In Vietnam, Bon and the narrator are captured and placed in a communist reeducation camp.

While in the camp, the narrator is forced to write his confession. He writes more than two hundred pages, but still the commandant and the commissar, whom he has not met, aren't satisfied. When the narrator finally meets the commissar he's shocked to learn that it is Man and that Man's face has been burned off by napalm. Man orders the torture of the narrator to help him remember something he's omitted from his confession.

After days of torture, the narrator admits he sat by and did nothing when a female communist agent was captured with a list of communist agents stuffed into her mouth. He sat by as the agent was raped and tortured. After the narrator admits this, Man pays for the narrator and Bon to be released from the camp. Bon and the narrator join the boat people as they leave Vietnam for the last time.



Chapters 1-3

Summary

"The Sympathizer," by Viet Thanh Nguyen, is the story of an unnamed Communist spy who flees to the United States after the fall of Saigon with the General he has been assigned to spy on. While in the U.S., the protagonist struggles with the question of where his allegiance truly lies as he is forced to confront the duality of his own nature as a half-European, half-Vietnamese man stuck between two worlds.

In Chapter 1, the narrator, an unnamed spy, begins writing his confession to the Commandant. He is in an isolation cell and begins his story at the point when he is still in Vietnam spying on the General and living at the General's villa. He acts as the General's aide and spends nearly every waking hour with the General, his wife, and the four children who remain at home. One of the General's daughters is studying in America. The General is a successful man who believes in God, the French, and the Americans, whom he thinks have been excellent teachers to the Vietnamese. He relies on the narrator to read the communist texts of the enemy and provide him with notes so that he can appear knowledgeable on the enemy's way of thinking.

It is April and the northern front has begun to collapse. Reports of fallen cities come into the General's office and the narrator takes pictures of them to send to his handler, Man. Though the narrator is pleased with the progress of the war, he feels sympathy for the poor people affected by the war. His mother would have been one of those poor people.

The General tells the narrator to ask Claude, their American friend, to procure an airplane so they can escape from Saigon. The narrator has known Claude for more than twenty years and the two are very close. Claude works for the CIA. Claude provides the narrator with a copy of Richard Hedd's book *Asian Communism and the Oriental Mode of Destruction*, which he agrees to read.

Claude informs the narrator and the General that he has a plane for them. The General wishes to bring all of Madame's relations as well as his staff when he leaves the country. When it becomes clear that the General will not be able to save everyone, he becomes angry. Claude tells him that even God can't save everyone and the narrator wonders what his father, a Catholic priest, would have thought of that.

The narrator works on the list of evacuees, which makes him think of a communist spy that he had tried to warn Man would be caught, but the warning arrived too late and she was captured with a list of names stuffed into her mouth. The narrator had been forced to take the list from her so as not to blow his cover. The communist agent is still in jail three years later.

The narrator gives the General the list of evacuees. He has saved one seat for himself and three for his friend Bon and his wife and child. Bon and Man are the narrator's blood



brothers who have been his friends since they were children. As the General and the narrator have a drink, the narrator reflects on his time in America as a student. He had already been working with the communist movement and was there to learn the American way of thinking.

The General and the narrator inform five chosen officers of the plan to leave and the narrator packs his rucksack, a gift from Claude upon his college graduation.

The narrator goes to pick up Bon, who is a true patriot. He finds Bon and Man at a beer garden. Man and the narrator tell Bon that Man will also be leaving and they will all go to Guam. Man is not leaving, but they know Bon won't leave if he knows Man is staying behind. The three men celebrate their last night in Vietnam. As they leave the beer garden they run into three marines and an altercation ensues. One of the marines calls the narrator a bastard and the narrator draws his gun. The bombing of the city begins, which interrupts the argument.

In Chapter 2, the narrator continues his letter to the Commandant, telling him of his feelings about being the bastard child of a Vietnamese woman and a French priest. He reflects on the invention of the Eurasian. He says his mother called him her "love child," but his father called him nothing at all. He says he was drawn to the General because the General never made an issue of his mixed heritage.

The narrator tells the Commandant that he paid the necessary bribes to arrange the evacuation of 92 people at the General's request. The group left from the General's villa in two buses. Bon, his wife Linh, and their toddler son Duc are there. The General says goodbye to the staff members who will be left behind. Madame and the General weep at having to leave their loyal staff, some of whom have been with them a long time. He tells them all to take what they want from the villa and then deny ever having known him. The narrator says that he believes the General is a sincere man. Madame gives each staff member an envelope of money.

As they leave the city, the General stops at a monument depicting marines charging forward. He salutes the monument as the narrator thinks about how the monument could just as easily be a depiction of the marines attacking the National Assembly it stands in front of.

They pass the basilica and the narrator thinks about how he and Man often met their even though they are atheists. They had met their when the narrator told Man about the evacuation plan and Man had informed him that he had been assigned a mission to travel to America to keep tabs on the General. The two have always conducted their business in secret and had used the guise of study groups to meet when they were in school. When Man informed the narrator of his mission to accompany the General to America, he told the narrator to send communications through Man's aunt in Paris. The narrator admits he is looking forward to going to America.

When the group arrives at the airbase they are met by the lieutenant the narrator bribed to allow them to pass. Things are a bit chaotic and Claude tells the narrator everyone is



trying to leave at once. Bon tells the narrator he knew this day was coming and the narrator encourages him to remain hopeful. He holds up his hand, showing Bon the scar the three friends have from becoming blood brothers. He thinks about how they all became blood brothers for the same reasons they chose to follow their individual political beliefs.

As Chapter 3 begins, the narrator thanks the Commandant for the notes he and the commissar provided about the narrator's confession. The notes ask what the narrator means when he uses the words "we" and "us." The narrator admits he cannot help but identify with the evacuees since he has spent most of his life with them. He says his weakness for sympathizing has much to do with being a bastard.

The narrator says that as a bastard, he has never hoped to be married since he knows many families wouldn't accept a man of mixed race. However, he says that being a bachelor leaves him free to chat with the call girls at the airbase where the evacuees wait to leave. The three prostitutes tell him they've been allowed in because of an American they call Sarge. They say they want to leave because they know the communists will imprison them as collaborators.

When the group finally leaves the airbase, they are stuffed on to buses with more than one hundred other people. When the General asks a marine who all of these other people are, the marine tells him they figured the Vietnamese are small, so they're putting two people on for every one American. They are similarly stuffed into an airplane.

As the plan prepares to take off, the airport is bombed. The narrator runs for cover with Bon and his family. Another plane arrives and the evacuees run toward it while they are being shot at. The narrator looks around for Bon and sees him kneeling on the tarmac holding Linh, who is dead. When the narrator reaches him, he discovers Duc is dead as well. Bon refuses to leave without them so the narrator grabs Linh's body and runs toward the plane. Bon runs behind him carrying Duc. They escape and as the plane flies away, Bon howls for the loss of his family.

Analysis

"The Sympathizer" is told as a series of written confessions by the anonymous narrator to the Commandant. Because it is told in a series of written documents, The Sympathizer can be identified as an epistolary novel. Using this style, the author invites the reader into the mind of the narrator and allows for a greater exploration of the narrator's thoughts and feelings about the people he encounters and the situations he is put in. However, since there are no outside views offered and the narrator is imprisoned and therefore under duress, the narrator might also be seen as unreliable since the reader has no other opinions or descriptions to rely upon in order to discern the truth of the situation.



This first section of the novel serves to set up the story as well as to introduce several of the major characters and themes. The first character introduced is the narrator who remains nameless throughout the novel. Though he remains nameless, the narrator gives the reader a good idea of who he is within the first paragraph of the novel. He tells the reader he is a spy and that he is of two minds, always able to see both sides of an issue. This informs the reader that while the man is a spy, he may not be as loyal to the cause he supports as the Commandant would want him to be. In fact, this duality is one of the major themes of the novel.

While the narrator readily admits to being of two minds, which introduces the theme of Duality, the author goes on to show the presence of duality in the narrator's life in a number of ways. The narrator is Eurasian, meaning that he is half Vietnamese and half European, French to be exact. The narrator struggles with his identity as a half-breed because he knows he is looked down upon by those around him. He says that he knows he won't be married because no family would allow their daughter to marry a half-breed. Yet, in keeping with his dualistic nature, he says that being a bachelor has its benefits because it allows him to socialize with the prostitutes at the airbase while he waits to be evacuated. However, the narrator is clearly uncomfortable with his dual heritage since he nearly kills a marine who calls him a bastard.

Another theme the author introduces is that of sympathy. The title of the novel, "The Sympathizer," can be taken at its face value of meaning a person who identifies with the enemy cause and is therefore labeled a sympathizer. However, the theme of sympathy indicates the author gave far more thought to the title. The narrator admits to being a man who can see both sides, therefore making him a man prone to sympathy for others. The narrator describes the General as struggling with leaving some of his staff members behind and says that he believes the General to be a sincere man who truly believed what he spoke and cared deeply for his family and staff. The narrator even confesses to the Commandant that he cannot help but sympathize with the other evacuees who are not communists like himself because he has spent so much of his time over the past years with them. His sympathy for the evacuees causes the narrator to lump himself into the group and refer to them as "us" and "we," which invites questions from the Commandant.

The narrator also talks about feeling sympathy for the poor people who are affected by the war going on around them. He states that his mother was a poor person and that the poor are often greatly affected by war but never have any say in the war itself. They are never asked if they want war.

The author also introduces the theme of Betrayal. The narrator himself has been betrayed by the other communists since he is in a communist prison despite the fact that he is a spy for the communists. The theme goes much deeper though, and it will prove to permeate the entire novel. The narrator and his handler, Man, have been betraying their blood brother Bon for quite some time. The narrator says that he and Man have been meeting in secret to discuss their communist leanings and have lied to Bon about what they are actually doing. They use excuses like study groups to hide their true actions from their friend. And, when the narrator is assigned to accompany the



General to America to continue spying on him, he and Man lie to Bon to get Bon to go to America as well. They tell Bon that Man is also going to America because they know that Bon will not leave if he knows that Man is staying behind.

Another example of betrayal is provided through the prostitutes at the airbase where the evacuees wait. These prostitutes tell the narrator that they feel they must leave the country because they know they will be arrested by the communists. This is a betrayal because these prostitutes have been servicing the communists, too, but will be imprisoned as collaborators when the communists take over.

The theme of Betrayal ties into the theme of East versus West, which the author also introduces in this section. The most obvious example of the theme of East vs. West is the war itself since the narrator lies on the side of the Vietnamese communists (the East) who oppose the involvement of the United States (the West). The narrator believes the Vietnamese people have been betrayed by the West through both the French and the Americans. The theme of East vs. West is further illustrated in the way that the Vietnamese evacuees are treated by the Americans. They are herded about like cattle and packed shoulder to shoulder into the buses and airplanes. When questioned about the conditions, the Americans tell them that they figure the Vietnamese are small so they can fit two of them for every one American. Another example of the theme is shown in a scene in which the General stops the bus as the evacuees travel to the airbase so that he can salute the monument standing outside the National Assembly one last time. The monument depicts marines charging into battle. The narrator remarks that while the monument is supposed to represent the assistance of the American forces, it could just as easily represent the Americans attacking the Vietnamese.

The final major theme that is introduced in this section is that of Religion. While the narrator professes to be an atheist he refers to religion quite often throughout the novel. In this section of the novel the narrator indicates his contempt for religion lies in the fact that his father is a French priest who, despite his vows of celibacy, impregnated his mother who was still a young girl. The narrator has no love for his father and says that while his mother called him her "love child," his father called him "nothing at all," which indicates there was no parental relationship between the two (Chapter 2, paragraph 2). Because he is an atheist, the narrator has no qualms about meeting Man at the basilica to discuss his missions in secret.

In addition to introducing the major themes of the novel and the narrator as the protagonist, the author also introduces other main characters of the story. The General is the man upon whom the narrator is assigned to spy. He has lived much of his life with the General and even lives in the General's house and eats dinner with the family. The narrator seems to genuinely like the General, which makes his job as a spy that much more difficult. The author does, indeed, portray the General as a good man if a misguided one. The General is truly saddened by having to leave some of his staff behind when they leave the country.

Also introduced are Bon and Man, the narrator's two best friends. Bon is described as being a homely man who is a true patriot and a good husband and father. He is also



extremely loyal to his friends. He seems to have no idea that Man and the narrator are communists, a fact that would likely break his heart if he were to discover it. Man is a fellow communist and the narrator's handler. The two have been meeting in secret since they were students and have been studying communist literature and ideals. The narrator and Man both feel a need to protect Bon, perhaps because they believe he's a gullible man who has fallen for the lies they believe the Americans have told the Vietnamese. In any case, that feeling of protectiveness as well as their political ideals bind Man and the narrator to one another.

As boys, the three friends took an oath of friendship and became blood brothers. They each bear a red scar on the palm of one hand. The scar serves as a constant symbol of their bond to one another and is the first thing the narrator sees every time he opens his hand. As a result, his friendship with Man and Bon informs many of the decisions and actions he makes.

The author also introduces Claude, a CIA agent who has been a part of the narrator's life since he was just a boy. Although Claude is not a communist, the narrator sees him as a true friend and something of a big brother figure. When the narrator graduated from college, Claude gave him a fancy leather rucksack. The narrator currently uses the rucksack, which has a false bottom, to carry the camera he uses to photograph classified documents. The rucksack is a symbol of the narrator's friendship with Claude, but also of the way in which the narrator must lie to so many of the people in his life because of his role as a spy.

Discussion Question 1

Why doesn't the author reveal the narrator's name?

Discussion Question 2

How does the narrator feel about the General? What do his feelings for the General say about him as a person and a spy?

Discussion Question 3

What is the relationship between Bon, Man, and the narrator like? How might this friendship affect the narrator's ability to serve as a spy?

Vocabulary

spook, commandant, pallor, incontrovertible, Eurasian, fanatical, sincere, façade, austere, narcissism, sympathizing, doltishly, ascended



Chapters 4-6

Summary

In Chapter 4 the evacuees arrive in Guam. An ambulance comes to take Linh's and Duc's bodies away. Bon lies catatonic on his bunk while the other refugees watch news coverage of the fall of Saigon and evacuation of refugees. The General decides to walk among the refugees to try to boost their morale, but since most are civilians they do not respond well to him. One woman throws a shoe at him and asks why he is there instead of defending their country.

The evacuees are taken to Camp Pendleton in San Diego where they go to another refugee camp, which is nicer than the last one. The narrator writes his first letter to Man's aunt in Paris and includes a message to Man written in invisible ink. There isn't much to report since the soldiers are in no condition to stage a revolution. He reports on Bon's state and says Bon might have died if he hadn't forced him to eat. He also says he spends a great deal of time in the General's barracks with Madame and the children.

The General shows the narrator an article about an officer they had left behind who had committed suicide. They toast the officer and the General remarks that they could have used him alive to keep an eye on the communists. The General asks the narrator if he's given any thought to the idea that there could be spies among them. The General asks who might be a likely suspect and the narrator reaches for a name, coming up with that of the crapulent major.

The narrator writes to Professor Hammer who had helped him find a scholarship to attend college in America when he was younger. Professor Hammer volunteers to be his sponsor and finds him a clerical job in the Department of Oriental Studies. Once in Los Angeles, the narrator works to find a sponsor for Bon. Reverend Ramon agrees to sponsor Bon. Bon and the narrator share an apartment. The General and his family also end up in Los Angeles. The General remains unemployed and becomes depressed while Madame finds schools for the children to attend and tends to the house. Eventually the General decides to open a liquor store.

The narrator becomes a minor celebrity on campus in his position in the Department of Oriental Studies due to an article the school newspaper runs about him. His reported role in the military is not accurate as he gives the reporter a false story of how he came to work under the General.

The narrator works closely with the secretary, Sofia Mori. The narrator wants to tell her his true political leanings, but does not. Instead, he works hard enough and says the right things to appear grateful for the help of Americans.

The narrator works under the Department Chair whose office is decorated with all sorts of Oriental items, including a picture of his Asian wife and his children. The Chair



remarks on the picture of his family by saying that his wife's genes have proven more resilient since the children have her dark hair. He uses the metaphor of foreign weeds choking out the native foliage to illustrate the idea. The Chair goes on to talk about the struggle the narrator must feel between the Orient and the Occident. He tells the narrator to make a list of his Oriental and his Occidental characteristics, which he does. When the narrator presents the list, the Chair tells the narrator he's a good student like all Orientals. The narrator can't help but feel a little pride. The Chair tells the narrator that Amerasians are the hope of the future since they mix the best aspects of both cultures. The narrator points out that he's actually Eurasian, but the Chair says it doesn't matter.

The narrator receives a letter from Man that contains a hidden message. They use a code based on a book by Richard Hedd. On the first anniversary of the fall of Saigon the narrator writes Man's aunt a letter commemorating the first year. He remarks that the refugees have not been allowed to remain together as a community which would have made them able to collectively represent themselves in America. They have been unable to even cook their native foods since the only Asian food available is in the Chinese markets. In spite of their many hardships, most of the refugees refuse to believe their country was dead.

In Chapter 5, the narrator begins by saying he is being honest in his confession because he doesn't understand why he is imprisoned and that if he is to be condemned, he will confess in a style of his own choosing.

The General plans to hold a grand opening for his liquor store. He invites the narrator and says that Claude will also be attending. The General has hired Bon as a clerk at the narrator's request. The grand opening is scheduled to coincide with the fall of Saigon. The narrator must ask Ms. Mori if he can leave work early to attend. Their relationship has become friendly and they engage in casual sex with one another. Ms. Mori tells him she was taken in by his kind manor and intrigued by the way white people love him, but only like her and see her as a delicate china doll, which she hates. She also does not like the Department Chair and says he was disappointed upon hiring her to learn she doesn't speak Japanese. She insists her culture is American since she was born in America.

The narrator reflects on a lesson he learned from Professor Hammer once about Ben Franklin and his advice to a younger man that all men should have an older mistress. Ms. Mori is older than the narrator. He says that the sexual revolution has not happened in the East and that everything but sex is free under communism. He wishes that Bon could also find a companion. Bon is serious about being Catholic and is embarrassed and discreet about sex. He says Catholics never acknowledge sex, but do acknowledge other tragedies that have occurred in the name of God.

When the narrator goes to the General's liquor store before the grand opening, the General invites him into the office and the narrator is certain he's been found out as a spy. Instead, he pulls out a bottle of scotch and offers the narrator and Claude a drink. Claude tells them about the chaos of trying to leave Saigon. He says that when the last



helicopter left, there will still four hundred people waiting to be evacuated and they told those people that helicopters were coming even though they knew there were no more to come. Claude also says he tried to get his girlfriend Kim out as well, but couldn't find her. He says he had to push his way through a crowd to get out and was only able to get out because he's American and some marines pulled him out. He says he was ashamed, but also glad to be American at that point.

The General tells Claude and the narrator that they have a spy and names the crapulent major. The General believes the crapulent major is a spy because he's Chinese, his family is doing well, and because he's fat and the General doesn't like fat men. Through the conversation, the narrator realizes that the General is becoming more like his old self and that he has contacts in Saigon. The General tells the narrator he must correct his mistake in evacuating the crapulent major and that he will leave the means of his elimination up to the narrator.

The narrator tells Bon that the General has ordered the major's execution and Bon says he will help. He shows the narrator a shotgun and a .38 that the major had helped him secure through his connections with the Chinese gangs. The narrator remarks that this is the first time Bon has looked happy in a year.

Chapter 6 begins with the General enjoying the grand opening of his store. He walks among the guests shaking hands. The store is full of the General's constituents, including many who had been soldiers under him. The narrator has reported to Man on most of these people and knows the poor conditions their lives are in. The narrator talks to the crapulent major and they arrange to go out for dinner together. He then sees one of his college schoolmates, Sonny, who is at the opening as a reporter. Sonny is arrogant and had led the antiwar faction of the Vietnamese students when they were in college. Sonny greets the narrator warmly and seems genuinely happy to see him.

