

# **This Earth of Mankind Study Guide**

**This Earth of Mankind by Pramoedya Ananta Toer**

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# Plot Summary

In Pramoedya Ananta Toer's, *This Earth of Mankind*, the protagonist comes of age against the backdrop of a colonial Java being ruled by the Dutch. Minke introduces himself and then launches into his story. His story is essentially a love story. He sets the backdrop of his class and education, and then moves into the first meeting of the Mellema family.

The Mellema family consists of daughter Annelies, son Robert, Mistress Nyai Ontosoroh, and Mr. Mellema. Minke is awestruck by the beauty of Annelies at his first meeting. He gets to meet her because a classmate, Robert Suurhof, invites him to come along. Suurhof's goal is actually to humiliate Minke, but to Suurhof's surprise, Robert Mellema grudgingly invites Minke into his home, and to his greater surprise, Annelies becomes smitten with Minke and her mother also approves.

Thus, Minke is brought into the Mellema family's life, although he has doubts about them. He consults with his friend and business partner, a French artist named Jean Marais, who advises him not to judge the family based on pre-conceived notions, but rather to spend time getting to know the family and then make a judgment call. Minke does this, and discovers that Nyai is self-educated, follows many European customs, and runs the successful family business. He moves into the family home at her invitation, and develops a deep bond with Annelies, while Robert Mellema becomes increasingly jealous of him. Minke continues his studies at school while living with the Mellema's, but one day gets taken away by the police, without warning. The police take him to his father, who has arranged for the police to bring him. His father has been promoted, and wants Minke to be the translator at his ceremony. While staying with his family, Minke makes new friends of a governing official's Dutch daughters.

Upon his return to Surabaya, Minke thinks he is being followed by a Chinese man. His suspicions are confirmed when the Mellema family guard, Darsam, tells him that Robert has ordered Darsam to kill Minke. Darsam is loyal only to Nyai, however, and as Nyai treats Minke like a son, Darsam has sworn to protect him. Nonetheless, Minke decides he should live at his boardinghouse for the time being. He returns to school and tries to concentrate on his studies.

Minke receives letters from Nyai imploring him to return to her home because of Annelies' declining health. Eventually, Minke can no longer stay away and visits her. He is charged by the family doctor with the task of nursing her back to health, for it seems that only his love will cure Annelies. Thus he begins living with the Mellema's again. He eventually marries Annelies, and shares much happiness with her for a few months.

However, the happiness is short-lived when Herman Mellema is discovered dead and shortly after, his son Maurits takes the family to court to get the family business and have control of Annelies' future. Minke, Nyai and their friends fight the courts, but are powerless to change the decision. Annelies will be shipped to the Netherlands, and her marriage with Minke is ruled invalid since she is not legitimate and it was not a Christian

marriage or sanctioned by the government. In the end, Nyai and Minke must watch her sail away, and thus the novel ends.



# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 Summary

This *Earth of Mankind* tells the story of the first love of Minke, a young Javanese man on the brink of adulthood in colonial Java at the end of the 19th century. Minke struggles to reconcile what he has been taught in a European-style school with his experiences as an island native as he falls in love with a socially unacceptable girl. The novel is historical fiction that explores the challenges of colonialism.

Chapter one is a very brief introduction to the novel, serving almost as a preface to the main story. The narrator introduces himself as Minke, declining to reveal his true identity for the time being. He then explains that the story he is about to tell derives from notes written by himself shortly after the events occurred, but that it is now thirteen years later and he has taken literary license with those notes.

## Chapter 1 Analysis

The book opens with the narrator identifying himself as Minke, while saying "I don't yet really need to reveal who I am before the eyes of others." This hints that the narrator is perhaps telling a story that, although it is a story made of specifics and about a single individual, yet is actually a story of universals. The true identity of the narrator is not necessarily important, because the narrator could be any young Javanese.

He then indicates that he wrote the notes for the story shortly after the events took place, when he did not know how everything would end. However, now he is looking back with the hindsight of thirteen years. He says that the future "often proves to be a great despot," foreshadowing that perhaps his tale does not have a happy ending, since the word "despot" typically does not have joyful connotations.