The narrator goes out to breakfast with the crapulent major and is astounded that the General could believe this man is a spy. The major tells him his wife gave birth to twins who are named Broccoli and Spinach because the major says they needed American names. The narrator sees him as a pathetic man.

That night the narrator talks to Bon about the planned assassination and says it will be murder if the major is not a spy. Bon tells him it's only murder if you know the man is innocent. Bon tells the narrator he is happy to have a purpose again.

The narrator attends a dinner party at Professor Hammer's house where he meets the Professor's boyfriend Stan. He had been curious about meeting a homosexual in his natural environment, which he says is the West because the East doesn't have homosexuals. He discovers that the Professor is no different from anyone else. He also learns that the Professor was once a communist because he'd been young and the communist ideals had seduced him. He says he doesn't regret having been a communist because it made him the American he is today.



As they leave the party, the narrator talks to Claude about having to assassinate the major. Claude tells him that no one is innocent and even if he's not a spy, the major must have some blood on his hands. Claude says that everyone is both innocent and guilty and that is what Original Sin is about.

The narrator begins watching the major to learn his schedule so he can plan the assassination. Bon and the narrator steal license plates off a car. When they return to their apartment Bon falls asleep quickly. The narrator remains awake thinking about an incident in which he and the major had once arrested a man suspected of being a Viet Cong tax collector. The major had accepted a bribe to free the man. When Man had learned of the bribe he'd said that their enemies were corrupt and they were not.

Bon and the narrator go to the major's house on the Fourth of July. The narrator approaches him with a gift while Bon comes up behind him and shoots him when he turns. Bon takes the major's wallet and they drive away. The narrator calls the General to report the major's death. Bon and the narrator sit down for a drink and as the narrator hands Bon a glass he sees the scar on his hand. When the narrator tries to sleep, he cannot get rid of the image of the major with a gunshot wound to his forehead like a third eye.

Analysis

This section introduces Ms. Mori, a Japanese-American woman who works with the narrator in the Department of Oriental Studies. Ms. Mori is an example of the theme of duality. Having been born in America, she identifies as American, yet she is seen as Japanese by white Americans. From her discussion of the Department Chair with the narrator, it seems she was hired to her position chiefly because she is Japanese, but he's disappointed because she doesn't speak Japanese. She complains about being treated like a "dainty little china doll with bound feet, a geisha who's ready to please" (Chapter 5, paragraph 6). It's interesting to note that while Ms. Mori is Japanese, she says she's treated like a china doll. The author uses her complaint as a means of further underscoring the idea that white people cannot tell the difference between the various Asian ethnicities. This is an idea that will be further explored as the narrator spends more time in America. Ms. Mori goes on to say that she cannot pull off the persona whites are looking for in someone who looks like her since she doesn't speak or dress the way they expect a Japanese woman to. She is at once too Japanese and yet not Japanese enough.

The author continues to explore the theme of duality through the narrator, again using the Department Chair to help illustrate the point. The Chair has a discussion with the narrator in which he talks about how Amerasians (though the narrator is actually Eurasian!) are caught between two worlds because of their dual heritage. He even goes so far as to assign homework to the narrator in the form of a list comprised of his Oriental and Occidental characteristics. The list itself is an excellent example of duality since the points are all set in opposition to one another. For instance, the narrator lists himself as "prefer to follow" on his Oriental side and "yet yearn to lead" on his



Occidental side. This is one of the aspects of his dual nature that will eventually lead him into trouble since he knows he should follow Man's orders, yet takes the lead in disregarding an order when he believes it's in his or Bon's best interest. Even the narrator's reaction to the Chair's praise of his list shows the narrator's duality. He knows he should be offended by the assignment itself, yet he can't help but feel some pride in the praise he receives.

Further on in this section the author again returns to the theme of duality when the narrator struggles with the order he receives to assassinate the crapulent major. He knows the major isn't a communist and is, therefore, innocent of the charges the General has made against him. When he talks to Claude about the major's possible innocence, Claude suggests that all people are innocent and guilty as a result of Original Sin. He tells the narrator that it doesn't really matter if the major is innocent of the General's charges because he's guilty of something.

This discussion of Original Sin also helps to further the religious theme of the novel. The author again returns to the theme of Religion to explain the actions and thoughts of the characters. The author doesn't paint religion, particularly Catholicism, in a favorable light since he often uses it to justify the dubious actions of certain characters. In this case, Claude uses the idea of Original Sin, in which all people are born with a stain of sin due to the Original Sin committed by Adam and Eve, to justify assassinating the major. He tells the narrator that he shouldn't feel bad about carrying out the General's orders or worry about the possibility of the major's innocence because the major can't be innocent due to Original Sin.

The author also further discusses the theme of Religion when the narrator talks about Bon's Catholicism being the reason Bon is shy and embarrassed about sex. In fact, he states that Bon is more uncomfortable with sex than he is with killing people. The author, through the narrator, suggests that the Catholic church fails to acknowledge sex and attempts to hide the fact that it occurs even among clergy, but they readily acknowledge heinous crimes that have been carried out in the name of God.

The theme of betrayal receives the author's attention in this section primarily through the assassination of the crapulent major. The narrator betrays the crapulent major when he fishes for a name for a possible spy in order to appease the General who is certain there must be spies in their rank. The narrator knows it's quite unlikely the major is a communist spy, a fact that is hammered home when he has breakfast with the man who comes across as slightly pathetic and fully incapable of being a spy. Although the narrator struggles with knowing the major is innocent, in the end he betrays the major and assists Bon with carrying out the major's assassination. The assassination plan itself uses betrayal as a means for Bon to sneak up on the major. The narrator approaches the major by extending a gift to the major, which draws his attention while Bon approaches from behind.

The author also looks at betrayal in the way that the General is treated by his own people at the refugee camp following the evacuation of Saigon. The General believes it's his duty to boost the morale of his countrymen, so he walks among them to offer



words of encouragement. He's hurt and confused with the refugees aren't pleased to see him but instead berate him for not staying behind and fighting for their country. He undoubtedly feels as though these people for whom he's been fighting have betrayed him.

The General's confusion at the way he's treated in the camp also allows the author to continue to explore the theme of Sympathy. The narrator sees the disheveled General after his run-in with the evacuees and feels bad for him. He describes the horror on the General's face and the way his clothing is torn. He treats the General with compassion and tells him to wait in the bathroom while the narrator gets him some fresh clothing.

Later, the theme of sympathy is explored through the narrator's feelings for the crapulent major and his family. The narrator goes to breakfast with the major in order to determine for himself whether or not the major might be a spy and also to find out more about him so that he can begin to formulate a plan for the assassination. He finds the major to be a soft man who loves his wife and twin children. He's also a person to be pitied since he's clearly out of place in America. Wanting to help his children fit in to this new country, he decides to give them American names. Unfortunately, he chooses the names Broccoli and Spinach believing them to be strong American names. He seems to have no idea that he's made things worse for his children by naming them after vegetables. The narrator knows he doesn't have the wits to be a spy and feels a great sense of sympathy for him as well as for the widow and children he leaves behind.

In spite of his sympathy for the major, the narrator still carries out the assassination in part because of his greater sympathy for Bon. The narrator notes that being a part of the assassination plan seems to be the first thing to make Bon happy since the death of his wife and child. The narrator loves Bon and so identifies with his friend's need for a sense of purpose. In fact, Bon's rare speech about the purpose he found in being a husband and father and the loss of that purpose moves the narrator and seems to make him more open to the idea of assassinating the major. He can see that on some level Bon needs this assassination in order to pull his life back together and give it some meaning. The narrator's bond of loyalty to Bon is unwavering. When the assassination is completed, the narrator can't help but look at the scar on his hand from their blood brother bond, which symbolizes his undying friendship and loyalty to both Bon and Man.

The theme of East versus West is illustrated in great detail through the Department Chair's unfortunate use of an offensive metaphor. The Chair tells the narrator about his Asian wife and their children. He says the children take after their mother. He talks about how her genes have proven more resilient than his. He likens her genes to a foreign weed that chokes out the indigenous plant life. He goes so far as to say that the results of introducing a foreign plant to native plants often has tragic results. This suggests that he believes that the addition of Asian genes to the American gene pool is somehow a tragedy. Yet, he doesn't seem consciously aware of his racism since he later goes on to say that Amerasians are the hope of the world since they are a mix of the best of both cultures. It's as though the Department Chair strives to be an advocate for the Asian culture, yet he really undermines it by through lack of knowledge combined with his overbearing enthusiasm.



Another representation of the East versus West theme occurs when the narrator writes a letter to Man's aunt to commemorate their first year since the fall of Saigon. The narrator talks about how the refugees have been scattered around America and have not been allowed to stay together. He suggests that their scattering might be deliberate since they present a threat to white Americans if they are allowed to remain together. If they formed one community, they might be able to band together and elect representatives to the government that could look out for their wellbeing. The narrator doesn't state outright that the Americans are preventing the refugees from doing so, and he really can't since he believes refugee mail might be secretly read, but it's clear he believes there is a reason the refugees aren't able to stay together in America.

Also of note in this section of novel is the introduction of Sonny. Sonny is a young Vietnamese man that the narrator went to college with. In Sonny's college days he was arrogant and outspoken. He was the leader of the antiwar group among the Vietnamese students and convinced he was always right. The narrator clearly does not like Sonny, yet they share a similar history having gone to college together and both being scholarship students. Their reunion is tinged by awkwardness due to the narrator's dislike of Sonny, but they spend some time getting caught up and agree to meet later for coffee. The narrator's reaction to Sonny reveals the narrator's wishy-washy nature and inability to say no. He doesn't like Sonny and probably doesn't want to sit down to coffee with him, but he finds himself accepting the invitation anyway. He then goes on to justify his acceptance of the invitation by saying that Sonny has changed and his own history was expunged when he burned his journals when he returned home from college.

The narrator's inconsistency of thoughts and actions not only belies his dual nature but also continues to suggest that he may be an unreliable narrator. The author continues to make this suggestion at the start of Chapter 5 when the narrator is insisting that his confession is an entirely honest one. He seems to protest the commandant's belief that he is not being honest with the vehemence of a dishonest man. It's difficult to take his insistence of honesty as genuine rather than as a means of covering up something he is hiding.

Discussion Question 1

How do the evacuees react to the General when they arrive in Guam? Why do they react in such a manner?

Discussion Question 2

How does the Department Chair explain his children taking after their mother? Is the metaphor he uses offensive? Why or why not?



Discussion Question 3

Why does Claude say he was never so glad and so ashamed to be an American when he was evacuating Saigon?

Vocabulary

refugees, sullen, barracks, menial, Occident, Orient, encoding, hypocrisy, barbarism, crapulent, sartorial, assimilation, synopsis



Chapters 7-9

Summary

As Chapter 7 begins, the narrator admits to the Commandant that the crapulent major's death troubled him. He needed his meetings at the basilica with Man so that Man could remind him that no one is innocent.

The narrator is invited to a wedding and invites Ms. Mori to attend with him. The narrator doesn't know the couple, but is invited because of his connection to the General. The General toasts the bride's father who was a hero captured in Saigon. The General has become even more his old self since the assassination of the major. The narrator had attended the funeral of the major and taken pictures to send to Man. The General had given the major's widow an envelope of money.

The narrator asks Ms. Mori to dance and while they are dancing he notices that the General's daughter Lana is one of the singers. He remembers her as a school girl dressed very modestly in a white ao dai, which he recalls she hated because she was a tomboy. She had earned a scholarship and insisted on going to Berkeley even though her parents thought it was a communist community. She had threatened suicide to get her way. When she would return home for a visit she dressed in jeans and tight shirts. Madame would lecture her about maintaining her virginity. The General and Madame no longer speak much about Lana. On stage, Lana wears a black leather miniskirt and dances the twist.

The groom's father, referred to as Clark Gable because of his mustache, gets on stage and announces the Congressman is in attendance. The Congressman is vehemently anti-communist and therefore welcomed the refugees while most Americans saw them as a reminder of their defeat. By most, they are seen as aliens who are robbing the American purse and feasting on canines, but the Congressman has actively spoken out in their defense. The Congressman delivers a speech praising the Vietnamese and excites the crowd.

The narrator sees Sonny taking notes on the speech and introduces him to Ms. Mori. Ms. Mori calls the Congressman a typical white man and says that a white man can learn just a few words of an Asian language and the Asians treat them like geniuses. Sonny says that when an Asian speaks English it had better be perfect or someone will make fun of their accent. Ms. Mori says it doesn't matter how long they are in America, they will always be seen as foreigners. The narrator speaks up and says that on the other hand when they do speak perfect English it makes the Americans trust them. Sonny makes a snide remark and the narrator realizes he hasn't changed.

The next weekend the narrator chauffeurs the General and Madame to the Congressman's house. On the way he mentions Lana and Madame becomes angry saying she has become a slut and says that at least in Vietnam they could protect their



children from corruption. Madame brings up this point again at lunch with the Congressman and his wife. The Congressman says that as a Cuban he and the Vietnamese have a shared cause against communism, which makes the General and Madame trust him. Madame confides in the Congressman's wife about Lana.

The Congressman tells them that one of his causes is to regulate movies and music to protect the youth. He says he's been asked to consult on a movie about the war and asks the General for his feedback. The General says the narrator can read the script and offer his thoughts. The movie is called *The Hamlet* and even though the narrator had lived in a hamlet for only a short time, he agrees to read the script. He thinks about how he has always taken risks and had done so when he approached Lana at the wedding. He thinks about how he had never preferred innocent school girls because he's impure and impurity is what he deserves. The narrator fantasizes about Lana who always appears in her white ao dai. He's conscious of the fact that white not only represents purity, it is also a sign of death.

Chapter 8 begins with the narrator summarizing the movie script in which the evil King Cong, the worst of the Viet Cong, threatens the hamlet. A band of Vietnamese soldiers trained by the Americans stands against King Cong. The script had arrived in an envelope with his name misspelled after the Auteur's personal assistant, Violet, had called for his mailing information and to set up a meeting with the Auteur. When he arrives at the Auteur's house, Violet lets him in and treats him in a condescending manner. The narrator believes her behavior has to do with his race. He remarks that it doesn't matter that he's only half Asian because in America you are either completely white or not at all. He believes she sees the Asian stereotype portrayed in American movies. The narrator thinks the greatest special effect of the movie script is how the movie was about Vietnam but not one Vietnamese had any intelligible lines.

The Auteur tells the narrator that he's the first Vietnamese the Auteur has met. He says authenticity is important to him. The narrator tells the Auteur he didn't get the details right to which the Auteur responds that he researched Vietnam by reading books by Buttinger and FitzGerald on the history of the country. The narrator says the Auteur didn't even get the screams right since people scream in different ways depending on the situation.

The narrator leaves the Auteur's house and recounts his experience there for the General and Madame. He tells them how he pointed out to the Auteur and Violet that the lack of speaking parts for Vietnamese is insensitive, but Violet said that what mattered was who paid for tickets to see movies. The Auteur had dismissed the narrator's thoughts because he'd never made a movie. The narrator tells Madame that the Auteur had really just been looking for someone to give him the stamp of approval and didn't really want any comments. The narrator goes on to reflect on the way Hollywood strips the truth of history away and gives the audience films about white people saving good yellow people from bad yellow people. He says this was the first war where the losers would get to write history.



Madame offers him some pho to make him feel better. He realizes she has been cooking all day, something she'd never done in Vietnam but had begun doing out of necessity. He eats the pho slowly as he thinks about his mother's cooking. She'd been very poor, but had still managed to make wonderful pho using the leftover beef bones his father had given her. The narrator tells Madame she should open a restaurant.

The General shows the narrator articles about the major's funeral and the wedding that Sonny has written. The funeral article suggests that his death might not have been due to a robbery and the wedding article states that the talk of war should stop because the war is over. The narrator defends Sonny saying he's just doing his job. Madame asks whose side he's on and he says she's right, there shouldn't be too much freedom of the press. The General says there should never be more than two opinions to choose from. He asks the narrator to talk to Sonny and remind him of how things are done back home. The General goes on to say that progress is being made and they are assembling slowly. The narrator says the movement needs a vanguard and cells in order to advance. The General tells him the Congressman is working on a way for them to send men to Thailand, which will be their staging area. Claude is working on funding the movement. The General says it's dangerous for newspapers to talk about the war being over.

In Chapter 9, Violet calls the narrator and tells him the Auteur reconsidered his advice and respects the narrator for standing up to him. She says they'll be using refugees who are in the Philippines as extras and they'd like the narrator to work with them. He remembers his mother telling him he's not half of anything but twice of everything, so he accepts the challenge. He also realizes he needs to get away from America for a while and the guilt of the major's death. He plans to save money to give to the major's widow and her children.

He sees the major's children as innocents who have been wronged like he was as a child when his aunts didn't want him to play with their children because he was a half-breed. He remembers how on the first New Year he can remember everyone got a red envelope from Aunt Two except for him. His mother had wept when they got home. He had received only half the money the cousins had received in his other envelopes. His mother had held him and told him he'd be better than all of them one day. When he'd told Bon and Man of the red envelopes, Bon had been angry and said he'd beat the cousin that called the narrator a bastard. However, Man told him the red envelope stood for everything that was wrong in their society and that red is the color of revolution.

The narrator reports to Man about his acceptance of the movie position and keeps the tone of the letter upbeat in case censors are reading refugee mail and looking for malcontents. He tells Man he has helped the General set up a nonprofit organization called the Benevolent Fraternity of Former Soldiers of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam so that he can receive donations for the movement.

The General and the narrator visit the Congressman to seek support for the Fraternity. The Congressman says that Congress won't give them official support, but the General tells him they don't need official support must support from like-minded individuals and



organizations. The General and the narrator suggest that the Congressman funnel money to the Fraternity in return for votes garnered by the General. The Congressman finally agrees saying that he hopes the Fraternity won't engage in anything illegal, by which he means only that he doesn't want to know about the illegal acts.

On his way to the Philippines, the narrator reads from Fodor's Southeast Asia, a tour guide. The book suggests that the East is vast and full of riches. The narrator thinks that in pointing this out it suggests that the West is not vast and doesn't have riches. In truth, the West has riches, but the Westerner takes them for granted just as the Easterner never notices the enchantment of the East.

When he arrives in the Philippines, the narrator meets the production designer, Harry, who shows him around the set. He shows him the outhouse mounted above the fishpond and the narrator remembers having used one like it. He remarks that it doesn't make him feel nostalgic, but grateful for the luxuries of the West.

The narrator takes a trip to a refugee camp to recruit extras. The people there are referred to as boat people and they are too desperate to turn down the low pay the narrator offers. When he asks one refugee if the conditions in Vietnam are really so bad, she tells him that instead of foreigners terrorizing their people, they are now terrorizing themselves. Even though he is working on the movie to ensure the Vietnamese are represented well, he now feels like he's helping to exploit them.

When he returns from the refugee camp, the narrator goes to the movie set to relieve his homesickness. He says the only thing missing from the set is the people and, most importantly, his mother. He remembers receiving a letter from his father saying his mother died of tuberculosis and was buried in a cemetery under a real headstone. He remembers that when he left for college in America his mother had given him a notebook and pen. Now, he kneels at a tombstone on the set where he has pasted a picture of his mother and painted her name.

Analysis

This section of the novel delves deeply into the theme of East versus West as the narrator begins working on a movie about the war in Vietnam. Nguyen has obviously drawn inspiration for the fictional movie in his novel from the real-life movie *Apocalypse Now*. Though the plot of the fictional movie differs, the disguise is thinly veiled and readers cannot help but think of *Apocalypse Now* if they are at all familiar with that movie. This allusion to a real movie provides the novel with realism and gives readers, regardless of their ethnicity, a point of reference upon which to base their opinions of the Hollywood-ization of history that the author presents as part of the East versus West theme.

One of the things about the movie that the narrator notes is that the Auteur has created a movie about the Vietnamese that doesn't include a single speaking part for a Vietnamese character. In fact, the Auteur notes that the narrator is the first Vietnamese



person he has ever met. This idea indicates the author's feeling that Asians have not been able to represent themselves in popular Western culture. This is also evident when the narrator meets Violet and gets the feeling that she is judging him based on the stereotypical Asians she has seen in movies. When the author finally does get the Auteur to include some speaking roles for Vietnamese characters, the Vietnamese still don't get the opportunity to represent themselves since those roles all go to actors from other Asian ethnicities. When the narrator tries to explain his thoughts on the movie script to the Auteur upon meeting him, his disappointment in the lack of roles for and misrepresentation of Vietnamese people is brushed aside when Violet says that it doesn't matter because it's Americans who will buy the movie tickets.

On his way to the Philippines to work on the movie, the narrator reads a tour guide of Southeast Asia that portrays the East as a vast land of enchantment that draws Westerner in. The narrator suggests that by painting the East in this manner the guide indicates that the West is none of these things. However, the narrator points out that the West is vast and also has it's riches and enchantments. In fact, the author would seem to be saying that there's no point in setting the East against the West in this manner because Easterners fail to see the enchantment in their land just as Westerners fail to see the riches in theirs, so in that matter, at least, people are the same on both sides of the issue.

Another scene of the novel that illustrates the East versus West theme occurs at the wedding the narrator attends with Ms. Mori as his guest. As the narrator watches the Congressman delivering a pro-Vietnamese speech, he thinks about how most white Americans see the Vietnamese as nothing more than canine-eating aliens who are stealing from Americans. While the author doesn't elaborate in this scene on why Americans might see the Vietnamese as thieves, there has been previous discussion of the refugees' eligibility for welfare and other public assistance, which is likely what the narrator is referring to here. As for the idea of Asians eating dogs, the narrator does say that while it's true that Asians do occasionally consume dogs, it's as a cuisine and not in the manner that most Americans picture it. This brief reflection by the narrator allows the author to expound on the stereotypes of Asians held by Westerners.

Later, the author again explores Asian stereotypes when Ms. Mori and Sonny discuss the way Asians are viewed based on how they speak. Ms. Mori finds it laughable the way that some Asians fawn over white people who learn just a few words of an Asian language while white people make fun of the accented, but fluent, English spoken by Asians. Here the author is suggesting that Easterners seem to undervalue their own accomplishments while praising Westerners for just making a tiny effort.

The author touches again on the theme of Betrayal while the narrator works on the movie. The narrator acts as a liaison for the refugees hired as extras. In fact, he's put in charge of hiring the extras. While the narrator acknowledges that he has at least seen to it that there are real Vietnamese people in the movie, albeit as extras, he now feels like he's somehow betraying his people because of the tiny parts and poor pay of the extras. The narrator is only able to offer the extras a dollar per day, but knows they'll take it because they need the money so badly. He knows that such low pay is an exploitation



of the desperate situation of the boat people, but there's nothing he can do about it. In this way, he is betraying his people by taking advantage of the situation they are in.

The narrator also believes that he is betraying his people because his efforts in the movie don't seem to have any real effect on the way Vietnamese people are portrayed in Hollywood movies. The parts of the Vietnamese characters with speaking roles are still very small and not being played by Vietnamese actors. He also knows that no one will remember the extras.

Another example of betrayal in the novel might also be seen in the character of Lana, the General's daughter. In a sense, by seeking to be herself, Lana has betrayed her parents. Lana rebels against the Asian ideals her parents adhere to and insists on dressing and acting like an American. She wears tiny miniskirts and sings and dances onstage, which angers Madame and leaves her feeling that her daughter has become a slut. The General and Madame feel so betrayed and embarrassed by their daughter that they rarely speak of her and Madame is angered by the narrator's mention of Lana as they drive to the Congressman's house. Madame is so upset by her daughter's behavior that she even discusses it with the Congressman's wife.

The theme of Sympathy is evident in the narrator's continuing sense of guilt after having assassinated the major. He is sympathetic toward the widow and children left behind. The narrator feels such a sense of sympathy for them that he decides he will give the extra money he makes on the movie to the widow. He talks about the innocence of the children. The narrator relates to the plight of the children since he remembers what it's like to be a child to whom things are done. In reflecting on this idea, the narrator shares the story of being denied a red envelope by one aunt on New Years and receiving only half the money in his red envelopes from the other aunts compared to the money received by his cousins. After talking to Man about the incident, the red envelope became a symbol of revolution and trying to right the wrongs done to innocent people.

The Duality theme is evident in the narrator's actions surrounding the General's efforts to rebuild his troops in preparation for an attack on the communists. While the narrator is a spy, he is also the General's friend and advisor. Because of this duality, he provides the General with suggestions for organizing his troops and for setting up an organization to help fund the effort. At the same time, he must report back to Man the steps forward the General has taken even though they're steps he's helped the General to take.

The theme of Religion is only briefly brought up in this section when the narrator talks about needing his talks with Man in the basilica to help him feel like the assassination of the major was the right thing to do. The author's use of the basilica as the place where the narrator would often converse with Man gives the reader the sense that the narrator uses his talks with man as a confessional of sorts. The narrator says that talking to Man in the basilica would help him to ease his conscience, just as a parishioner might feel a sense of relief after giving their confession to a priest.

This section of the novel also contains several examples of symbolism. As mentioned, the red envelopes the author received as a child symbolize revolution and the need to



stand up for those who can't stand up for themselves. The narrator also goes into some detail when speaking about the outhouse that has been constructed on the set of the movie. The realistic nature of the outhouse makes him think of his childhood. When he is invited to try it out, he declines. The outhouse doesn't make him feel nostalgic for his childhood, but instead symbolizes the poverty and hardship he grew up with. Also on the set is a realistic cemetery where the author chooses a tombstone to be his mother's. He attaches her picture to the stone and writes her name on it. This fake tombstone symbolizes the real tombstone that is somewhere in Vietnam and that he has never seen since his mother died while he was in America.

Another example of symbolism is in the gift the narrator's mother gave him when he began college. He remembers that when he left for America to attend college his mother saved up to buy him a notebook and pen. The gift represented his mother's hopes for his future and the opportunity to learn the things that she could not, such as reading and writing.

The author also includes some instances of foreshadowing in these chapters. The narrator thinks about Lana and the other school girls in Vietnam wearing their white ao dai's for school. While the white clothing might be seen as representing purity, the narrator remembers that white also represents death and mourning in the Asian culture. The mention of white as a symbol of death creates a sense of foreboding and indicates to the reader that the major's death is not the last one that will occur in the novel. In fact, the author also includes a discussion between the General and the narrator about articles that Sonny has written. The General and Madame believe the articles are a detriment to the movement and encourage the narrator to remind Sonny how such infractions are dealt with back home. This conversation foreshadows Sonny's impending death at the hands of the narrator.

Another example of foreshadowing is in the narrator's enjoyment of a bowl of pho that Madame has cooked. The pho reminds him of home and the soup his mother used to make. He likes it so much that he jokingly tells Madame she should open a restaurant. The mention at the time seems like just a compliment paid to the Madame, but the idea takes root and she does eventually open a restaurant to help fund the movement.

Discussion Question 1

Why do the General and Madame avoid talking about Lana? What draws the narrator to Lana?

Discussion Question 2

Why does the narrator help the General set up the Fraternity? Did he have to suggest the idea to the General? Does this suggest that he's more sympathetic to the cause of the Republic or to the communist cause?



Discussion Question 3

What stereotypes of Asians does the author discuss in this section? How does he dispute or uphold each of these stereotypes?

Vocabulary

ideology, pervaded, eulogized, paradoxical, bucolic, dilapidated, bludgeoned, complacent, jaunty, precociously, luminaries, hamlet, ersatz



Chapters 10-12

Summary

At the beginning of Chapter 10 the Auteur arrives and throws himself a welcome party. He hires local men to dress as cannibals and strippers to play white women being boiled alive as entertainment. The boat people are not at the party, so the narrator is the only Vietnamese person there. The narrator remarks that although he is not one of the boat people, he feels sympathy for them.

During the party the Auteur sits at the edge of the dance floor and chats with the Thespian, one of the stars of the movie, while Violet flirts with the Idol, who is another of the stars. The narrator goes to the table where the actors playing the Vietnamese parts are sitting. The Auteur has made some of the changes suggested by the narrator, including adding three Vietnamese characters with speaking parts. The parts are not being played by Vietnamese people, but by other Asians. Danny Boy, who plays the younger brother is a Filipino boy from an acting family whose mother fawns over him. James Yoon plays the older brother. He is a Korean man who has appeared in a variety of television shows as various Asians, but no one ever remembers his name. Asia Soo plays the sister. She is half Chinese and half British and very beautiful. She is a lesbian and the men on the set like to think they can change that.

The narrator writes to Man's aunt about the happenings on the set and sends pictures of the cast. He writes of how sad it is to see stories of the boat people fleeing from the horrors in their country. To Man in invisible ink he wonders if these things are really happening or if it's just propaganda. In his confession he asks the Commandant what he thinks was happening and why people were fleeing if the revolution served the people.

The movie shoot goes along well and mainly non-combat scenes are shot prior to December. The narrator manages the extras and assigns parts to them. The three roles are civilians, soldiers in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, and National Liberation Front guerrillas or Viet Cong. Everyone wants to play a soldier in the Army of the Republic, but no one wants to play the Viet Cong role. Finally, the narrator convinces Violet to double the salary of those playing the Viet Cong. Part of what the extras object to in playing the Viet Cong is that some of them will be involved in the scene in which the younger sister, Mai, is raped.

The narrator asks the Auteur if a rape scene is really necessary and their relationship becomes strained at his questioning. The Auteur calls the narrator a sellout and a loser. The narrator lashes back and says he must be a loser for believing the promises the Americans had made to them. The rape scene is eventually filmed on a closed set.

The narrator is present on set when a scene in which James Yoon is water boarded. The Auteur explains the scene to the extras who also played the rapists and tells them to "act natural" and "have fun." The extras wonder what torturing someone has to do



with acting natural. In Vietnamese, one of the extras instructs the others to act unnatural and play the part of the VC.

The narrator also recounts the fate of the only black character in the movie. He states that once the character's heritage is explained his fate is sealed. He is eventually castrated by the VC. The narrator recalls Claude teaching the interrogation class that this was something Native Americans had once done and that the VC did it as well proving he shared a common humanity with his class. He then went on to show a slide of an American urinating on a Viet Cong corpse.

The water torture scene is especially brutal and James Yoon is determined to make it his best death scene ever, though he's been killed on film many times. Yoon cries and even vomits. The Auteur tells him he is fantastic and then shoots six more takes. The narrator remembers Claude teaching that interrogation isn't about brute force, but about the mind. By the time the scene is complete, Yoon is truly in pain and the narrator recalls having seen the communist agent looking like that, but then has to stop thinking about her face.

In the end, Yoon's character bites off his tongue to drown in his own blood without ever having said an intelligible word.

In Chapter 11 the narrator says that the longer he works on the movie, the more it seems like propaganda. He receives a letter from Man assuring him that the reports of the conditions of the Vietnamese people are exaggerated and that he is not a collaborator and his mission with the movie is important. The narrator recalls a discussion he and Man once had about the importance of art to a revolution. He also recalls having been assigned the task of being a mole and learning to hide in plain sight.

The narrator recounts the filming of the final battle scene of the movie. The Thespian's character dies in the arms of the Idol's character, having been shot by the madame from the brothel who turns out to be Viet Cong. The scene in which the Americans strike King Cong's lair is a massive undertaking. The Auteur proclaims that long after the world has forgotten the war, this work of art will remain. The narrator knows the Auteur believes that somehow his movie is more important than all the lives lost in the war. The narrator says he had been deluded in thinking he would affect any real change because all he'd done is smooth the path as the technical consultant of a bad movie that wanted to be a good one.

The cemetery set is rigged for destruction for one of the scenes. Before the scene is shot, the narrator visits his mother's fake grave one more time. As he kneels at her grave he hears the crapulent major laughing. A blasting cap is triggered and he's later told that the blast was an accident. The narrator knows the Auteur is responsible.

The narrator wakes up in a hospital. Everything in the room is white. The doctor tells him his injuries are not bad considering he should be dead. The extras who played the Viet Cong torturers visit him bringing a fruit basket and a bottle of liquor. They say the



gifts are from the Auteur. The extras believe the Auteur is responsible for the blast. When the extras toast him, the narrator feels like one of them in spite of everything.

The extras leave and the narrator thinks about a time when he was in an all white room interrogating a prisoner. He and Claude had chosen to play country music as a means of torture. The narrator believes country music is the beat of bloodthirsty Americans. The prisoner had specialized in explosives. He was called the Watchman because his triggers were often made out of watches. In one conversation with the Watchman, the Watchman had said that the war proved Americans really believed yellow people were all guilty until proven innocent, but they pretend they're all innocent. The Watchman called the narrator a bastard and said hybrids are defective. The narrator was determined to prove his intelligence to the Watchman, so he wrote a confession for the Watchman that said the Watchman was a homosexual and was trying to save the man he loved. The Watchman agreed to speak so the confession wouldn't be published. He remembers being pleased at Claude's praise and putting himself in the place of the Americans when he broke the Watchman.

At the beginning of Chapter 12 the narrator flies back to America without having been invited back to the movie set. Bon meets him at the airport. He learns that Madame and the General have opened a restaurant to help fund the movement. The General invites the narrator to the restaurant for a meal. The narrator tells the General that opening the restaurant is courageous since it's difficult to overcome American's aversion to their food. The General says it's degrading and that the restaurant isn't even nice. The building is in bad shape and the waiters are former soldiers. Both the General and Madame are depressed at their current state. Their sadness makes the narrator sad, too.

To cheer them, the narrator says opening a restaurant to fund the movement is a wonderful idea. The General explains that all profits go to the movement. Madame says it's a secret, but an open one and the people who come there know they are helping the revolution. The General says that almost everything is in place for the revolution. He says a group of veterans is training every weekend and they'll pick the best from that group for the next step. The General tells the narrator that Bon will be a part of that group and the narrator knows that Bon accepted the mission because he knows his chances of survival are slim. The narrator says that if Bon is going, he should go as well. The General is delighted, but says he needs the narrator to stay with him and help with the planning.

The narrator notices that on the wall of the restaurant is the flag of the defeated Republic of Vietnam, which the General says is the flag of the free Vietnamese people. Also on the wall is a clock shaped like his homeland. The numbers form a circle around Saigon. The narrator says the clock maker must have understood that the distance from their country was more a distance of time than physical separation because it would take years for them to be able to return. The clock is set to Saigon time.

The narrator tells the General and Madame about his time in the Philippines, which makes them feel less gloomy, but more resentful. He does not tell the General that he



was nearly killed and that he was paid compensation for his injuries. He had been visited in the hospital by Violet and a representative from the movie studio who had offered him \$5,000. The narrator had told him that as an Asian he couldn't think only of himself, but must also think of his relatives who would expect some of the money. He haggled with the man until he was offered \$10,000.

Upon leaving the restaurant the narrator goes to the crapulent major's widow and gives her five thousand dollars. There is no sign of the major's murder at the widow's house. The narrator says he doesn't believe in God but he does believe in ghosts and he's afraid of them. The widow invites him in and offers him tea and ladyfingers. She cries and says she misses him. The narrator feels that he must appease the major's ghost. He gives the widow the money and tells her to think of the children when she tries to resist. She insists he see the children and when he does he thinks about having attended classes taught by his father before he knew the priest was his father. He remembers having gotten into a fight with another child who had made fun of his mixed heritage. When his mother had learned of the incident she finally told him the identity of his father saying that he was a gift from God.

After leaving the widow's house the narrator decides to visit Ms. Mori. He goes to her apartment and Ms. Mori invites him in. Sonny is sitting on Ms. Mori's futon with her cat in his lap. The cat always hated the narrator.

Analysis

The time the narrator spends working on the movie allows the author to delve more deeply into the theme of Sympathy as the reader sees the narrator struggle with the conditions of the boat people and the things they tell him about the conditions in Vietnam. The narrator grows concerned about what might really be going on in Vietnam when one of the boat people tells him that the Vietnamese are now hurting themselves instead of being hurt by the Americans or the French. He sympathizes with the plight of the Vietnamese and questions Man about the things he's hearing about what is going on in Vietnam under communist rule.

The narrator sympathizes with the boat people who have fled Vietnam and are hired to play extras in the movie, though as a communist he should probably view them as enemies or at least as deserters. He can see that they are hungry and desperate and feels bad about the low pay he is allowed to offer them. To the narrator, being the agent of the movie producers who pay so little feels like being a collaborator with the Americans. He feels as though he is now the one keeping his fellow countrymen down. In the end, he feels as though the movie is more a work of propaganda than of art.

The Sympathy theme is also evident in that when the narrator returns home from making the movie, one of the first things he does is to go to the crapulent major's widow and give her \$5,000. He sympathizes with the widow and her children, whom he knows are innocents caught in the middle. He talks of appeasing the major's ghost, but he is



likely justifying his sympathy toward the widow and also trying to ease his guilty conscience.

The narrator again shows sympathy when he visits the General in the restaurant he and Madame have opened to fund the movement. The General and Madame are visibly depressed by their circumstances. The General complains that the restaurant isn't very nice and he feels demeaned by having to serve customers that sometimes belittle him. The narrator can see their sadness and it makes him sad, too. Though the narrator is assigned to spy on the General and shouldn't have friendly feelings toward him, he still cares about the General and makes an attempt to cheer him up by turning the conversation to the good the General is doing for the movement by funding it with money raised through the restaurant. Of course, the reader knows the narrator shouldn't be happy about the General's success in moving forward with his plans.

The theme of Duality is explored through the narrator's relationships with the people working on the movie. He doesn't fit in with the white actors and certainly doesn't get along with the Auteur or Violet. Yet, he also doesn't fit in with the Asian actors since they aren't Vietnamese and have different life experiences from his. Though he sympathizes with the extras, he doesn't really fit in there either because they undoubtedly see him as their boss in his role as manager of the extras and he's never fully fit in with Vietnamese people because of his heritage. Yet, when he is injured in the explosion, it is the extras who visit the narrator in the hospital and he is surprised by feeling grateful for their acceptance of him.

Another example of the theme of duality comes through the narrator's remembrance of an incident from his childhood. He describes an instance when a bully said he was like the product of a dog mating with a cat, meaning that as a half-breed, he is unnatural. His dual nature often leaves the narrator feeling as though there is something wrong with him, which is one of the reasons he becomes so angry each time someone calls him a bastard; he feels a kernel of truth in their harsh words.

As the narrator describes this scene in which he was bullied as a child, the author also returns briefly to the theme of religion when his mother tells him he is not unnatural, but is a gift from God. After this incident, his mother revealed the truth of his father's identity to the narrator. She considered him a gift from God because his father was a priest. His mother believed that God sent her the narrator because he would never have allowed the relationship between her and the priest if it weren't in his plans. She believed the narrator had a destiny. Perhaps it is the narrator's fear of not fulfilling the destiny that his mother believed in that causes him so much conflict and makes him critical of religion. He does not want to believe that he might have a destiny because it's too much pressure, and so he chooses not to believe in God so that he does not have to believe in a possible destiny.

The theme of East versus West is evident when the Auteur arrives in the Philippines and throws himself a party. The Auteur, who is white, clearly believes the people of the Philippines are beneath him since he hires them to enact scenes of natives boiling women alive in giant cauldrons. The Auteur also hires Asian actors from cultures other



than Vietnamese to play the only speaking parts of Vietnamese characters, which indicates he doesn't see the differences in the various Asian cultures and thinks other white Americans who will be buying the movie tickets won't see the differences either.

Later, the theme is again illustrated when the Auteur and the narrator argue over the necessity of including a brutal rape scene in the movie. The Auteur calls the narrator a loser and the narrator retorts that he must be a loser if he believed the lies the Americans fed the Vietnamese people. This comment leaves the reader wondering if the narrator perhaps really did believe in the Americans at some point since the remark is made in the heat of an argument when it's unlikely the narrator would have been thinking about hiding his identity as a communist spy.