The narrator then gives the reader perhaps some comfort that the potentially unhappy ending may not actually be what occurred. He says that his original notes on the events have been combined with his "dreams, imaginings" so that they have become "different from the original." He then launches into his story.



# Chapter 2

## Chapter 2 Summary

Minke begins his story by boasting of his education at one of the best schools in the Indies, which has given him general and scientific knowledge, as well as the ability to take notes. He then describes the progress seen upon the island in recent years, such as trains and reproductions of photographs. In the course of this, he identifies his location as the island of Java in the Netherland Indies. He segues from general exclamation about progress to tell of one particular photographic reproduction that is dear to him. He has a photograph of a beautiful lady, one renowned for beauty, of high class, and remote from his current city of Surabaya, who happens to share his birthday of August 31, 1880.

After setting the scene of the general time, place, and location, Minke dives into more details of the story. His schoolmate, Robert Suurhof, shows up at Minke's boarding house one day and talks Minke into coming with him to see a girl who he proclaims is even more beautiful than the girl in the photograph. It so happens that the day is Sept. 7, 1898, which is Sept. 6, 1898 in Holland, where the girl in the photograph is about to become Queen Welhelmina. Minke cannot believe a girl exists more beautiful than Wilhelmina, so he eventually agrees to accompany Robert on his visit.

Robert does not tell Minke where they are going. Minke wonders why Robert wants him to meet this beauty, and why Robert is not interested in her. Robert explains that the beauty is not pure European blood, but of mixed blood: part native islander and part European. Robert indicates that for himself, "only a goddess with Pure European blood" is satisfactory, but for Minke as a native, the mixed blood, or Indo, girl is acceptable.

They enter the Wonokromo district of the city of Surabaya, pass a Chinese brothel, and arrive at the home of Mr. Mellema, a wealthy businessman who was better known as having a much-admired, beautiful concubine, Nyai Ontosoroh. Minke is surprised to find this is the home they are visiting, since it is common knowledge that no one visited here. Introductions are made, and Robert Mellema, Mr. Mellema's son, thinks about turning his guests away, since Minke is a Native. In the end, he decides that Minke can also come in, and Minke and the two Roberts enter the house, where Minke meets Annelies Mellema. He is immediately entranced with her beauty, sitting speechless beside her. Annelies makes effort to draw Minke into conversation. She takes him away from the Roberts, and introduces him to her mother, Nyai Ontosoroh, more commonly referred to as Nyai, which means concubine. Minke is shocked to find Nyai greeting him with Dutch, rather than Javanese, customs. Nyai then leaves the two alone, where Minke tells Annelies that she is beautiful. Annelies responds by calling her mother, but her mother only confirms that Annelies is indeed beautiful and should thank Minke.

The four children eat lunch with Nyai, who again impresses Minke with her civilized, European manners. After lunch, Annelies takes Minke on a tour of the land, stopping by



the barn, fields, and peasants working. Minke is impressed with the business skills Annelies shows in her interactions with the workers, as well as the fact that she can milk cows and ride horses, despite having never finished primary school. The two spend the afternoon together, and a friendship develops. Annelies changes into evening clothes, which Minke realizes she has done just for him.

The family and their guests have dinner together, which is interrupted by the arrival of Mr. Mellema, who immediately hones on Minke as a native. However, he is shot down by Nyai, who overrides him and tells him that Minke is welcome in their house. He then fades away, cowed by Nyai. The two Roberts leave the dinner table after this incident, and Minke prepares to go. Nyai invites him to stay anytime; in fact, to live there if he wants. She does this on the pretext that Annelies does not have any friends and since Minke has become her friend, he should visit more often. Robert Suurhof and Minke depart the house together, but do not speak on their return trip. Minke goes to bed at his boarding house, where he is awoken in the morning with notification of a package and letter from Nyai.

## Chapter 2 Analysis

Several main characters and themes get introduced in this chapter. The conflict of class in the colonial system is introduced in Robert Suurhof and Minke's conversation in the buggy ride to Wonokromo. Suurhof derogatorily states that Annelies' beauty is not for him because she is Indo, or mixed-blood of a native and a European. Minke tells the reader that Suurhof is an Indo, but thinks of himself as European because he was born on a Dutch ship. Minke tells the reader that actually this doesn't even make Suurhof a Dutch citizen. Minke himself is pure Native. This foreshadows later events in the novel where class and race play a role.

European education, in which Minke has put his faith, gets contrasted with Minke's introduction to Nyai, who appears to have European knowledge but has never been to school. During the tour of the farm with Annelies, Minke's education continues when he observes women working. He is "dumbfounded to see women [. . .] seeking a living in someone else's business," because this is so far out of his experience to date. Later as Minke listens to Nyai talk, he listens in silence at all the new ideas Nyai voices about things which his own teachers never mention.

"The future" also gets introduced as a theme; specifically, Minke's future. Minke denies that he will become a bupati (regional officer) when Robert Suurhof suggests this. This foreshadows a repeating refrain throughout the book, when others tell Minke he may become a bupati. A bupati is considered the highest office an educated native Javanese can obtain in the colonial government of the island. Thus, most people think they are praising Minke's abilities by telling him he'll become a bupati. Minke himself has different dreams for his future.

The initial meeting of the Mellema family also foreshadows events to come. Robert Mellema is described as giving "frightening, stabbing glances" glares at Minke, while



conversely Annelies shows her childlike desire to win over Minke by dressing up especially for him. Nyai begins to amaze Minke with her European mannerisms. All of these characteristics of all three characters get further development throughout the course of the novel.

Yet another theme the reader gets introduced to is that of truth and knowledge. In this chapter, Minke is still very much the schoolchild, who believes everything he reads. In a conversation with Nyai, she asks him if it's true that people can make ice, to which he replies that this is what the newspapers say. Nyai then states, "I want to know if the newspaper reports are true." Minke inwardly is "amazed that somebody could doubt a newspaper report."

More foreshadowing occurs during his tour of the farm, Minke asks to go to a field of reeds he sees nearby, but Annelies refuses, shying away from the place, growing nervous. The reader gets the sense that the marsh of reeds holds some dark secret, but does not yet learn what that secret is.

The tensions in Minke between reason and emotions come to light in a scene when Minke is reflecting upon Annelies' reaction to his spontaneous kissing of her. He justifies it to himself saying that any male would have done the same thing around such a beautiful girl, after all, his biology teacher said - at which point Minke interrupts himself saying "Ah, to the devil with biology!" This is one of the first times where Minke lets go of his scientific education and allows his feelings to have the upper hand.

After Minke arrives back at his boarding house, he is greeted by his landlady who fusses at him for still not having read letters that she has placed in his room, which she sees when she brings a new letter to him. She reminds him that letters were sent in order to be read, and that they may contain important information. Minke ignores the letters, but the reader gets a sense of foreboding about what information the letters may contain and if they will bring Minke harm or not.





# Chapter 3

## Chapter 3 Summary

Minke returns to the routine of school, but cannot get Annelies out of his mind. He wonders if Nyai has bewitched him. He is also confused about ideas of concubines and their family as low-class and immoral. All races and classes of people in the Indies judged Nyai's, so Minke is unsure that he has any right to think of them in a different light after just one encounter. He consults his friend and neighbor Jean Marais for advice. Jean Marais suggests that Minke hold off judgment until he makes two or three more visits to the house. He reminds Minke that Minke is educated and can decide for himself if a situation is right or wrong, without depending on society's decisions in the matter.

The conversation then turns to Marais' newest painting, which depicts a woman about to be killed by a Netherland Indies soldier, his bayonet thrusting at her chest while she helplessly lifts a hand to defend herself. When Minke questions him, Marais reveals that this is based on his personal experience and that he did not kill this woman but freed her. Eventually, they fell in love and had a child, whom Marais indicates is none other than his daughter May, whom Minke walks to school each morning. Tragically, however, the woman's brother killed her for having contact with infidels. Marais tells Minke this story to indicate that "love is beautiful, Minke, very, very beautiful, but perhaps disaster follows. You must dare to face its consequences."