Another example of the East versus West theme occurs when the Vietnamese actors are given instructions for acting out a scene in which they torture a man. The Auteur tells them to act naturally and enjoy themselves as they pretend to beat the man. The extras are confused by the instructions since it certainly isn't natural to them to act with such violence, but clearly the Auteur believes that's just part of their nature as Vietnamese people.

The theme of betrayal is shown through the narrator's questioning of what the conditions in Vietnam truly are. He feels a sense of betrayal by his fellow communists when he wonders why the boat people are fleeing the country if the communists have made it better. When he asks Man about the conditions, Man lies to him and tells him everything is fine. The reader later learns that Man does not think things are going well under communist rule.

The narrator himself feels like the betrayer in this section of the novel. He feels as though he's betraying the Vietnamese by working on the movie. He does not believe he's made any real changes in the way the Vietnamese people are being portrayed in the movie and, in fact, feels like he's helping the Americans keep the Vietnamese down because he is responsible for hiring them at such low wages.

The Auteur also carries out an act of betrayal when he attempts to kill the narrator. When the narrator goes to visit the tombstone that he has chosen to represent his mother's grave, an explosion goes off prematurely. The author has previously indicated that the people working on the movie sets are meticulous since the sets are so intricate, so it's not likely that the explosion was really just an accident. When the extras visit the narrator in the hospital, they confirm his suspicions that the Auteur caused the explosion as retribution for the narrator arguing with him.

This section of the novel also includes some examples of foreshadowing as well as fulfillment of a previous foreshadow. The author draws the reader toward the final chapters of the book in which the narrator will be tortured through flashbacks the narrator experiences during the filming of the movie. The narrator describes an incident in which he was a party to the torture of a man called the Watchman who created explosives using watches as triggers. This foreshadows the eventual torture of the narrator since he will be tortured using the same methods that were used on the



Watchman and also using a device triggered by a clock. Also, while watching the filming of a scene in which an Asian actor is subjected to water torture makes the narrator think of the torturing of a female agent that he witnessed. The narrator's remembrance of the female agent provides the reader with a foreshadow of the incident the narrator must confess to in order to satisfy the commandant and the commissar.

A previous foreshadow is fulfilled in the General and Madame opening a restaurant to help fund the General's efforts to rebuild his army. In a prior section of the novel, the narrator had tasted Madame's delicious pho and complimented her by saying she should open a restaurant. Now, of course, the General has done just that and the restaurant features Madame's authentic Vietnamese cooking.

The author also includes a couple of examples of symbolism in this section. The narrator talks about torture rooms always being entirely white. This harkens back to the narrator's remark when thinking about Lana in her white ao dai that white symbolizes death and mourning. The author will return to this symbolism again when the narrator is tortured.

The narrator notices two other symbols in the General's restaurant. The first is the flag of the Republic of Vietnam. Though the flag is now defunct since the Republic has been defeated, the General still insists on displaying it and explains that it will always be the symbol of the free people of Vietnam. The second symbol is in a clock shaped like the country of Vietnam. The clock face is centered over the location of Saigon and the narrator remarks that the clock symbolizes how the Vietnamese are always going in circles. By this, he means that he doesn't believe things in their country ever really progress since they are always at war, if not with another country, then with themselves.

Discussion Question 1

What does the narrator's argument with the Auteur over the rape scene reveal about the narrator's feelings about Americans? Could this argument have been dangerous for him? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Why does the narrator hear the major's laugh when he is kneeling at the tombstone with his mother's picture on it? Is the laugh real or imagined?

Discussion Question 3

Why are the General and Madame depressed over having opened a restaurant?

Vocabulary

auteur, galling, disgruntled, anecdote, provincial, melee, deluded, obliterate, presumably, validation, revenue, exile, debriefed



Chapters 13-15

Summary

As Chapter 13 begins Sonny asks the narrator what is in the bag he is carrying. He has no choice but to share the vodka and cigarettes with Ms. Mori and Sonny, though he had planned an evening alone with Ms. Mori. They ask about his trip to the Philippines, so he tells them about it. The narrator notices an open photo album on the table and asks about it. Ms. Mori says the pictures are of her family. Sonny begins pointing out the people in the pictures and telling the narrator who they are. Sonny tells the story of Ms. Mori's brother Abe who was put in prison for refusing to fight in the war. Abe eventually moved to Japan because white people always told him to go back there, but when he arrived he discovered the Japanese people didn't think he was one of them, either. Sonny says that perhaps he and Ms. Mori will go to Japan some day so he can meet Abe.

The narrator then tells Ms. Mori that Sonny used to support the revolution and asks Sonny why he didn't fight or at least return to help the people. He asks Sonny if he's still in America because he's afraid. Ms. Mori stands up for Sonny and says he stayed because America is his home and there are people to be helped there, too. Sonny stops her and says the narrator is right. He says that he had planned to return one day, but has discovered you cannot live among people and remain unchanged. He says he admires the way the narrator went back and fought for what he believes in. Ms. Mori continues to comfort Sonny and says she's not better than him since she allows the Department Chair to degrade her by calling her Miss Butterfly. The narrator says it's never too late to fight and they agree with him.

The narrator writes to Man's aunt and reports that the General has found a place to train his soldiers. The General sketches out the training area on a napkin and the narrator later takes it to send to Man as well as a list of the names of the platoon commanders. The narrator goes with the General to the training area to serve as a documentarian. He notes how when they are in civilian clothes, the men blend in and go unnoticed, but as soldiers they are different men. The General delivers a motivational speech. The narrator has a conversation with the grizzled captain and the affectless lieutenant who tell him they don't intend to return to America. The narrator reports to Man that the soldiers shouldn't be underestimated. These men are driven by a desire to be recognized and remembered.

The narrator tries to convince Bon not to return to Vietnam. He tells Bon that he must be crazy to go on such a suicide mission. Bon responds by telling him that it's crazier to live when there's no reason to go on living. Bon says he can't remain in America because it's a prison and he's disillusioned with what the Americans had promised the Vietnamese. He says that if any of them were real men, they'd never have left their country. He says he's willing to die because there's nothing left worth living for.



Sonny asks the narrator about the rumors of a secret army and the narrator tells him he knows nothing of it. Sonny says he must know because he's the General's man, to which the narrator replies that's a good reason not to tell a communist about any plans. Sonny asks why the narrator thinks he's a communist and says that even if he were, he wouldn't tell the narrator. The narrator reflects on how subversives have to remain in disguise. Ms. Mori wonders why the soldiers don't realize the war is over and the narrator says that wars don't die, they just go to sleep.

The narrator goes home and dreams of an ancient kapok tree against which he lays his head to go to sleep. He realizes that the bark of the tree is an ear. Half of the tree is above him and half is rooted beneath the earth. When he looks at the tree it has hundreds of ears.

In Chapter 14 the narrator sees a copy of an article that Sonny has written titled "Move On, War Over" lying on the General's desk. He photographs the article to send to Man just as he's been photographing all of the General's documents. Since returning from the Philippines he has been unemployed and has been acting as the General's clerk. The General is not paying him, but gives him generous gifts of expensive liquor. The narrator wonders how he will manage to report on Bon's actions, but still save him.

The General returns from working at the restaurant. He is in a foul mood as he usually is after manning the cash register where the salutes of his soldiers remind him that he's not wearing his uniform now or where civilians make snide comments about him being a General. He points to Sonny's article and asks if the narrator has read it. He says he hasn't and the General reads pieces of the article to him in which Sonny has questioned the purpose of the Fraternity and hinted that they may intend to overthrow the communist regime. The article also suggests that they should seek peaceful reconciliation. The narrator says that newsmen are always troublesome and the General asks how they know Sonny isn't a communist sympathizer. The General asks if Sonny held such sympathies in college and the narrator says he did. The General asks why the narrator didn't warn him about Sonny before and then says the narrator is too sympathetic. He tells the narrator he may have to do something about Sonny.

The narrator tries to distract himself from thinking about the General's suggestion that he do something about Sonny by going to a nightclub where Lana is performing. Bon goes with him. The narrator recalls how he met Man and Bon when the two jumped in to defend him from bullies. He says he believes he's still friends with them today because they are all people who feel they need to stand up for people who are weaker.

Lana gets on stage and is dressed in a miniskirt, bustier, and thigh-high boots. She sings a song about unrequited love, which draws the attention of the crowd. Then she signs a rendition of Nancy Sinatra's "Bang Bang" in which she uses English, French, and Vietnamese that reminds listeners of life in Vietnam and the violence they lived with there as well as the people they loved and their home. It also reminds them that they can never forget.



When Lana gets off stage, the narrator goes to her table to talk to her. He compliments her and she says he probably agrees with her father about her singing being a waste of time. He says he does not and she says her parents worry that she won't be able to marry someone respectable and rich. He can't help himself and looks at her cleavage where he sees a gold cross. They continue to talk through the evening between her songs. During that time he learns a lot about her social and political ideals. Lana eventually joins the narrator and Bon at their table where she talks to Bon about music and Saigon. When Lana asks Bon about his wife and child he cries and tells her they are dead, which surprises the author since he never talks about them. Lana hugs Bon and the narrator is moved with love for his friend and desire for Lana.

In Chapter 15, the narrator courts Lana. He writes her letters and sings to her. Bon asks what will happen when the General finds out about their relationship and the narrator says he doesn't need to know because he and Lana both know they'll never marry. He says that if there is a God, He didn't intend for men and women to be slaves to each other. As they talk, a shoplifter tries to take a bottle from the liquor store. Bon grabs the baseball bat under the counter to threaten the shoplifter. The narrator says that Bon is teaching the shoplifter a lesson in the same way they'd been taught.

The narrator is reminded of the way his father would sometimes hit their knuckles with a ruler during lessons. His father never showed any regret because everyone is guilty of Original Sin, so the punishment was always deserved. He thinks that even if he commits sins with Lana, they'll never be enough since they wouldn't be original, but perhaps they would allow him a glimpse at eternity. Bon is tapping the crying shoplifters on the head with the bat and they beg for forgiveness. The narrator thinks about how Christian ideas are so embedded in America that they are even printed on the money. He then thinks that at least the shoplifters know one of the motives for belief, fear, but wonders if they could ever be taught the other reason, love.

The General returns to the store at his usual times and is preoccupied with thoughts of the problem of Sonny and the rumors that are spreading. The narrator chauffeurs the General to a country club. While driving, the narrator sees a vision of the crapulent major in the seat next to him and the major says he can't wait to see how this current plot ends.

They arrive at the country club the Congressman has invited them to and are surprised that it doesn't look the way they expected it to. Instead, it just looks like a steak house. Richard Hedd is in attendance at the dinner they've been invited to. The Congressman greets them and introduces them to several men in suits and to Dr. Hedd. The narrator asks Dr. Hedd to autograph his dogeared copy of Hedd's book. The Congressman says that the narrator is a student of the American character and Dr. Hedd asks why he's reading his book since it's about Asians. The narrator responds that the best way to get to know someone is to understand what they think of you. The narrator thinks about passages of Hedd's book that apply to him.

A conversation ensues and Dr. Hedd uses the term "saving face." One of the men calls him on it and Dr. Hedd says he uses the term out of respect and that there is nothing



wrong with respecting your enemy. The Congressman mentions that a million Vietnamese died of famine when the Japanese were strong. The narrator is concerned that the Congressman has damaged their status as pleasant dinner companions, which could affect Hedd helping them garner funding for the Fraternity. He deflects the conversation by saying that most Vietnamese people in America are less focused on the past and more focused on becoming Americans. Dr. Hedd turns the conversation to a question of happiness and concludes that the narrator has figured out that "the pursuit of happiness is promised to all Americans, but unhappiness is guaranteed for many" (Chapter 15, paragraph 34). The mood of the table becomes dark and the General intervenes by saying that freedom is guaranteed and that is more important.

Dinner goes on and the General finally has a chance to talk about his cause. He does so carefully and the narrator says he knows the General understands that white people are often afraid of non-whites, so he must be patient. During the conversation, the General shows himself to be intelligent and aware of history as well as Dr. Hedd's book. Dr. Hedd says that in the Orient life is plentiful so they don't attach the same importance to life as the Westerner does. They ask the narrator what he thinks and he says that life is important to Orientals, but to the Oriental life is merely valuable, while to Westerners it is invaluable. Dr. Hedd is impressed by the response. The Congressman says they can now introduce them to the country club and they're taken to another room where there are beautiful women arranged on leather sofas. The General doesn't understand and the narrator says he'll explain it later.

Analysis

The theme of Betrayal is most evident in this section through the romantic relationships of the narrator. When he returns from the Philippines he discovers that Ms. Mori and Sonny have begun dating. He feels betrayed by both Sonny and Ms. Mori. The betrayal is further emphasized when he realizes that Sonny has actually taken the time to get to know Ms. Mori since he is able to tell the narrator about the people in the photographs of Ms. Mori's photo album. Even Ms. Mori's cat who has never liked the narrator has warmed up to Sonny and sits in his lap. The narrator feels betrayed by Ms. Mori not only because she is dating Sonny, but also because she's clearly let Sonny into her life in a way she never let the narrator in.

During the narrator's visit with Sonny and Ms. Mori, they have a conversation about Abe, Ms. Mori's brother who now lives in Japan. The author uses this story to underline the theme of betrayal as it applies to other Asian cultures. The Mori family was placed in an internment camp with other Japanese Americans during World War II, which must have felt like they were being betrayed by the country they'd come to live in. Then, when Abe is an adult and the Vietnam War begins, he's drafted by that same country that betrayed him to fight in the war. When he refuses, he's imprisoned, which adds to the betrayal. After he is released from prison, Abe decides to go live in Japan since white Americans have been telling him to do so all his life. However, when he arrives in Japan, Abe isn't accepted there either because he's Americanized. Therefore, Abe is betrayed by the Japanese people living in Japan as well.



The story of Abe also ties into the author's theme of Duality. Abe is another example of a character who suffers from his dual nature. He's not American enough for white Americans who insist he should go back to Japan, though he was likely born in America like his sister. However, the American side of his personality makes him unable to assimilate into Japanese culture in Japan.

Another example of the theme of Betrayal occurs in the narrator dating Lana. He obviously knows the General would not approve of the relationship, and so is betraying the General's confidence by dating his daughter and compounding that betrayal by not telling him about it.

The author also shows the theme of Betrayal in the way that Bon has begun to feel about America. He now feels like life in America has become a prison and he needs to get out. He plans to return to Vietnam with the General's soldiers even though there's very little chance of them returning alive. He believes the Americans lied to the Vietnamese and made promises they failed to keep. Bon's feeling betrayed by America shows an evolution of his character from the loyal patriot he was at the beginning of the novel to a broken man whose political views have shifted.

The theme of Sympathy is explored in the way the narrator feels when he sees the General's soldiers dressed in their uniforms and training. He sees how these men have gone from being broken men trying to get by in America to proud men ready to fight again for the cause they believe in. He notes that their posture has changed and they hardly look like the men he would see in the General's restaurant. The narrator sympathizes with them because he can see that, like him, all they really want is for someone to recognize the sacrifices they've made to fight for what they believe in and remember them when they're gone. The narrator reports back to Man that the communists shouldn't underestimate these men because of their desire to be recognized and remembered. His letter reveals how he is feeling as well because he is, in a sense, telling Man that he himself should not be underestimated either.

It's interesting to note that the General accuses the narrator of being too sympathetic when the General accuses the narrator of failing to warn him about Sonny. This indicates that even the General, a man who the narrator has been trying to hide his true identity from for years, can see what kind of man the narrator really is. He can see that the narrator is a man who cares about other people and whose sympathies sometimes lead him to make decisions that get him into trouble.

The theme of Religion is displayed best in the scene in which Bon and the narrator are talking in the liquor store and a shoplifter attempts to take a bottle. Bon and the narrator are talking about Lana and the narrator says he knows that he and Lana will never be married. He says that even if there is a God, God didn't intend for men and women to be slaves to one another. Though the narrator claims he doesn't believe in God, this is another instance in which he uses religion to justify his actions.

Then, when Bon goes after the shoplifters with a baseball bat, the narrator reflects on the way that Bon is teaching a lesson in the same way their lessons were taught to



them. He remembers his father, the priest, hitting their knuckles with a ruler just as Bon is tapping on the heads of the shoplifters with the bat. The author returns again to the idea of Original Sin being justification for unwarranted punishment since the priest never felt guilty about punishing children because they were all at least guilty of Original Sin. He further expounds on the idea of Original Sin as the narrator talks about the sins he'd like to commit with Lana, saying they'll never be enough because they certainly won't be original. He hopes, though, that he'll get to see a bit of eternity while he's with Lana because, as an atheist, he doesn't believe he'll see eternity in any other way.

The narrator's depiction of the scene also includes his feelings that people are taught religious beliefs through fear. As the Bon threatens the shoplifters, they beg for mercy. The narrator says it's obvious they have learned that one reason to believe is fear. He goes on to wonder if they'll ever know that the other reason to believe is love. This statement is interesting in that it reveals the narrator must, at least at some level, believe in God. There is a love there, even if he can't quite admit it. He recognizes that the foundation of Christianity is really in love.

The theme of East versus West is evident in the negotiations that take place between the men who attend the dinner party at the country club. The discussions begin with the men talking about the narrator and his being a student of Western culture. Dr. Hedd wonders why the narrator would read his book since it's about Asians. The author responds that the best way to understand Westerners is to understand how they see Asians. This conversation can be seen as a verbal sparring match since Dr. Hedd is attempting to gain insight into the narrator's personality while the narrator is trying to protect his true identity while also trying to help the General get funding for the Fraternity. On a couple of occasions during the conversation, the narrator recognizes the need to steer the conversation away from the conflict between the East and West in order to keep the businessmen in good spirits so that they will give money. The General, too, sees the need to avoid a conflict since he is consciously careful about the way he speaks to the white men at the table while explaining the Fraternity and its needs. Only after the General and the narrator have proven they aren't combative Asians and are worthy of being in attendance with the white businessman are they allowed into the true country club where there are beautiful women in a lavish setting.

Also of note in this section is the strange dream the narrator has about a kapok tree. He dreams that he leans his head against the bark only to realize the bark is an ear and the tree has hundreds of ears. The ears on the tree signify the way that he must always listen and be aware in his job as a spy. However, there are hundreds of ears because he is aware that someone is always listening and the more people are aware, the harder it is to hide his identity. The narrator also says that half the tree is above the ground and half is underground. The half of the tree that is above the ground, the one with all the ears, stands for the narrator's public life where he must submerge his identity as a spy to live among the people he is spying on, the same people who might hear him slip up and reveal himself. The half of the tree that is underground is the part of himself he must keep hidden from everyone around him. The dream indicates the narrator is experiencing great anxiety about his role as a spy and his fear of being found out is



growing. He is also having difficulty living his dual life in which he must hide such a large part of himself.

Another interesting aspect of this section is the way in which the major's ghost shows up as Sonny's death is being plotted. The major's ghost represents the narrator's guilt at having done things in order to maintain his false identity. Not only does the narrator feel guilty about having participated in the assassination of the major, but he is about to add to that guilt by killing Sonny as well. The major scoffs at him and says he can't wait to see how it all plays out, but the narrator knows what will happen. He knows he will be forced to kill Sonny.

Discussion Question 1

What does the narrator mean when he says that Asians think life is valuable, but Americans think it's invaluable? Why does he say this? Does he really believe that?

Discussion Question 2

How have Bon's political views changed since coming to America?

Discussion Question 3

How does the conversation at the country club exemplify the tensions between the East and the West?

Vocabulary

genial, eddies, nefarious, grizzled, affectless, subversive, chintzy, itinerary, nostalgic, listless, ensuing, lucre, dogeared



Chapters 16-18

Summary

At the beginning of Chapter 16 the General tells the narrator he can go with the soldiers to the homeland if he can do what needs to be done, but he does not specify what he believes needs to be done. He tells the narrator he will leave it up to him to figure out. Man has written to the narrator and ordered him to stay in America. He tells Bon what the General said about going back to the homeland and Bon confirms that it's Sonny they need to take care of. Bon tells the narrator that he will kill Sonny for the narrator and the narrator can tell the General that he did it himself. However, the narrator knows he can't accept Bon's offer. He thinks of the killing as a rite or a sacrament and his father's teaching that what made a man created in the image of God like God is the soul. He states that God must be a killer, too. Bon reassures him that killing Sonny is nothing to feel bad about because they'll prevent him from making more Viet Cong.