May then comes into the room, and Marais asks Minke to take her walking. He does, even though May wants her father to go walking with her. Minke takes May to the park, where his mind wanders to the back-story of Jean Marais. Marais was an artist in Paris whose work never caught the eye of the critics, so he took off, traveling to other countries and eventually ending up in the Dutch Indies when his money ran out. Out of money, Marais' only option was to join the Dutch Indies army. Since he was a pure-blooded European, he was automatically a private first class. Second class was always composed of Natives and Indos. May brings Minke's reflections to a halt when she exclaims about some kites she sees. Minke comes to himself and takes her back to her father, and then returns to his boarding house. Here he finds Darsam waiting for him with a letter from Nyai, requesting that Minke visit since Annelies has fallen into daydreaming and is no longer helping out with the business. Minke decides that he will visit them again, so that he can save the family and the business.

## Chapter 3 Analysis

The novel takes a break from intensity by returning Minke to his usual setting of the boarding house. At this point, the novel reinforces the idea of class and race by highlighting Jean Marais' experience in the army. As a European, he automatically received a higher placement than Natives or Indos, even though it is suggested that he



was not necessarily a better soldier. The reader learns that Marais falls in love with a woman of the enemy he is supposed to be fighting, and has a child by her. However, the woman is killed by her brother for mixing with "infidels."

This section also highlights the struggle between natives and colonizers. The people that Marais fights, the Achanese, have been struggling for twenty-seven years against the Dutch. The novel suggests that the natives fight for the freedom and love of country, because they continue fighting even when they know they will be eventually defeated. This spirit is something that is lacking in the Dutch Indies Army, which is fighting out of duty.

Also in this chapter, Marais warns Minke that love, while beautiful, can also be disastrous. This foreshadows Minke and Annelies' love may not have a happily-ever-after ending.

The end of the chapter also foreshadows that Annelies' health is now tied up in Minke. In Nyai's message to Minke, she says she is worried about her health and that she has taken to daydreaming and not working. Nyai views Minke as the only solution to her daughter's health and happiness, and Minke takes this responsibility upon himself when he decides that he will visit her again.



# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 Summary

Minke returns to the Mellema home, where he finds that Annelies indeed appears sick, but that his arrival sparks life back to her face. This time, Minke comes with luggage, as he intends to stay here. Annelies unpacks for him in his room. She finds three unread letters, and asks why he hasn't read them. Minke again does not read the letters as he would rather spend time with Annelies. They converse in the garden, where again Annelies hints that something bad happened with her father when she was in primary school, and that is why she did not return to school.

Annelies departs to do work, and Minke begins writing about his experiences with the family to date, dreaming that perhaps someday he can turn them into published stories.

He has dinner with Annelies and Nyai, with no sign of the male Mellema's. They have a pleasant dinner and evening of listening to music and talking. Minke tells the story of Jean and May Marais. Nyai invites him to bring May to visit and become a younger sister to Annelies.

Minke then works up his courage to ask Nyai where she received her education. She replies that she did not attend any school, but got educated from life. Minke is again amazed by this, and reflects upon it as he lies in bed that night, and resolves to study the family more so that he can one day write about them.

## Chapter 4 Analysis

Upon Minke's return to the Mellema home, the reader observes Annelies' improvement in health. This cycle of absent Minke, sick Annelies and present Minke, healthy Annelies, will continue throughout the novel.

In this chapter, the three unread letters to Minke make an appearance again. This time it is Annelies who lectures Minke on the importance of reading them, but he still does not.

The novel hints again at a dark event that happened in Annelies' fourth year of primary school, when she was taken out of school. The reader learns that something happened that caused her father to change.

Class distinction is again brought up, but this time in the context of a single family. This is the first time the reader sees characters actively choosing their class. Both Annelies and Robert Mellema are mixed-blood Indos, since their father is European and their mother is Native. Yet interestingly, Robert views himself as European, taking his father's side, and even hating natives, even though he is half-native. Annelies loves her mother and so considers herself a Native. She is willing to take a lower class to side with her mother. Thus, the lines are drawn, with the family divided by gender and race.

This chapter foreshadows again that this love story will not end well, as Minke reflects, "And what can be obtained in this life without payment? Everything must be paid for, or redeemed, even the shortest happiness."

Finally, in this chapter the reader learns that Nyai is self-educated, having never attended school. This shakes Minke's beliefs to the foundation, since he was raised on the importance of education and is rather proud of attending an exclusive European school. Nyai promotes a philosophy that life is a teacher.