The narrator goes to Lana's apartment to seek solace. Although the narrator doesn't reveal he's going to kill Sonny, they talk about having fantasized about killing someone or what life might be like if someone were dead. The narrator tells Lana he's thought about killing his father and tells her he was a priest. She is shocked by this and he finds that endearing. He tells Lana that as a child he wished his father would acknowledge him as his son, but when he didn't he just wished his father would die. Lana leans forward and it's clear she wants the narrator to kiss her, but he moves away and says he needs to go take care of something. He drives to Sonny's apartment.

The narrator arrives at Sonny's carrying the pistol and silencer that the General gave Bon money to purchase for the narrator. He rings Sonny's intercom and Sonny buzzes him up. Sonny thinks the narrator is there to talk about Ms. Mori. The narrator says it was his fault because he never wrote to her. Sonny offers him a drink and begins to talk about politics but then apologizes and says that talking politics is a weakness of his. He tells the narrator that's what he loves about Ms. Mori, her willingness to listen to him. As the narrator listens to Sonny he can see the red scar on his hand through the glass. He can hear Bon's voice in his head urging him to get it over with.

The narrator confesses to Sonny that he is a communist agent. Sonny doesn't believe him and thinks the narrator is trying to convince him to admit that he's a communist. They argue and the narrator shoots at Sonny, but misses. Instead, the first bullet hits the radio that has been playing news of Vietnam and the second pierces Sonny's hand. The narrator finally kills Sonny, wipes his prints from his glass, and dons a disguise before leaving. He vomits into the gutter before getting into his car.

Chapter 17 begins the next morning and Bon is helping soothe the narrator with liquor. The narrator had gone to Lana's after killing Sonny, but even a night with her didn't erase what he'd done. Bon assures the narrator he'll feel better when they get to Thailand. They are leaving the next day so that the narrator can avoid the law and Ms.



Mori. The narrator has written to Man to tell him he knows he is disobeying orders, but he must go with Bon in order to save his life.

The narrator, Bon, the affectless lieutenant, and the grizzled captain leave on a plane. As they leave the lieutenant wonders why they ever called America the "beautiful country." The narrator thinks of all the things he'll miss, particularly the optimism of America. Bon is happy to be going back to where everyone looks like them, but the narrator reminds him he doesn't look like all of the Vietnamese because he's only half Vietnamese.

The narrator tries to sleep on the plane, but every time he closes his eyes he sees the crapulent major or Sonny. When he picks up his rucksack to exit the plane it feels heavier as though his guilt is weighing it down. Claude greets them at the gate. The narrator wonders if one of Man's agents is in the crowds of natives they pass by. Claude squeezes the narrator's shoulder and tells him he's proud of him, which the narrator knows is Claude's way of expressing his love for the narrator. Claude tells the narrator he's heard what the narrator did and that he shouldn't feel bad about it because Sonny had it coming.

Claude takes them to a club where there are scantily clad women. Bon declines and says he's going for a walk. The narrator says he'll go with Bon. As the narrator and Bon stand outside the club smoking they hear tourists passing by making crude remarks about the women. Bon says he has to leave before he kills someone and they end up going to see "The Hamlet" at a movie theater. The audience reacts positively to the movie and the narrator finds himself caught up in it as well. The audience is silent during the rape scene. The narrator realizes the scene has gotten the response the Auteur intended. They stay through the credits and everyone down to the animals and the laundresses are credited, but the narrator's name never appears. The narrator is angry and feels like the Auteur couldn't kill him in real life, so he did it in this work of fiction.

Bon and the narrator go to their hotel. The narrator is unable to sleep and thinks about a conversation he had with the General before leaving. The General told him that he and Madame had always seen him as their adopted son. The General then asked him how he could have tried to seduce their daughter. He told the narrator that there were many rumors about the narrator and Lana. The General said he was very disappointed and had wanted the narrator to remain by his side, but after hearing the rumors he decided to let him go to Thailand. He reminded the narrator that the narrator is a bastard and they would never let their daughter be with someone like him.

The next day they go to where the soldiers are assembled. The narrator is surprised at their ragtag appearance. The grizzled captain remarks that the soldiers look like Viet Cong. They are welcomed by the admiral, who refers to himself as uncle like Ho Chi Minh. The admiral tells them that he could have gone to America when he left Vietnam, but the Americans had betrayed them and he knew they were done fighting, so he'd gone to Thailand. He knew the Thai would continue to fight communism because it is affecting their borders. Bon asks the admiral if he really thinks they can succeed. The



admiral says he knows they can. He tells Bon to think about how Christianity began with just Jesus and his apostles and their faith. They have 200 apostles and a radio station proclaiming the word of freedom, so they have things Jesus never had. They also have faith. Bon says Jesus died and the admiral tells him that if they die on this mission, the people they save will be grateful to them. He says it doesn't sound like Bon is a believer. Bon says he used to be a believer, but he's not anymore. Now he just wants to kill communists.

At Chapter 18 begins the narrator has been in Thailand for two weeks. He is surprised to have encountered the three marines that he and Bon fought with in Saigon. They had ended up on the admiral's ship and have been in Thailand ever since. The narrator and Bon reluctantly shake hands with the marines who tell them they will be going across the border, too.

12 men, among them the narrator and Bon, form a reconnaissance team and set out accompanied by a Lao farmer and a Hmong scout as their guides. Instead of armor, they all wear a picture of the Virgin Mary over their hearts that the admiral had given them before they left. Claude had given them all high fives and spoken to the narrator to give him advice about staying safe.

The group walks for two nights. The narrator carries his rucksack and a gun. He thinks about Lana as they walk. Lana had told him she liked him because he was everything her mother hated. He says he is so used to hatred that this didn't bother him.

The lieutenant walks into the trees to relieve himself and there is an explosion. They men prepare for an attack and the lieutenant screams. One of the marines says they have to shut him up, so the grizzled captain puts his hand over the lieutenant's mouth and pinches his nose shut until he stops thrashing and dies. They realize they are not under attack. The explosion was due to a mine. The grizzled captain wants to bury the lieutenant, but the marines tell him that will take too long so he insists they carry the body with them. The narrator is forced to carry the lieutenant's severed leg. He carries it as far away from himself and it reminds him of standing in front of his father's class holding a Bible on his outstretched hands as punishment. This thought makes him recall the phone call he received notifying him of his father's death. The deacon who called him said he found the narrator's number in his father's papers and that he was important to the priest. When they finally stop walking, they bury the lieutenant. As the narrator kneels at the grave, he sees Sonny and the major and they ask him if the lieutenant's ghost will have one leg or two.

They reach the Mekong river, which, the narrator notes in his confession, is where the Commandant was waiting for him. The group constructs a bamboo raft and they take turns crossing the river. The major and Sonny sit with the narrator as he waits and go with him when he crosses. When the narrator reaches the other side they are attacked. Bon pulls him down to the ground and urges him to shoot. Suddenly the narrator realizes that he and Bon are the last ones shooting. Someone with a northern accent calls out for them to give up. He looks at Bon and sees tears in his eyes. Bon says that



if it weren't for the narrator, he'd die there. The narrator realizes he's succeeded in saving Bon, but has only saved him from death.

Analysis

This section of the novel contains an excellent example of the theme of Religion that occurs when the narrator and Bon reach Thailand. There they meet the admiral who tells them he is certain they can succeed in defeating the communists in Vietnam. To illustrate his point, he compares them to Jesus and his apostles. He reminds them that from one man and his 12 followers, along with the word of God and their faith, the Christian religion grew. He says they can defeat the communists because they have far more followers than Jesus did. They also have a radio proclaiming their message of freedom, which is like the word of God. And, of course, they have their faith in their mission. Bon tells the admiral that Jesus died, and the admiral assures him that if they should die on the mission, the people they save will be grateful to them just as Christians are faithful to Jesus. Bon tells the admiral he no longer believes, but it's unclear if he means he no longer believes in God or in their military mission. It is quite possible that the author means he doesn't believe in either anymore since Bon says his sole reason for being there is to kill communists. The author's use of this religious comparison gives readers who are familiar with Christianity some understanding of the certainty those who fought on the side of the Republic had of their eventual success and belief that they were on the right side of the issue.

The theme of Religion is also explored when the narrator and Bon talk about killing Sonny. The narrator believes he must be the one to kill Sonny because killing is akin to a religious sacrament. He says that if a man's soul is what makes him a being made in God's image, then God must be a killer, too. By taking Sonny's life, the narrator seems to be saying he will become more like God, an interesting statement since he's repeatedly said he doesn't believe in God.

The theme of Betrayal also plays a major part in this section of the novel. The most obvious betrayal that occurs is the narrator's assassination of Sonny. The fact that the first bullet the narrator fires destroys the radio that has been playing news from Vietnam is significant since the narrator has figuratively destroyed the political situation that has put him in a position that forces him to kill. The second bullet pierces the palm of Sonny's hand, reminding the reader of the scars that the narrator, Bon, and Man have on their hands. This may signify the narrator's knowledge that Sonny is like them and could have been the narrator's friend under different circumstances.

The scene of Sonny's death also allows the author to touch on the theme of Duality. The narrator seems unable to cope, in this moment, with his duality as a spy and the General's assistant and so he feels the need to tell someone who he is. He confesses his true identity to Sonny because Sonny is a safe choice since he's about to die. The narrator's continual struggle with duality has placed him in yet another undesirable situation that he would not have otherwise been in. Had the narrator not needed to hide



his identity as a spy, he may not have felt the need to prove his loyalty and deflect suspicion from himself.

Another example of betrayal is the narrator's disobedience to Man when he decides to go to Thailand with Bon, which is against the orders Man has given him. He knows Man will be unhappy with him, so he writes a letter to Man to apologize and explain himself. Yet, he still worries about Man's reaction since upon arriving in Thailand he wonders if Man has operatives among the crowds of natives who might be watching him.

When the narrator and Bon are captured, the narrator feels as though he's betrayed Bon. He knows that while he has saved Bon's life, that's all he has saved. Bon tells the narrator that he would die right there rather than be captured were it not for the narrator. Bon's unfailing friendship to the narrator causes him to be captured and forced to exist in a prison, which the narrator knows will continue to change Bon from the man he was before they went to America. He knows that he has not saved Bon from oppression, imprisonment, or the communist rule that Bon despises.

The narrator also realizes he's betrayed the General's confidence by pursuing a relationship with Lana. However, the General betrays the narrator when he calls the narrator a bastard, a word he must know is extremely hurtful to the narrator, and says that he would never allow his daughter to marry someone like the narrator. The narrator is especially hurt by this because he'd always thought the General was accepting of his mixed heritage and perhaps even thought of it as an asset that allowed the narrator to more fully understand the Americans.

Finally, the author uses the narrator's viewing of the movie "The Hamlet" to create yet another example of betrayal. As the narrator watches the credits, he discovers that his name has been left out completely. This makes him very angry and he realizes that the Auteur may not have succeeded in killing him in real life, but he did it on film by failing to acknowledge the work the narrator did.

The theme of Sympathy is briefly touched on in this section when Claude sympathizes with the narrator whom he knows is uneasy about having killed Sonny. Claude shows his affection for the narrator in his greeting and trying to reassure his old friend that Sonny's death was warranted since Sonny deserved it. The reader will recall that it is Claude who believes that all men are guilty of Original Sin and so are never innocent, which is why he says that Sonny deserved to die.

Sympathy is also evident when the narrator stays outside the club that Claude takes them to so that he can keep Bon company. The narrator, as the reader knows, would normally have no qualms about spending time with strippers and hookers, but he gives up the chance for a night of fun for the sake of his friend.

The author further develops the symbolism of the rucksack the narrator carries when he notes that it feels heavier as he gets off the plane in Thailand. He feels as though the added guilt of having killed Sonny is weighing him down. The narrator's ever-present rucksack has transformed from a symbol of his friendship with Claude into a symbol of



his life as a spy. He carries the tools he uses as a spy in the bottom of the rucksack and it now carries the guilt he's assumed in his efforts to maintain his false identity. The ghosts of the major and Sonny also accompany the narrator to Thailand as symbols of the guilt he cannot shake. They sit with him on the plane and go with him on the mission.

Discussion Question 1

Why does the narrator confess to Sonny that he is a communist spy?

Discussion Question 2

What does the narrator say about how killing relates to God? What does this reveal about his character? Do you think he really believes what he says?

Discussion Question 3

Why do the crapulent major and Sonny continue to follow the narrator around even after he goes back to Vietnam?

Vocabulary

succinct, consolation, subversive, debased, prone, hematoma, vertiginous, malcontents, agitation, hierarchy, reconnaissance, depleted, julienned, adhering



Chapters 19-21

Summary

At the beginning of Chapter 19 the narrator is face to face with the commandant who questions the dramatic nature of the narrator's confession. The narrator comments that since he is a prisoner and the commandant is the one holding him, it may be difficult for them to sympathize with one another. The commandant insists the narrator is not a prisoner like those he was brought in with. Instead, he's a guest of the commissar and guests can leave. He then revises his statement and calls the narrator a patient who is being cured of the dangerous ideas he's picked up.

The commandant and the narrator have been meeting weekly and the commandant says the commissar believes that the narrator is finally ready to be cured. The narrator still has not met the commissar. The commandant tells the narrator that his confession was the necessary first step. It's not the commandant's fault it took a year to write and the confession still isn't very good. The narrator politely says he doesn't understand why his confession still isn't good enough. The commandant says the commissar believes that the confession is not genuine and it lacks the necessary style. He says it's obvious in the confession that the narrator prefers foreign intellectuals and culture. The narrator admits he's been contaminated by the West and the commandant says it's odd that he can't put that into writing.

The commandant goes on to give examples of native intellectuals the narrator might have quoted instead of the Westerners he uses as examples. He asks about a particular quote and the narrator says his mother taught him the quote once. The narrator says he believes his confession does show reverence for his mother and disdain for his foreign father. The commandant admits that the narrator is tainted due to his heritage and says it's hard for a child to succeed given that situation.

The two talk about the decent living conditions the prisoners have in comparison to the cave the commandant once lived in. The commandant talks about how the prisoners are being reeducated to understand that the Americans turned their country into a wasteland and they must work hard to rebuild it. The commandant reveals a jar containing the preserved body of a baby born with two heads as a result of chemicals used by the Americans. He insists that the narrator's confession still shows a faulty character since he defends Bon.

The commandant informs the narrator that the commissar wants to meet him to clarify some issues. The narrator is offered a meal of wood pigeon and manioc soup. He reflects on the terrible diet he's been offered while in prison and the trouble it's caused in his digestive tract.

The narrator realizes he should have written a short confession consisting of the Communist Party slogans, but he couldn't bring himself to write them. The commandant



tells him his confession shows he is selfish, immoral, and is full of Christian superstition. The narrator insists he's anti-American and the commandant says that shows he still identifies as American since they no longer define themselves as anti-American since the defeat of the Americans. They finish dinner and the commandant takes the narrator to meet the commissar.

As they walk over to meet the commissar, the narrator thinks about how the prisoners think he is a hero thanks to Bon. They blame the commissar for the narrator's imprisonment and they talk of the commissar's facelessness, which some have respect for since it shows his dedication to his cause. The narrator hopes to learn why the guards fear the commissar and the revolutionaries fear each other if they are all supposed to be comrades. Before leaving the narrator at the commissar's quarters, the commandant tells him that he doesn't see as much potential in the narrator as the commissar does. The narrator realizes he's not out of the commandant's control yet and so thanks him for all he's done.

The commissar calls to the narrator to come in and the narrator recognizes the voice. He walks into a simple room and the commissar appears with a face that is horribly burned. He asks the narrator if he's beyond recognition and the narrator realizes it's Man.

In Chapter 20 the narrator is blindfolded and gagged before he can respond to his shock at Man being the commissar. He is stripped and his ears are plugged and muffed. He's left deaf, dumb, and blind strapped to a mattress. He begins to panic and then thinks this is his final test and he must be calm. He reminds himself that he's the perfect Oriental student according to Professor Hammer, the finest representative of his country according to Claude, and twice of everything according to his mother. He sees the crapulent major and Sonny circling him and berating him about his fate in relationship to their deaths.

Time passes and the narrator realizes he's hungry. He thinks about a conversation he and Man had once about how if the rich would all spare a bowl of rice for the poor, there would be no starving people. Man told him that sympathy alone couldn't change things, but a revolution could free the people. The narrator realizes that Man meant they'd be free from classes, but not that individuals would be free since many revolutionaries had died in prison and he might die, too. Every time he starts to fall asleep a foot nudges him awake again.

Finally someone removes the hood from his head, but not the blindfold. The muffs and earplugs are also removed. Someone pours water down his throat. The narrator hears Man telling him that he told the him not to come. The narrator asks how he could have not returned to his home and how Man can torture his friend like this. Man says he is trying to prevent worse from happening. Man says he is trying to get the narrator to remember what he's forgotten. The narrator says he's already confessed everything, but Man says he has not. He tells the narrator that he'll untie him if he can answer a question. He asks what is more important than freedom and independence and the narrator answers that nothing is. The answer is wrong.



Man tells him his plan to keep Bon alive by getting himself killed was foolish and asks where the two would be without him. He says he volunteered to be the commissar of the camp when he heard Bon and the narrator were being sent there. He says he's kept the commandant from killing Bon. He tells the narrator the commandant would have put him on a demining squad if it weren't for the commissar. He says he is not the one the narrator must convince, but the commandants of the world who are threatened by people like the narrator.

The narrator weeps at the thought of Man being separated from his wife and children and tells Man they wouldn't turn away from him in spite of his burned face. Man becomes angry and tells him he can't imagine what it's like to have your wife and children cringe and your friends not recognize you. The narrator begs to know what happened to Man. He explains that he was the victim of napalm. His wife found him dying in a hospital and got him the help he needed to survive.

Man tells him he must revise his confession one more time to please the commandant. The narrator asks Man to tell him what he's forgotten that he must confess. Man quotes from the narrator's confession about the communist agent who had stuffed the list of names in her mouth. Man demands to know her fate. The narrator says he didn't do anything to her and Man says that's it, he did nothing.

Man says he needs to go rest, but tells the narrator that while he was suffering from his burns he thought about the narrator and how he'd lost his country and it was Man's fault. However, now that the narrator has returned, he can't imagine that the narrator's suffering was worse than his.

In Chapter 21, the narrator begins to refer to himself in the third person as "the prisoner." He says the prisoner realizes that in order to be a true revolutionary he must also be a historical subject and that he will only remember his history by remaining awake. His hood, blindfold, and earplugs are removed to reveal he is in a completely white room.

Three people dressed in white lab coats stand beside his mattress and begin to question him. He is asked who he is and concludes that he must be "a bad gook." When asked what he is, he becomes angry and says he knows what they think he is. They think he's a bastard and a counterrevolutionary. He then breaks down in tears and wonders if his sacrifices will ever be recognized. When asked what his name is, the narrator feels as though he's forgotten his name. He gave himself his American name and his mother gave him his native name, so he could never forget his name. He says his name and the commissar says he can't even get his name right. The commissar tells the doctor to give him the serum.

The doctor tells the narrator they must continue with their experiment to help him remember and points to a field telephone in a satchel. The doctor attaches the narrator to the phone using a clip that he puts on the narrator's toe. He says they don't intend to cause the narrator pain, just to provide a stimulus to keep him awake. The doctor holds



up a wristwatch and says that he's rewired the phone to cause a spark each time the secondhand crosses the twelve.

Man asks to be alone with the narrator. Everyone leaves the room except Man, the crapulent major, and Sonny. Man holds up a book that was found in the narrator's quarters at the General's villa. He asks the narrator about it and the narrator says it's a CIA book. It's a book that Claude had required for his interrogation class and it contains the methods being used on the narrator.