The reader learns more of Minke's motivations at the end of this chapter. He decides to spend more time with the Mellema family so that he can learn more about them, adopting Nyais' philosophy of life -specifically, their family life—as a teacher. He hopes to be able to use his experiences in his writings some day, and become a Native who is also a writer.



# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5 Summary

Minke tells the story of how Nyai became a nyai, as he learned it from Annelies. Nyai tells Annelies that she received her education from Herman Mellema in their earlier days, when they were happy, before he changed. She also indicates that she did not have Herman admitted to a mental institution after his change because doing so would risk having the court take away her control over her family and business.

The story then shifts to Nyai telling her own story to Annelies. She reveals her actual name is Sanikem. When she was a child, her father was very ambitious and was always trying to improve his situation, going to extreme lengths. He wanted to be promoted from a factory clerk to a paymaster, so that he could have more respect and also take better care of his family and extended family, being able to get them good jobs at the factory. He even did things like hire magic men to perform spells, yet for years he was unsuccessful at getting a promotion.

Nyai tells how, after she turned thirteen, she was kept in the house at all times, due to her beauty. She had many offers of marriage, but her father rejected them, and her mother did not have a say in the matter. Eventually, her father got the offer he was looking for, but it was not for marriage. Rather, he sold his daughter to the white leader as a concubine so that he could get a promotion at the factory. His wife protested, but could not do anything to stop him, and thus Sanikem was forced to become Herman Mellema's concubine.

Nyai then jumps back to the present day, telling Annelies that she does not want Annelies to end up in this situation, but to be able to marry whomever she wants. She then returns to her story. She relates how she refused to see her parents again and resolved to become the best nyai she could. This was the beginning of her education, as Mr. Mellema began teaching her how to read and write. Nyai tells of how they moved to Wonokromo and began the farm there, and how she gradually became more and more indispensable to Mr. Mellema's. She tells of the birth of Robert and Annelies and her accumulation of more responsibilities and more wealth, while at the same time she is stripped of her name as the mother of her children. Mr. Mellema legally acknowledged them in court as his children, which meant they could no longer be considered her children, although they would still be considered illegitimate.

She then tells of the event that changed Herman Mellema. His only legitimate child from his marriage to a European lady showed up one day and made threats to his father, and told him to divorce his mother. This is what caused Mr. Mellema to stand "there open-mouthed, like somebody who'd lost his senses," says Nyai, "and it turned out later that indeed he had lost his mind." After his son departed the house, Mr. Mellema left too and did not return for several days. When he did return, he was changed, and this was when Nyai took charge of the house and business, and took Annelies out of school in order to



help with the business. This is also when the family split, with Robert siding with his father and Annelies with her mother.

Annelies then resumes the narration, and tells Minke that this is the state he finds her family in when he meets them five years after these events occurred.

## Chapter 5 Analysis

After Minke's resolve in the previous chapter to study and write about the Mellema family, the reader immediately sees the results in chapter 5, when Minke provides Nyai's back-story. The novel takes a break from present day action to tell her story. It is presented in the context of Annelies learning the story from Nyai while unable to sleep at night due to her love of Minke. This provides the framework for the story.

During the telling, the reader gets insight into the plight of illegitimate children, which foreshadows future events. Nyai tells Annelies about why she did not have Herman admitted into a mental hospital after he changed. She says that if he were found unfit, then his business, money, and family would be left to the mercy of a court, and that she, as a native, would be unable to do anything for herself or her children. Thus, Nyai decided for the sake of her own children, not to have Herman admitted. This foreshadows that, if something were to happen in the future to Herman, Nyai's rights and everything she has worked for, could be taken away: "Your mama, just a Native, would have no rights over anything, and would not be able to do a thing for her child, you, Ann. All our backbreaking efforts, with never a holiday, would have been in vain. And my giving birth to you, Ann, would have been in vain too, because the law would not acknowledge my motherhood, just because I'm a Native and was not legally married." She goes on to say that "even permission for [Annelies] to marry would not come from me, but from that executor- neither kith nor kin." This frightful scenario is what could have occurred if Nyai had decided to admit Herman. Thus, she decided against it. Yet, the reader is left with a better understanding of the precarious fate of natives in the colonial Indies.