Man returns and asks if he's remembered what he'd forgotten and the narrator realizes that he does. He recounts the story of the fate of the female agent who was caught with the list in her mouth. He tells Man that the events took place in an old movie theater and that Claude and the crapulent major were there. He had sat by while the agent was repeatedly raped by policemen in an attempt to get her to reveal information about the list. The agent had fought and screamed for a time, but eventually became silent.

After telling the story, the narrator says the policemen had learned their lessons from Claude well and were good students just like the narrator. He then launches into a long list of "ifs" that might have changed the course of his life. He asks if none of those things had happened, could Man please just let him sleep.

Analysis

This section of the novel represents the climax of the story. The action reaches its peak as the narrator is imprisoned and tortured. The author drives the suspense by hiding the identity of the commissar who orders the narrator's written confession and the mystery that surrounds the "faceless" man. The twist of the story is that the commissar turns out to be Man, the narrator's best friend.

The author reinforces the idea of the narrator's unreliable nature through the commandant's comments on his written confession. The commandant calls the confession "dramatic" and accuses the narrator of histrionics. The narrator responds that it's his confession and he'll write it in any manner and style he wishes. This indicates to the reader that perhaps the narrator is more concerned with evoking a certain reaction than he is with telling the whole truth. Indeed, this is underlined when it takes torture for the narrator to reveal the incident in his life that has caused him the greatest guilt, the rape and torture of the female agent while he sat by and did nothing.

The author reveals something of his own thoughts on the value of the written word as the commandant and the narrator talk. The narrator can admit while speaking to the commandant that he has been unduly influenced by the West, but he never actually puts that in writing in his confession. The commandant points that out to him. This may reveal the author's feelings, as a writer, that there is great weight in committing words to paper. In fact, this will become even more apparent in the final section of the novel when the narrator takes great pains to carry his lengthy manuscript with him as his legacy to the world.



In this section, the theme of Betrayal turns to the betrayal of the narrator by the communist movement. The narrator comes to understand that his idea of freedom is not the freedom that the communists offer. Instead, he realizes that the communists only offer freedom from societal classes, but they clearly don't offer freedom for all since the narrator is in a prison. He knows now that the power has simply shifted, but there will always be people who remain under the thumb of those in power. In fact, he wonders why there is so much fear in the communist party when they are all supposed to be comrades. He says the revolutionaries all fear each other and the guards fear the commissar. The narrator's feeling of betrayal by the communists is compounded by the fact that his best friend is the commissar who has ordered his torture.

The torture the narrator suffers is due to the fact that Man believes the narrator betrayed the female agent he failed to help when she was captured and raped. While the narrator professes to be unaware of what he's forgotten to confess, the reader knows that he never really forgot the incident since the female agent has been mentioned a few times previously. The narrator has consciously forced thoughts of her away, which indicates he knows he did the wrong thing.

The theme of Duality is explored through the questioning and torture of the narrator as well. The commandant tells the narrator that he has been tainted by his mixed heritage and that, to the commandant, it's clear that the narrator never had a chance because he is a bastard.

As he's being tortured, the narrator's duality actually begins to manifest in the way he refers to himself. The narrator gets to a point where he feels like he's outside of his body. He begins to refer to himself as "the prisoner" and tells the events from a third person perspective. The author's use of this perspective enhances the idea that the torture is horrendous to the point where the narrator is no longer himself. In fact, when he is asked his name, the narrator is unable for a moment to remember what his name is. Then, he remembers he has a name his mother gave him and an American name he gave himself, which further illustrates the Duality theme. The narrator finally gives a name, though the author still does not reveal what that name is, but it's not the name the commandant and commissar want to hear. Presumably the narrator gave his American name since that seems to be the one that would most anger them. And yet, it's possible that in giving his Vietnamese name, the narrator has angered them because they no longer see him as Vietnamese due to his immersion in American culture, so they don't believe he should refer to himself by his given name.

The commandant's belief that the narrator is contaminated by Western ideas is indicative of the East versus West theme. The commandant initially calls the narrator a guest, but then corrects himself to say that the narrator is a prisoner who must be cured. The narrator's Americanization is treated as though it is a disease that he must be rid of. The commandant says he can tell the narrator is contaminated because he uses far more references to Western intellectuals than he does to their own native intellectuals. Having been educated in America and then spending years in America spying on the General at Man's orders, it seems only natural that the narrator would be more familiar with Western literary figures and intellectuals, so his contamination is in part the result



of his work as a communist spy. However, the commandant clearly doesn't see it that way. He says the narrator is weak and his character is faulty. The only thing the commandant can see of worth in the narrator is the fact that the narrator shows his love for his Vietnamese mother and his disdain for his French father.

The theme of Religion is only briefly mentioned when the commandant remarks that the narrator's confession is full of "Christian superstition." His comment is interesting since the narrator has repeatedly said he's an atheist, yet the commandant, like the reader, can see that isn't entirely true. The narrator seems to be regurgitating what he knows he's supposed to believe according to Man and the communist movement. However, he cannot let go of the teachings he was brought up with and there seems to be at least an inkling of belief, or at least doubt in the non-existence of God.

The theme of Sympathy reaches its peak in this section of the novel when the narrator shares the story of Man telling him that sympathy cannot change anything, only a revolution can. The narrator had told Man that if only the rich would give a bowl of rice to the poor, no one would go hungry. Of course, the idea of communal property is supposed to be one of the key components of communism. However, Man indicates it isn't sympathy that will cause people to share with one another, but the violence of a revolution. The narrator's sympathetic nature is what the narrator believes has always caused him to fall short. From the outset he has said he is a man of two minds who can see both sides of any issue. As a result, he has been unable to be fully committed to the revolution and has taken actions that have led to his imprisonment. And now, even in prison, the narrator continues to sympathize with his captors. He feels for Man who has suffered terrible injury from napalm and keeps himself from his wife and children because of it. He even feels for the commandant since he understands that the commandant can't sympathize with him because he's supposed to be the captor.

Also of importance within this section is the author's inclusion of some examples of symbolism. The author returns to the symbolism of the color white when the narrator talks about the total whiteness of the room he is in while he's being tortured. This reminds the reader that the narrator previously mentioned that white symbolizes death and mourning in the Asian culture. The author also includes the gruesome symbol of a two-headed baby in a jar. The commandant uses the deformed baby as a means of reminding those he questions that the Americans are responsible for the terrible state of their people. The baby symbolizes the crimes the communists believe the Americans committed against the Vietnamese people.

The author also fulfills the previous foreshadow of the narrator's story about the Watchman who created explosive devices using watches as the timers. The reader is reminded of this story when the narrator is tortured with electrical stimulus that is triggered by a watch.

Discussion Question 1

How does the narrator describe freedom under communism?



Discussion Question 2

Why is the narrator unable to admit in writing that he has been contaminated by Western culture? What might this suggest about the author's feelings toward writing?

Discussion Question 3

Why does the commandant show the narrator the baby in the jar?

Vocabulary

diligent, eminently, moroseness, imperialist, perplexity, collectivities, copious, liberation, cryptic, inciting, serum, diorama, obsidian, capacious



Chapters 22-23

Summary

As Chapter 22 starts, the narrator feels like his consciousness has been separated from his body due to lack of sleep. He looks down at his body and sees the doctor, the commandant, Sonny, and the major standing around him. He refers to himself as the "Holy Spirit" who sees and hears all. He continues to beg for sleep. The commandant tells him he wasn't willing to sacrifice himself for the agent and he tries to protest, but finally gives in and admits he's being reeducated because of what he didn't do.

The commandant and the commissar talk about the narrator's admission. The commissar asks if the commandant is satisfied and says that there is no way the narrator could have saved the Bru comrade or the Watchman and the female agent lived. The Commissar says the narrator should also receive credit for the lives he took, including the life of his father. At first the narrator says he didn't do anything to his father, but then says he didn't mean it. He reveals that he wrote to Man saying he wished his father was dead and Man then assassinated the priest.

Everyone except the commissar, the ghosts, and the narrator leave the room. Man repeatedly asks the narrator what is more precious than freedom and independence. The narrator is unable to come up with the answer Man wants, but says he wishes he were dead. The ghosts applaud and Man draws his gun. As he hears the bullet being loaded into the chamber, he thinks about hearing the bells from his father's church as a child. He also thinks about how he could never have been anything but divided because he's a bastard and he lives in a divided country.

Man sets the gun down and begins untying the narrator's hand. He places the gun in the narrator's hand. Man presses the gun between his own eyes and tells the narrator he's the only one who can do this. They both weep. Man tells the narrator that the commandant won't let the narrator leave until he redeems himself, but that he will not ever let Bon leave. The narrator says he can't leave without Bon. Man says the narrator will die there and asks to be killed first. Man tells the narrator that he's really being reeducated because he's too educated. He says that the committees and commissars don't really care about the reeducation of the prisoners. He says he can't live teaching something he doesn't believe in.

Suddenly Man begins to laugh and the gun falls to the floor. Man says he realizes his request was selfish and that if he died, the narrator and Bon would be killed. The narrator sees a touch of madness in Man's face. He tells the narrator he'll let him go when he can answer the question and then leaves. As he leaves he lifts his hand to wave and the narrator sees the scar on his palm.

When Man is gone, the speakers in the room come on and play the sounds of a baby screaming. The narrator wonders if he screamed like that at his mother and says that if



he did, it's because of his father's genes. He imagines his conception as an invasion and the division of his cells until he became the person he is. Then he imagines the screaming is the female agent and then his mother. He imagines his birth and the doula slicing his frenulum so that his tongue can move. Then he doesn't know who the screaming is and finally he realizes the screaming is him. He is screaming the answer to the question and the answer is "nothing."

In Chapter 23 the narrator's reeducation is over. When he finally screams his answer, Man releases him and holds him while he weeps and laughs hysterically. He says that a good student can never have understood nothing, but a misunderstood fool can. He beats his head against the wall because of his own stupidity until Man and the commandant tie him down again. He says that all truths mean at least two things and the commandant doesn't get the joke.

The doctor is called in and he's moved back to his isolation cell. He is prescribed a better diet, sunlight, and exercise. He sleeps a lot and doesn't talk, which bothers the commandant. The doctor tells the commandant that it's all in the narrator's head. The narrator thinks the doctor is only half right. He says it is all in his mind, but wonders which mind it's in. Finally, the doctor thinks that the act of writing might help the narrator. He gives the narrator the confession he wrote and asks him to copy the confession on to another stack of paper.

As the narrator copies the pages he begins to feel sympathy for the man in the pages who he sees as a fool, but also as someone who might have been too smart for his own good. He wonders if the man chose the correct side of history. When he finishes, he realizes he won't find the answers in those pages, so he asks the doctor for more paper. He writes about what was done to him in the examination room. He feels sorry for the man with two minds as well as sympathy for the man who did these things to him. When he finishes writing, he asks to see the commissar again.

The narrator hasn't seen Man since his recovery began. He thinks Man may have been staying away because he was also conflicted about what he'd done to the narrator. The narrator says he knows that what had been done was necessary because he had to come to the answer himself and Man had attempted to speed up the process through pain. When Man arrives the narrator can see that Man is nervous. He says that Man is also divided. He's the commissar, but also Man. He's the torturer, but also the friend. He comes to realize that seeing oneself as whole is incorrect because everyone is both what they see themselves as and what others see them as.

Man tells the narrator that he's bought both the narrator's and Bon's freedom. They are to go to Saigon to meet one of Bon's cousins and then will leave the country. The narrator embraces Man and knows that Man can never leave the camp. He reflects that he's learned that the revolution has changed from a force for political change into one that hoards power. As a result, independence and freedom are now worth less than nothing. Man holds up his hand to show his scar and the narrator shows his thinking that after everything, these are the only marks on their bodies. Man returns the narrator's rucksack and his copy of "Asian Communism and the Oriental Mode of



Destruction." Man insists he take the book in case he ever needs to send a message. He also gives the narrator the manuscript of his confession.

As Bon and the narrator leave the camp they see some of the others from their group still behind the fences, including one of the marines who wishes them good luck. The commandant asks the narrator if he still has nothing today and he's unable to respond because nothing is unspeakable. Bon tells him that one of the marines died before they were captured. The narrator wonders what they died for and then laughs as he realizes they died for nothing.

Bon and Man arrive in Saigon and go to the navigator's house, Bon's cousin. The navigator tells them they will leave by boat and the chances of survival are only 50-50. They wait two months before leaving during which the narrator continues to work on his manuscript. Paper is in ample supply since everyone is required to write periodic confessions and submit them to the cadres.

On the night before they leave, the narrator has paid his and Bon's fair with the gold the commissar gave him and carries the manuscript and book in his rucksack. He says he has nothing to leave anyone now except his words. They travel by bus to a ferryman at a riverbank and board a skiff that will take them to the larger boat. The narrator straps the rucksack with the manuscript to his back and says it will remain there whether he lives or dies. He still needs to write a few more words. He contemplates what revolutionaries do when they succeed in taking power and then says we can only answer that question for ourselves. He says that tomorrow he will become one of the boat people. That term now bothers him as it seems condescending.

He doesn't feel cynical about his future. Instead, he still sees himself as a revolutionary in search of a revolution. He knows he's not alone and that others, too, are waiting for the right moment. He makes himself one promise, he'll live.

Analysis

This final section of the novel explores the theme of Betrayal through what has become of Man. He no longer believes in the communist movement and feels betrayed by it. The narrator notes that the movement is now just one in which people seek to hoard power. Man no longer feels he can teach communism to the prisoners because he cannot teach what he doesn't believe in, so he begs the narrator to kill him. When the narrator hears the bullet being loaded into the gun, the sound reminds him of the bells on his father's church, a description that lends itself to the religion theme. However, Man realizes he can't die because it would certainly mean the deaths of his friends Bon and the narrator in the prison camp. The narrator sees in Man's eyes that he has gone slightly insane due to his situation.

Man's feeling of betrayal infuses the answer to his question of what is more important than freedom and independence with a double meaning. The correct answer according to communist teaching is "nothing," meaning that of all the things that are important to a



person, freedom and independence should come first. Now, though, Man believes that because of the shift in the movement to a bid for power, independence and freedom have become worth less than nothing. It is only after the narrator understands this that his reeducation comes to an end. Once the narrator understands the duality of the answer, he finds it humorous in a slightly mad way and even laughs when he thinks about how people died for "nothing."

Another illustration of the theme of betrayal is in the way in which the narrator's father died. The narrator has previously said that he often wished his father dead because his father didn't acknowledge him as a son. Then, when he received a call to tell him that his father had died, he learned that his father had always kept information about how to get in touch with him and that he was, in fact, very important to his father. As the narrator is being reeducated, he hears Man talking about the narrator being responsible for the death of his father. It comes out that the narrator wrote to Man once saying that he wanted his father dead, so Man assassinated the priest. Because Man took the narrator's letter as an assassination request, the narrator is responsible for the death of his father and, therefore, betrayed his father.

The theme of Sympathy is evident in that the narrator feels sympathetic toward Man because of his situation. He knows that Man cannot leave the camp, both because of his face and because if he leaves the camp and deserts the communist movement, he will be killed. At the same time, Man also has sympathy for the narrator as is shown when he pleads with the commandant on the narrator's behalf, reminding the commandant of all the things the narrator should be given credit for. Finally, the theme of Sympathy is shown when the narrator says that he feels sympathetic toward the man in the pages of the confession. In the end, it seems he's able to at least understand how his life turned out the way it did, if not able to forgive himself for the things he's done.

The theme of Duality is explored through the narrator's feelings of being divided. As he's tortured, he feels as though he's been separated from his body and, in keeping with the theme of Religion, refers to himself as the all-seeing, all-hearing Holy Ghost. Later, as he reviews and revises his confession manuscript, the narrator talks about the self that is in the pages of the manuscript as "the man" as though the confession isn't about himself. As he struggles to recover, he overhears the doctor telling Man that the narrator's symptoms are all in his mind. The narrator wonders which mind they're in, which takes his belief that he is a man of two minds, as he stated in the opening line of the book, to a more literal level. In fact, he goes on to say that the only reason he could finally understand the true answer to Man's question is because he is a man of two minds, and that is also why he is able to understand Man, a man with no face.

During his reeducation, there is a point when the narrator talks about his conception, which he describes in terms of division. He sees himself as the product of several divisions that lead to the divided man he is. He also talks about how he could never have been anything but divided since he comes from a mixed heritage so that his ethnicity is divided and he was brought up in a country divided by war.



While these final chapters of the novel reveal the betrayal that Man feels and the ways in which the narrator has betrayed the female agent and his father, ultimately they are both redeemed by their steadfast friendship for one another and for Bon. The author returns to the symbolism of the scars they wear on their hands to remind the reader of the importance of this friendship in their lives. Twice Man lifts his hand to wave at the narrator and the narrator notices the scar. The first wave occurs as his reeducation comes to an end. Seeing the scar is likely what helps the narrator to remember that Man is his friend and helps him to understand and sympathize with the situation that Man is in. The second wave occurs as the narrator and Bon leave the camp. Upon seeing the scar, the narrator thinks about how the scar is the only mark that remains on their bodies. Of course that doesn't literally mean that all other scars and marks they've accumulated over the years have disappeared. Instead, the narrator is saying that it is the only mark that matters. All of the things that have happened have not erased the friendship between the three men and that friendship will continue to steer their lives.

Discussion Question 1

Why does the narrator say that the scars on his, Man's, and Bon's hands are the only marks that remain on their bodies?

Discussion Question 2

Why is the answer to the question "nothing?" What does that mean? Why wasn't the narrator correct the first time he said "nothing" was the answer?

Discussion Question 3

Why does the narrator begin to refer to himself as "we" and "our?"

Vocabulary

placid, clairvoyant, averted, partitioned, malevolent, multitudes, metronome, absurd, paradoxical, reunification, reluctant, void, dubious, shambolic



Characters

Narrator

The narrator is the protagonist of the story and the entire novel is written from his perspective as he writes his confession to his communist captors. The narrator's name is never revealed, but the reader knows he is a communist spy who is spying on the General, an officer in the army of the Republic of Vietnam. Under the General, the narrator serves as a captain and works very closely with the General. In fact, at the start of the novel he is living in the General's villa in Vietnam. He has spent a great deal of his life with the General and is, therefore, sympathetic toward the General and his family. Although they should be his enemies since he is a communist, he clearly has warm feelings toward them.

The narrator is a conflicted man who not only genuinely likes the man he's supposed to be spying on, but also has mixed feelings about America, which he should also despise as a communist. The narrator attended college in America and knows a great deal about the culture. He speaks perfect English and is able to submerge himself in popular culture, which leads Ms. Mori, his coworker and romantic interest, to lament the fact that white people love him, but only like her. When the narrator leaves America to go back to Vietnam he admits to himself that he will certainly miss America and the luxuries it offers.

His two best friends with whom he made a blood-brother pact when they were children, are Bon and Man. These two friends reveal a duality in the narrator since they are from two ends of the political spectrum. Man is a devout communist and the narrator's handler as a spy. Meanwhile, Bon is a loyal patriot who has no idea his two best friends are communists. Despite their opposing political views, the three men are devoted to one another. As a result, the narrator puts Bon on the list of evacuees to go to America when Saigon falls and then returns to Vietnam with him to keep him from getting killed.

The narrator also struggles with his mixed heritage and is incensed each time someone calls him a bastard. He is the son of a Vietnamese mother and French father, who was a priest. His mother was very young when she became pregnant with him. Though she was an illiterate peasant, she was also her son's greatest supporter. She often told him that he wasn't half of anything, but twice of everything. The narrator was in America for college when his mother died, so he was unable to say goodbye to her or even visit her grave. This leads him to later claim a fake grave on the set of the movie he works on to symbolize her grave where he can sit and remember her. Because of his mixed heritage, the narrator feels like he doesn't really fit in anywhere. He is too white for the Vietnamese people and isn't white enough for white Americans.

When called upon to assassinate two men at the General's orders, the narrator suffers from immense guilt. He struggles with killing people and worries about whether or not they are innocent. His guilt causes him to carry the men he assassinated with him as



ghosts who plague his conscience throughout the novel, even traveling back to Vietnam with him.

The narrator is also deeply conflicted about religion. He was raised a Catholic and attended school with his father, the Catholic priest, as his teacher. Therefore, he's knowledgeable about the Bible and has remembered the teachings of his father well. Yet, he sees his father as a hypocrite and believes the church to be corrupt. However, he continuously refers back to religion in a way that shows it is a part of who he is, even if it's not a part he likes.

Man/The Commissar

Man is one of the narrator's two best friends with whom he made a blood-brother pact as a boy. Man is a devoted communist and serves as the narrator's handler in his duties as a spy. The narrator reports his findings back to Man while he's in America via letters to Man's aunt in Paris. The letters contain messages written in invisible ink that tell about the General's actions.

Man orders the narrator to travel to America to continue spying on the General after the fall of Saigon, but he orders him to remain in America when the General's troops return to Vietnam. However, because Bon is returning to Vietnam, the narrator chooses to disobey Man's orders in order to keep Bon from getting himself killed.

When the narrator is captured and placed in a communist reeducation camp, it is eventually revealed that Man is the commissar. He has been horribly disfigured by napalm and is often referred to as "faceless" because much of his face has burned away.

Although Man wants to save both the narrator and Bon, who is also in the camp, he must also follow the communist party teachings. Therefore, he orders the torture of the narrator in order to get him to admit to having done nothing when a female communist agent was captured, raped, and tortured while the narrator sat by and watched in his guise as a captain in the General's army. Through the course of the narrator's torture, Man reveals that he has lost faith in the communist movement. Man finally buys the narrator's freedom as well as Bon's and arranges for them to leave Vietnam.

Bon

Bon is one of the narrator's two best friends with whom he made a blood-brother pact as a boy. Bon is a loyal patriot of the Republic of Vietnam, and therefore on the opposite side of the political spectrum from the narrator. However, Bon is unaware that the narrator and Man are communists. Bon is a fighter and the narrator met him when Bon leapt into a fight to help the narrator who was being bullied. As an adult, he retains that fighting spirit until his wife and child are killed as they flee Saigon. After that, Bon is despondent and lacks purpose in America. Though he's a man of few words, Bon explains to the narrator that when his wife and child were alive, he had a purpose as a



husband, father, and soldier, but with them gone and no army to fight in, his life has no meaning. He only becomes happy and more of his old self when he helps the narrator to assassinate the crapulent major. When the General's army is ready to return to Vietnam, Bon is happy to be a part of that army, not necessarily because he believes they can take Vietnam back, but because he wants to kill communists. The narrator's loyalty to Bon makes him return to Vietnam against Man's orders so that he can try to keep Bon from being killed. Bon is with the narrator when both are captured and placed in a communist reeducation camp where Man is the commissar, though Bon never learns the commissar's true identity. Bon is freed from the camp at the same time as the narrator because Man pays for his freedom. He leaves Vietnam with the narrator.

The General

The General is the man that the narrator is assigned to spy on. His name is never revealed and the narrator only ever refers to him as the General. He is a man that truly believes in the cause he fights for. He is exceedingly loyal to the Republic of Vietnam and leads a movement to reassemble his troops to go back to Vietnam and take their homeland back from the communists. He's a proud man, but also a kind and caring man as is evidenced by his sadness when he is forced to leave a portion of his staff behind in Vietnam when he flees. He is generous with his money as he gives each staff member an envelope as he leaves and tells them to take what they want from his villa. He also leaves the keys in his car when he gets on the plane so that someone can make use of it. In America, when he orders the death of the crapulent major, he gives the widow a thick envelope of money to help her care for herself and her children.

The General views the narrator as a son until he learns that the narrator has been pursuing a relationship with the General's daughter, Lana. As the narrator leaves for Vietnam, the General tells him that he knows about the relationship and that he would never let his daughter marry a bastard like the narrator.

Claude

Claude is an American and a CIA operative who befriended the narrator when the narrator was young. Claude helped the narrator go to America for college and gave the narrator a rucksack with a false bottom when he graduated, saying that every man should have a piece of luggage with a false bottom. The narrator hides the camera he uses to take pictures of the General's classified documents in the bottom of the rucksack as well as other items he uses for spying. Claude truly cares about the narrator and the narrator cares about him. Indeed, he is one of the few characters the narrator cares enough about to provide his name. Claude once taught classes to the Vietnamese army about interrogation methods. These same methods are used on the narrator when he is captured by the communists.



Sofia Mori

Sofia Mori, whom the narrator calls Ms. Mori, works with the narrator at the Department of Oriental Studies. She is Japanese-American and was born in America. However, she notes that she is still seen as a foreigner by white Americans even though she speaks perfect English and doesn't speak Japanese at all, a fact that disappoints the Department Chair for whom she works who seems to have hired her only because she's Japanese. Ms. Mori and the narrator develop a casual sexual relationship, though the narrator seems to have deeper feelings for her than she does for him. When the narrator goes to the Philippines to work on a movie, the two lose touch and Ms. Mori begins dating Sonny.

Crapulent Major

The crapulent major is the first person the General orders the narrator to assassinate. The narrator gives the crapulent major's name as a possible spy when the General speculates that there might be spies among them in America. The narrator doesn't believe the major is a spy. He only gives the major's name to draw attention away from himself. Upon being ordered to assassinate the major, the narrator worries about killing an innocent man. He has breakfast with the major in order to get to know him better in hopes of discovering he's guilty of something. Instead, he finds the major to be a bit pathetic and the father of two children. This makes the narrator feel even guiltier after he and Bon carry out the assassination. The major remains with the narrator as a ghost who plagues his guilty conscience even when the narrator returns to Vietnam.

Sonny

Sonny went to college with the narrator. He is a reporter and, as a college student, lead the anti-war faction of the Vietnamese students. Sonny begins dating Ms. Mori when the narrator goes to the Philippines. His articles denouncing further talk of a war that's over and speculating that the crapulent major's death may not have been the result of a robbery lead the General to order the narrator to assassinate Sonny. Sonny's ghost follows the narrator after his death reminding the narrator of his guilt.

Madame

Madame is the General's wife. She worries about raising her children in America because she doesn't think she can protect them from immorality the way she could in Vietnam. She is deeply disappointed in her daughter Lana, who has become Americanized. Though she didn't perform household duties when she lived in Vietnam, she is forced to do so in America since she no longer has servants. She is an excellent cook and the General opens a restaurant serving her delicious Vietnamese foods in order to fund his army.



The Commandant

The commandant is the man to whom the narrator is writing his confession. He is one of the narrator's captors and would have the narrator sent to work in a mine field if it weren't for Man's intervention. The commandant makes the narrator write and rewrite his confession until both he and the narrator are satisfied with the results.

Lana

Lana is the oldest daughter of the General and Madame. She went to college in America and has remained there. She has adopted the American culture and dresses and acts like an American, much to the horror of her parents. She is a singer in a band and dresses in short skirts and tight tops. The narrator is attracted to her and the two begin a romantic relationship, which leads the General to, in a sense, disown the narrator and tell him that a bastard could never marry his daughter.

The Auteur

The Auteur is the writer and director of the movie the narrator works on in the Philippines. He initially rejects the narrator's comments about the script, but later changes his mind and hires the narrator to serve as a manager for the Vietnamese extras on the set. He still treats the narrator as a lesser being and the two argue over a particularly brutal scene in the movie. When the narrator is injured in a premature explosion on the set, the narrator and some of the extras believe the Auteur is responsible.

Violet

Violet is the Auteur's assistant. She immediately judges the narrator according to Asian stereotypes and disregards him. She's very abrupt and cares so little about the narrator that she misspells his name when she sends him a package containing the script for him to review.

Linh and Duc

Linh is Bon's wife and Duc is his son. They are both killed in an attack on the evacuees as they attempt to board a plane to leave Saigon.

Professor Hammer

Professor Hammer serves as the narrator's sponsor when he comes to America as a refugee and helps him to get a job in the Department of Oriental Studies.



The Department Chair

The Department Chair is the narrator's boss at the Department of Oriental Studies. He surrounds himself with Oriental kitsch and rhetoric, but the narrator believes he and the rest of the professors in the department actually know very little about the Asian culture.

The Congressman

The Congressman is supportive of the Vietnamese refugees and the General's movement to rebuild an army to take back Vietnam from the communists. He helps the General to gain funding for the movement.

The Thespian and The Idol

The Thespian and the Idol are the stars of the movie made in the Philippines. Both are white American actors.

Danny Boy, James Yoon, and Asia Soo

These are the Asian actors who play the parts of the Vietnamese siblings in the movie the narrator works on. None of them are Vietnamese.

The Affectless Lieutenant and the Grizzled Captain

These are two officers who are part of the General's army that he assembles in America. Both return to Vietnam with the narrator.

Richard Hedd

Richard Hedd is the author of *Asian Communism and the Oriental Mode of Destruction*, which the narrator and Man use as a cipher in the encoded messages they send one another. The narrator meets Richard Hedd at a dinner party.

The Admiral

The admiral is the leader of the Thai refugee camps. He fashions himself after Ho Chi Minh, even referring to himself as "Uncle."



Marine Lieutenants

The narrator and Bon encounter three marine lieutenants in Vietnam at the beginning of the novel. They argue with the marines and the narrator pulls a gun on one when he calls the narrator a bastard. When the narrator returns to Vietnam, he is reunited with these marines who are part of the mission. One is killed when they are attacked and the other two are imprisoned at the reeducation camp.



Symbols and Symbolism

Rucksack

The narrator receives a rucksack with a false bottom from Claude when he graduates. The rucksack represents not only his friendship with Claude, but also his life as a spy. He carries the tools he uses to report on the General's activities in the false bottom of the rucksack. When he returns to Vietnam, he feels the rucksack grow heavy because it carries the guilt he's assumed in maintaining his false identity, namely the deaths of the crapulent major and Sonny. Finally, as the novel comes to a close, the narrator carries the lengthy manuscript of his confession in the rucksack so that it literally contains the story of his life as a spy.

Red Envelopes

The narrator recounts the first New Years in his memory in which he and his cousin received red envelopes with money in them from their aunts. One aunt refused the narrator an envelope and the other aunts gave him only half the money they gave the other children. The envelopes symbolize the unfair way in which the narrator has been treated because of his mixed heritage. When he tells Man about the event, Man tells him that red is the color of revolution, so the envelopes also come to symbolize in the narrator the need for revolution and a change among the people.

Movie Set Outhouse

When the narrator tours the movie set, he is surprised by how detailed and authentic the sets are. He describes the realistic nature of the outhouse perched over the fish pond. It reminds him of the outhouse he used as a child and the poverty he grew up in. When asked if he'd like to try it out, he declines. The outhouse does not create a feeling of nostalgia for him because it symbolizes the difficult life he and his mother endured because they were very poor, which is not a condition he enjoyed or wishes to return to.

Notebook and Pen

The narrator talks about his mother buying him a notebook and pen when he left for college. Though the gift might be considered small, to the narrator it meant a lot because he knew the notebook and pen symbolized for his mother everything she could never achieve because of her station in life and everything she believed her son would eventually become.



Tombstone

The narrator chooses a fake tombstone on the movie set to symbolize his mother's grave and her love and sacrifice for him. He chooses this tombstone as a symbol because he's never seen his mother's real grave since she died while he was in America for college. He fastens her picture to the movie set tombstone and visits it to think of her while he's working on the movie just as he might have visited her real grave.

White

After seeing Lana again, the narrator remembers her as a child dressed in her white ao dai for school. He says that to Westerners, the white ao dai makes the schoolgirls look pure and innocent. However, as he cannot remove the image of Lana in her ao dai from his thoughts, he remembers that in the Vietnamese culture, white also symbolizes death and mourning. Shortly after the narrator realizes the symbolism of the color white, he is instructed to kill Sonny. White as a symbol of death and mourning reoccurs as the narrator is tortured almost to the point of death in a room where everything is white.

Republic of Vietnam Flag

The General displays a flag of the Republic of Vietnam in his restaurant. Although the Republic has been defeated, the General insists that the flag represents the free people of Vietnam. He displays the flag as a symbol of the Republic and a reminder to his loyal soldiers that the Republic is not gone, but can rise again.

Ghosts of the Crapulent Major and Sonny

The crapulent major and Sonny remain with the narrator as ghosts after he kills them. Their ghosts symbolize the guilt the narrator is unable to rid himself of. He knows he has killed innocent men in order to hide his own identity as a communist spy. The ghosts appear only occasionally at first and usually at times when the narrator is reminded of what he's done or when he's about to do something he knows he shouldn't, such as the major's appearance when the General indicates that the narrator is to assassinate Sonny. As the narrator is tortured in the reeducation camp, the ghosts remain his constant companions until he confesses everything.

Red Scars

The narrator, Bon, and Man each have a red scar on the palms of one hand. The scars are the result of them making a blood-brother bond when they were children. The narrator says that the scar is the first thing he sees every time he opens his hand. It is a constant reminder of his friendship with Bon and Man and symbolizes their bond. The narrator notices the scar as he and Bon talk about killing the crapulent major, an event



that makes Bon happy for the first time since the death of his wife and child. The narrator knows he must go through with the assassination if for no other reason than to make Bon happy, a fact of which he is reminded by the scar on his hand. At the end of the novel, when Man raises his hand to say goodbye to the narrator, the narrator sees Man's scar. He comments that after everything these three men have been through, the only mark that remains on their bodies are these scars. By this, the narrator means that, in the end, the only thing that has mattered has been their friendship and that is what remains.

Two-Headed Baby in a Jar

The commandant shows the narrator the preserved boy of a two-headed baby in a jar while the narrator is being held and forced to write his confession. The baby is deformed because of the chemicals the Americans used during the war. The baby symbolizes the abuse the communists believe the West has inflicted upon the Vietnamese people and serves as a reminder of what the communists are fighting against.



Settings

Vietnam

The novel both begins and ends in Vietnam. At the start of the novel, the narrator is in Vietnam at the time of the fall of Saigon. The country is war torn and the Americans have been defeated and are leaving the country. The narrator is living at the General's villa and reporting to Man on the General's activities. When the General makes the decision to flee the country, Man orders the narrator to go with him. Man creates the list of evacuees the General will be taking with him.

At the close of the novel, after the narrator has been in America for years, he returns to Vietnam in order to save Bon's life when the General sends troops to attempt to regain the country from the communists. When the narrator returns to Vietnam, he discovers that things are no better under the communists. The communists profess that they are reeducating the people, but the narrator can see that they are really just abusing their power and the people are still oppressed.

America

The majority of the novel is set in America. After leaving the refugee camp at Camp Pendleton in San Diego, California, the narrator settles in Los Angeles, California. He and Bon live together in an apartment. The narrator likes living in America, but doesn't feel like he fits in there any better than he does in Vietnam due to his mixed heritage. Although the narrator is a communist and should, therefore, despise America, he finds that he actually likes living there. He likes the luxuries of life in America that he doesn't have in Vietnam, like air conditioning. As a result, when he leaves America, the narrator knows that he will miss it.

Department of Oriental Studies

The narrator works in the Department of Oriental Studies at a university. He feels that the professors in the department who are supposed to be so learned about the Asian culture actually don't know anything. The office of the Department Chair is cluttered with all sorts of Oriental knick knacks and artifacts, including a photograph of the Chair's Asian wife. On the wall is an Oriental rug, which the narrator jokingly says is there in place of a real Oriental. The Chair's secretary is Ms. Mori, a Japanese American who was apparently hired because she's Japanese. However, the Chair is slightly disappointed in her because she doesn't actually speak Japanese since she was born and raised in America.



Philippine Movie Location

The narrator travels to the Philippines at the General's request to work on the set of a movie about the Vietnam war. He manages the cast of extras, which he hires from the boat people who have fled from Vietnam. The movie set is very elaborate and the narrator is impressed by the authenticity of the hamlet set where much of the movie's action takes place. The set is complete with an outhouse that reminds the narrator of the outhouse he used as a child. There is also a cemetery set that is so realistic the narrator decides to choose one of the tombstones to represent his mother's grave. He tapes a picture of her to the stone and writes her name on it. He visits the stone and thinks of his mother. On the day the cemetery set is to be demolished in a scene of the movie, the narrator decides to make one last visit to the tombstone. While he's there, an explosion goes off prematurely and he is injured. He and some of the extras who work on the movie believe the explosion was not an accident, but was set by the Auteur with whom he'd argued. The narrator never goes back to the set after that.

Reeducation Camp

When the narrator returns to Vietnam with Bon and the General's troops, he is captured and placed in a reeducation camp. He is kept isolated from the other prisoners and forced to eat a diet of terrible food that causes havoc in his digestive system. While there, he is forced to write his confession for the commandant. The manuscript is 295 pages long and he's forced to keep revising it until both the commandant and the commissar are pleased with the results. Once they are happy with the manuscript, the narrator is taken to the commissar's quarters to finally meet him. The quarters are simple and made of bamboo. When the mosquito net curtains are parted, he learns that the commissar is his friend Man. The narrator is tortured in order to help him remember the one thing he has failed to confess. He is placed in a white room where he is deprived of all visual and auditory sensory input. When he finally confesses to doing nothing to help a female agent who was raped and tortured for being found with a list of communists, his torture ends and he is allowed to recover. Finally, he and Bon are released and as they walk through the gates he sees others who were on the mission with him. None of them know he is a communist, so they speak kindly to him as he leaves.



Themes and Motifs

Betrayal

The theme of Betrayal pervades the novel into the very last chapter. The narrator is a man whose life is filled with moments of betrayal. His first betrayal is in that he keeps his identity as a communist a secret from one of his best friends, Bon. He and Man lie to Bon about their political views and even lie to him by saying that Man will be following them to America as they leave Vietnam because they know Bon will not go otherwise.

The narrator really lives a life in which he must betray someone on a daily basis while he is a spy. He is accepted into the General's family as someone they view almost like a son. He lives with them and eats dinner at the table with the General's wife and children. Yet, he is secretly spying on the General and reporting his activities back to Man. During the course of his spying on the General, he is ordered by the General to assassinate both the crapulent major and Sonny. His assassination of the major is a betrayal because he is the one who plants the idea that the major might be a spy in the General's head. He does so because he becomes nervous when the General begins talking about spies, so he reaches for a name and blurts out the major's. He knows the major isn't a spy and wouldn't even be capable of being a spy, yet he goes through with the assassination. The assassination of Sonny is a betrayal because Sonny is, in a way, his friend and also the love interest of his friend and one time lover, Ms. Mori. In fact, he believes that Sonny is also a communist, but since the General has ordered his death and the narrator needs to protect his own identity, he kills Sonny.

When the narrator leaves America to return to Vietnam, he is betrayed by the General, but only because the General learns the narrator has betrayed him. The narrator dated the General's daughter Lana in secret. The General feels like the narrator betrayed him by trying to seduce his daughter. He tells the narrator he would never let his daughter marry a bastard like the narrator. The narrator feels betrayed because he genuinely likes the General and always thought his mixed heritage wasn't an issue for the General.

The theme of Betrayal continues when the narrator is captured upon returning to Vietnam. He is placed in a communist reeducation camp. He's forced to write his confession, which takes over a year. The confession is ordered by the commissar, a man whose identity he never learns for that entire year. Finally, he is taken to meet the commissar and it's Man. The narrator feels betrayed by Man, who is supposed to be one of his best friends, because Man is holding him prisoner. Man compounds the betrayal by ordering the narrator to be tortured until he can remember what it is he's failed to confess. The event the narrator is forced to remember is also a betrayal. He confesses that when a female communist agent was captured, he sat by and did nothing while she was raped.



Finally, the theme of betrayal is exemplified in what has become of Man's life. Man reveals to the narrator that he no longer believes in the communist movement and feels betrayed by it. He now sees that the movement is no longer political, but has become a quest for power. Man no longer wants to teach people about communism because he no longer believes in it, yet he can't get out of the situation he's in because he knows he will be killed if he tries.

Sympathy

The author uses Sympathy as a theme to show how the narrator's sympathy for various people and situations in his life lead him to make the decisions he does. As a result, his life is shaped by sympathy. At the outset of the novel, the narrator describes himself as someone who can see both sides of any argument, which means that regardless of where he stands on an issue, he can sympathize with the other side. This is the crux of his situation as a communist spy. While he truly wants to believe wholeheartedly in the communist movement, he cannot help but sympathize with the side of the Republic and the people he's ordered to spy on.

The narrator really likes the General and his family. He admires the way the General holds to his values and believes in what he says. He sees the way the General tries to boost the morale of the people in the refugee camp and feels for the General when he is not received warmly, but is instead ridiculed. When the General comes to America and his life is no longer filled with the luxuries and honor it once was, the narrator does things to try to make the General feel better. He compliments the General's run down restaurant and his efforts to use the restaurant to fund the Fraternity. He even makes suggestions for how the General could go about rebuilding his troops and finding funding.

The narrator's sympathetic nature makes it particularly difficult for him to carry out the assassinations the General orders. He knows the capulent major isn't a spy and can see that he's only a man with a wife and children that he loves. As a result, the narrator feels terribly guilty about having killed the major and strives to make up for it by giving the widow a great deal of money to help her raise her children. Then, when he's ordered to kill Sonny, he again feels a great sense of guilt because he can sympathize with Sonny as well. Although he sees Sonny as a rival, he also sees Sonny as someone like him, a man who have lived for so long among Americans that he's been changed by them. He also sympathizes with Ms. Mori, whom he know will be affected by Sonny's death.

When the narrator is captured, he even has sympathy for Man in spite of the fact that Man orders the narrator to be tortured. He can see that Man is in a difficult situation and has no choice but to treat the narrator the way he might any other prisoner. He is moved by Man's story of how he was disfigured by napalm and his wife saved his life. He also feels for Man because Man cannot bear to go home to his wife and children because they cringe when they see his horribly burned face.



When the narrator begins to review and revise his confession, he even feels sympathy for himself, or rather for the man in the pages. He sees how the man's life has been formed by the decisions he's been forced to make and, though he can't quite forgive himself for the things he's done, he at least sympathizes with himself.

Religion

The theme of Religion is explored through the narrator's feelings about religion. The narrator is the product of the union of his Vietnamese mother, who was very young at the time, and his French priest father. Obviously the narrator is aware that, as a priest, his father had broken his vows of abstinence and furthermore, did so with a young girl. This coupled with the fact that his father was never able to claim him as a son causes the narrator to hate his father, and by extension religion. Yet, his mother described his birth as being a gift from God.

The narrator professes throughout the novel that he is an atheist, and yet he mentions God and religion often, which belies the fact that he still holds on to some belief. He mentions that he and Man often met in a basilica to talk about their plans. The basilica seems to be, in a way, a place where the narrator "confesses" to Man about his thoughts and feelings. When the narrator is feeling guilty about having carried out an assassination, he wishes he could meet Man at the basilica because Man would assuage his guilty conscience. In this way, speaking to Man can be seen as in the same way a Christian might confess to a priest.

The narrator attempts to hide his kernel of belief in God by frequently ridiculing religion. He talks about how Bon's Catholicism leaves him unable to be free about sex. He says that Bon is more embarrassed by sex than he is by killing. This, he says, is in keeping with the ways of the Catholic church since the church doesn't acknowledge that sex occurs among the clergy, but they will admit that people have killed in the name of the church.

The author uses religion several times as a means of describing events and actions throughout the novel. When the narrator is forced to carry the severed leg of a fallen soldier as the reconnaissance team attempts to enter Vietnam, the author includes a flashback to the narrator being forced to hold a Bible on his outstretched hands as a form of punishment. While readers may not know the weight of holding a severed leg, they can understand the weight of a thick book and how difficult it would be to hold one at arm's length for a long period of time. Also, when Man loads a bullet into a gun, the narrator thinks of the sound of the bell on his father's church. Again, not all readers may know what a bullet being loaded sounds like, but they have probably heard church bells and understand how that sound cuts through the air like a bullet entering a chamber might in an otherwise silent room.

The author also uses religion to explain why the narrator might believe in communism. He describes a scene in which Bon catches a shoplifter in the liquor store and the shoplifter begs for forgiveness. The narrator says that fear is one of the ways to make



people believe, but love is the other. He imparts this lesson while talking about religion. Churches do sometimes use the "fear of God" as a means of teaching people to be good for fear that they will otherwise be sent to Hell or punished in some way. This is a concept that most readers can relate to on some level. Undoubtedly the communist movement also uses fear to convert non-believers, as is evidenced by the torture the narrator suffers in the reeducation camp designed to bring people to the communist way of thinking. But, he says that love is also a motivation for belief, such as the love that Jesus had for people. In the narrator's case, his love for Man helped him to believe in the communist teachings since Man was also his teacher.

Duality

The theme of Duality is chiefly exemplified in the dual nature of the narrator. The narrator is a man of dual heritage since he is both French and Vietnamese. This identity as a half-breed causes him a great deal of difficulty as a child and still as an adult. As a child, the other Vietnamese children say he's the product of an unnatural union and he is bullied. His aunts give him only half the money they give the other children at New Years, if they give him any at all. As an adult, he is frequently called a bastard, a term that never fails to anger him. It even causes him to pull a gun on a marine in Vietnam. Because he is of mixed heritage, the narrator never fully fits into Vietnamese society or American society; he is too white for the Vietnamese and not white enough for the Americans.

In the first lines of the novel, the narrator says he is "a man of two minds." The duality he refers to here is the fact that he can always see both sides of any issue. His ability to see both sides of the war in Vietnam is what leads him into much of the trouble he encounters. The narrator professes himself to be a communist and works as a communist spy, and yet he also understands where those who fight on the side of the Republic are coming from. In fact, he really cares about the people he's supposed to be spying on.

In the end, as the narrator is tortured, he literally views himself as being split into two people and even begins to refer to himself in the plural as "we" and "our." He recognizes his dual nature and his dual set of beliefs. He is both a communist and a sympathizer with the Republic. He is both an atheist and a man who can't shake his belief in God. He is both French and Vietnamese.

There are two other notable characters whose stories enhance the theme of duality. Ms. Mori is a Japanese-American who works with the narrator in America. She is full-blooded Japanese, but she was born and raised in America and so identifies as an American. However, she recognizes that white Americans will always see her as a foreigner. Her story also includes the story of her brother, Abe, who was imprisoned because he refused to fight after being drafted. The Mori family had once been placed in a Japanese internment camp because they weren't seen as Americans, yet Abe was asked to fight as an American when he was drafted for the Vietnam war. Abe eventually went to live in Japan because white Americans had repeatedly told him to go back to



Japan where he belongs. However, when he got to Japan, he was treated like an outsider because he was too American.

The other character who shows duality is Man. Man is both the narrator's handler and his friend. In the end, he also becomes the narrator's torturer, while still remaining his friend. Man is also the commissar responsible for reeducating prisoners about communism, yet he's a man who no longer believes in communism. The narrator, because of his own dual nature, is also see both sides of Man and sympathizes with him for being forced to live both sides

East versus West

The theme of East versus West is shown through the opposing viewpoints of the white characters and the Asian characters in the novel. The narrator, being of mixed heritage and a man who can see both sides, recognizes the thoughts and feelings of both the whites and the Asians and sometimes points out where they might both be in error, though he mostly falls on the side of Asians since he does primarily identify as Asian.

The most obvious example of East versus West is in the war itself. The Asian communists are opposed to the interference by the Americans. They believe that Western ideals will pollute their country with ideas of capitalism. They see the Americans' involvement in the lives of the Vietnamese as being far more harmful than good. Even some of the people who are not communists begin to feel that America has been feeding the lies. Bon explains this when he talks about returning to Vietnam because America now feels like a prison and he no longer believes in the lies America has told to the Vietnamese people. The narrator's feelings about the American involvement are first shown when he talks about the General stopping as they flee Saigon to salute a monument depicting marines charging into battle. He says that those marines could just as easily be attacking the people they are supposed to be protecting.

The East versus West theme is also explored in the way that white Americans react to the Asian characters in the book, and the way the Asians react to them in return. When the narrator begins working at the Department of Oriental Studies he says none of the scholars there actually know anything. The Department Chair collects Oriental things, including his Asian wife whose genes he compares to an invasive species of weed that might choke out native vegetation. The Chair has hired Ms. Mori simply because she's Japanese, and he's disappointed when he learns she can't speak Japanese.

At one point, Ms. Mori and Sonny have a conversation about the way that Asians are very complimentary of white people when they learn just a word or two of an Asian language, but white people make fun of them if they speak fluent but accented English.

When the narrator and the General meet with the Congressman and other businessmen to procure funding for the Fraternity, the narrator notes that the General knows he must speak very carefully to these white men lest he frighten them. Before the General even gets a chance to begin speaking about the Fraternity, he tries to keep the conversation

steered in a direction that will not paint Asians in a poor light so that they businessmen will be more likely to open their wallets.

Finally, as the narrator is forced to write his confession, the commandant tells him it's clear he's been contaminated by the West. He points out that the narrator uses more references to Western scholars than he does to Eastern scholars. The commandant treats the narrator's Americanization as a disease that must be eradicated.



Styles

Point of View

The majority of the novel is written in first person from the perspective of the narrator. There is no insight into the feelings or thoughts of the other characters in the novel. However, the narrator frequently expounds on his own thoughts and experiences. The novel is an epistolary novel since the entire thing is the narrator's written confession to the commandant, therefore the point of view must be primarily first person in keeping with the nature of the narrator's writing. The story is told in past tense since it is mostly the narrator's confession of events that have led up to his capture. When the narrator is released, he writes the final pages of his confession that tell about his torture and recovery. These pages are also written in past tense.

The author does briefly shift to third person during the narrator's torture. The narrator feels as though he is somehow apart from his body and begins to refer to himself as "the prisoner." After his torture, the narrator begins referring to himself in the plural, that is he uses "we" and "our" instead of "I" and "my." The author uses this technique to indicate the narrator has had an epiphany about his dual nature and is coming to terms with the two sides of his personality.

The author uses a stream of consciousness manner of writing since the narrator expounds on his thoughts and reactions to events, but there is little to no description of the settings. There is also no conventional dialogue, only the narrator's retelling of a conversation with no use of traditional punctuation in the dialogue, such as quotation marks. The narrator's telling of an event often leads to a remembrance of something from his past, which he interjects into the main plot of the story.

Language and Meaning

The language of the story may be difficult for high school level readers since the author uses a great deal of higher level words, such as *crapulent* and *occidental*. The language is in keeping with the character of the narrator since the reader knows he is college educated, bilingual, and highly intelligent. His intelligence is necessary to his position as a spy since he must be able to blend in whenever necessary. The difficult language makes this novel an excellent opportunity for readers to expand their vocabulary, but may make reading a bit cumbersome at times.

The author does not provide the names of most of the characters, including the narrator. The lack of names may make remembering characters a bit harder, especially since there are a great number of characters.

Paragraphs are often quite lengthy and there is no use of traditional style in writing dialogue. The author does not use quotation marks and generally does not separate each character's dialogue into separate paragraphs, but instead runs them all together



in one paragraph. Since the novel is the narrator's confession, this unconventional manner of writing may be meant to reflect the narrator's attempt to get the story on paper while in an isolation cell, a time when he would probably give little thought to the conventions of writing. However, it is sometimes difficult for readers to determine who is speaking, when that person stops speaking, and when the next person begins.

Structure

The novel consists of 23 chapters. The chapters are not titled, only numbered. Chapters are generally around fifteen pages in length. Paragraphs within the chapters tend to be quite lengthy, sometimes spanning a page or more.

There are essentially two plot lines taking place within the novel. The main plotline tells the story of the narrator going to America to continue spying on the activities of the General and then returning to Vietnam where he is captured. The second plotline is the story of what happens to the narrator while his being held captive. This plotline serves as the shell of the main plotline and is also utilized to provide a twist ending when the narrator discovers it is Man that is holding him captive. The secondary plotline also allows the author to bring the story to a conclusion with the narrator leaving Vietnam, this time probably for good.



Quotes

I am a spy, a sleeper, a spook, a man of two faces. Perhaps not surprisingly, I am also a man of two minds.

-- Narrator (chapter 1 paragraph 1)

Importance: These are the opening lines of the novel. They indicate the dual nature of the narrator, which drives the action of the story. He is a communist spy acting as an officer under the General, to whom he has been assigned by his handler. His orders are to spy on the General and report back activities that relate to the General's army trying to regain control of Vietnam. However, the narrator genuinely likes the General and his family and must carry out orders the General issues as well as those he receives from his handler. In addition, as a communist, the narrator is supposed to despise American and European influences, yet he is conflicted. He is half Vietnamese and half French. As a result he isn't fully accepted by the Vietnamese people. Having been educated in America he is comfortable there and enjoys certain aspects of the culture.

We'll be blood brothers even if we lose the war, even if we lose our country. He looked at me and his eyes were damp. For us there is no end.

-- Man and the Narrator (chapter 1 paragraph 24)

Importance: This quote sums up the relationship between Man, Bon, and the narrator. The three men have been friends since their school days. Man and the narrator are communists, but Bon is a patriot. Bon does not know that the other two are communists. In spite of their political differences they are devoted to one another. The narrator's loyalty to Bon leads him to return to Vietnam even though he's been ordered to stay in America. Man's loyalty to Bon and the narrator leads him to pay for their release from a communist prison camp.

Not for the first time, I longed to tell someone that I was one of them, a sympathizer with the Left, a revolutionary fighting for peace, equality, democracy, freedom, and independence, all the noble things my people had died for and I had hid for.

-- Narrator (chapter 4 paragraph 28)

Importance: The narrator says this in reference to Ms. Mori. He is attracted to her and they later begin a romantic relationship. His inability to really share his identity and his feelings with her eventually costs him the relationship. The narrator is always forced to hide his true identity since he is a spy. He cannot let anyone, even those he is closest to, know that he is a communist as it would not only compromise his position, but would also likely lead to his death. Throughout the novel he struggles with wanting to tell people he cares for about himself.

Popes, cardinals, bishops, priests, and monks carrying on with women, girls, boys, and each other? Hardly ever discussed! Not that there was anything wrong with carrying on—it's hypocrisy that stinks, not sex. But the Church torturing, murdering, crusading against, or infecting with disease millions of people in the name of our Lord the Savior,



from Arabia to the Americas? Acknowledged with useless, pious regret, if even that.
-- Narrator (chapter 5 paragraph 15)

Importance: This quote is an example of the theme of Religion that runs throughout the book. The narrator is a professed atheist who despises the church. His feelings toward the church are likely due to the fact that his father was a French priest and his mother was very young when she got pregnant with him. The narrator frequently uses religion to explain the actions of others. In this instance, he is expounding on Bon's embarrassment about sex. He says Bon's attitude comes from his Catholicism, which he takes very seriously. However, he says that Bon is far less embarrassed about killing and the same goes for the Church.

No matter whether my eyes were open or shut, I could still see it, the crapulent major's third eye, weeping because of what it could see about me.
-- Narrator (chapter 6 paragraph 66)

Importance: The narrator says this after having carried out the assassination of the crapulent major. He instantly feels guilty because he knows he's killed an innocent man and that guilt remains with him throughout the book. The crapulent major haunts the narrator and his ghost, along with the ghost of Sonny, serve as constant reminders to the narrator that he has killed people in order to preserve his secrecy as a spy for a cause he isn't really sure he believes in.

I might have been just half an Asian, but in America it was all or nothing when it came to race. You were either white or you weren't.
-- Narrator (chapter 8 paragraph 3)

Importance: The narrator says this about Violet's reaction to him when he goes to the Auteur's house to discuss his notes on the movie script. Violet is condescending and rude to him and he is certain it is because of his ethnicity. This quote is also an example of the theme of duality since the narrator often says that for the Vietnamese he is too white and for the Americans he isn't white at all.

What would Man or Ms. Mori think, knowing that I was little more, perhaps, than a collaborator, helping to exploit my fellow countrymen and refugees?
-- Narrator (chapter 9 paragraph 41)

Importance: The narrator says this about having been hired to find and manage Vietnamese extras for the Auteur's movie. The General has sent him to work on the movie in hopes that he will be able to ensure the Vietnamese are adequately represented in a movie about the war in their country. However, the narrator has his doubts as to whether or not he can affect any real change. He feels guilty about being able to offer the boat people he hires as extras only a dollar a day. He knows they are too desperate to turn the pittance down. His sympathy for the extras and the plight of the Vietnamese in Hollywood movies causes a bitter argument with the Auteur and results in the Auteur attempting to kill him through an "accidental" explosion on the set.



If our revolution served the people, why were some of these people voting by fleeing? At the time, I had no answers to these questions. Only now am I beginning to understand.
-- Narrator (chapter 10 paragraph 9)

Importance: The narrator asks this of the commandant as he is writing his confession. This quote reveals the fact that the narrator doubts the communist movement. While filming the movie he sees that something is wrong because the boat people had fled a country where supposedly the communists were going to make their lives better. He hears reports of how terrible things are in Vietnam and passes them on to Man. Man responds that the reports are exaggerated and things in Vietnam are fine. Once he is imprisoned by the communists who are supposed to be his comrades, he can see that the movement is corrupt and the people aren't being helped at all.

What I learned, against my will, is that it's impossible to live among a foreign people and not become changed by them.
-- Sonny (chapter 13 paragraph 23)

Importance: Sonny says this to the narrator when the narrator confronts him about why he never returned to Vietnam. The narrator is attempting to make Sonny look bad in front of Ms. Mori, but is unsuccessful. Sonny's statement about being changed echoes what is happening to the narrator and is an example of the theme of Sympathy. The narrator, like Sonny, cannot help but be changed by living with the General and his family as well as the Americans. He frequently finds himself sympathizing with the people around him, which results in doubts about the orders he receives from both Man and the General.

It must be said. Life is plentiful, life is cheap in the Orient. And as the philosophy of the Orient express it-Dr. Hedd paused-life is not important. Perhaps it is insensitive to say, but the Oriental does not put the same high price on life as the Westerner.
-- Richard Hedd (chapter 15 paragraph 48)

Importance: Dr. Hedd says this during a dinner meeting with the Congressman and several people that the General hopes will support the Fraternity. It is an example of the East versus West theme of the novel. In this case, Dr. Hedd, a white author is suggesting that Asians don't place importance on lives the way that Westerners do, which diminishes Asians in the eyes of the white people at the table. The narrator is asked his opinion of the statement and begins to object, but sees the General frown. He realizes that not agreeing with Dr. Hedd could compromise their potential funding. He quickly revises his stance to say that Asians find life valuable, but Westerners find life invaluable. The narrator often finds the East and the West at odds and must find a way to balance between the two in order to carry out his mission and live his life as a man of mixed heritage.

Oh, Captain, said the General. You are a fine young man, but you are also, in case you have not noticed, a bastard.
-- The General (chapter 17 paragraph 20)



Importance: This quote is an example of the theme of betrayal. Over the years the narrator has grown close to the General and his family even though he is supposed to be spying on them. He has shown the General compassion at times when the General is low. When the General finds out that the narrator has been seeing his daughter Lana, he and Madame are angry about it. As the narrator leaves for Vietnam, the General tells him that he knows about the relationship and is very disappointed. He says that he and Madame would never have let Lana marry him because he's of mixed blood. The narrator is stunned by the General's reaction and feels betrayed by a man that he's spent so much of his life with and who he thought had no problem with his heritage.

We had been through so much, me and myself.

-- Narrator (chapter 23 paragraph 22)

Importance: After being interrogated and tortured, the narrator has an epiphany about himself and his dual nature, but he also goes a little mad. He begins to refer to himself as two people, even using "we" and "our" to describe his actions. This continues to the end of the novel, but the author uses this affectation to suggest a larger "we," that is he suggests that the narrator is no longer talking about just himself, but about all revolutionaries.