Several other passages within this chapter play on the same theme, such as when Nyai realizes her children can never be considered legitimate.

This chapter also reveals to the reader the event that changes Herman Mellema. The change has been foreshadowed in previous chapters, but here the reader finally learns what happened. This is also still related to the theme of legitimacy, because Herman's legitimate son Maurits is the precipitating factor for the change. His accusations of Herman's unfaithfulness with Nyai and her "bastard children" are what cause Herman to lose his mind.



# Chapter 6

## Chapter 6 Summary

The narration switches back to Minke in this chapter. Minke receives an invitation from Robert Mellema to visit in his room, and suspiciously accepts. Their conversation begins awkwardly and quickly goes downhill, with Robert expressing hatred and jealousy towards Minke. Annelies relieves Minke when she comes to get him away from Robert. Nyai joins them and shows Minke an article that he has actually written under a pen name. Nyai does not yet know that he wrote it, but notices that the person in the article resembles herself. Minke then admits his authorship to her, and Nyai praises him for his writing and encourages him to keep doing it, rather than getting angry that he based it on her. She even urges him to write about Robert, because he would make an interesting tragic character. Minke reflects on his desires to write, and doing so leads him to comparing his knowledge of Japan to that of the Indies. This in turn makes him reflect on battles between whites and natives in other areas, and about how hopeless it seems that a "colored people" could ever conquer a "white people."

## Chapter 6 Analysis

The narrative returns to the present-day with Minke as narrator. During his meeting with Robert Mellema, the tension between Natives and Europeans again arises, even though Robert is actually a mixed-blood Indo. Robert likes to think of himself as European, but Minke reminds him that in his "veins runs Native blood."

The theme of self-education or betterment through education runs in this chapter too. Minke indicates that he himself is also mixed-blood, in the sense that he has "European knowledge and learning inside" himself, from studying at H.B.S.

This theme continues when Nyai talks with Minke about writing, after she discovers that he wrote an article based on her. She mentions authors such as Victor Hugo, which any modern day student would recognize, but Minke fails to. This shows not only the broad range of Nyai's knowledge, but also the failings of the Dutch educational system, which promotes Dutch works but apparently does not provide its students a true literary education. Minke actually doubts the truth of what Nyai said, because he has never heard of it and because he is formally educated. This shows that even Minke, with his generally open mind, harbors some of the prejudices of the day associated with class and education.

This chapter hints that Minke will become an author. He is published under a pen name, and Nyai encourages him to continue writing. She tells him to write about humanity's life, and the reader gets a hint that is why he is writing this book. (quote p. 111) She then goes on to say that interesting stories are never about happy things, which foreshadows the fact that the very story Minke is narrating may also not have a happy ending,



because it is interesting. She says that happy stories "clearly do not take place on this earth of ours," which help explain the meaning of the novel's name, while also foreshadowing. The novel is *This Earth of Mankind*, not *This Earth of Angels* or some other such name. Thus, if it is about mankind, the story will be interesting but not necessarily happy.





# Chapter 7

## Chapter 7 Summary

This chapter begins with Minke being awakened at 4 a.m. by Nyai, because officers have come to arrest him and take him to the town of B—. The officer cannot give reasons why, and Minke does not know why he is being taken. However, he has no choice and must go with the officer. After traveling most of the day, they arrive in the town and go to the bupati's office. Minke is forced to bow down before the bupati, whom he soon realizes is his father. His father is the one who has had police officers bring him here, because Minke had never replied to the repeated letters from his father, brother, and mother. He learns his father wants him to be the translator at his father's celebration ceremony of being appointed a bupati. Minke reluctantly agrees to do this. He then gets visits by his mother and his older brother, who have varying reactions to the news that he is living at Wonokromo.

The next day, preparations are made for the ceremony, and Minke translates the speeches at his father's appointment. This is followed by traditional celebrations. During this time, Minke receives an invitation from the assistant resident of the town, Herbert de la Croix, who is impressed with Minke's translations, to visit at his home. Minke feels obligated to take him up on this offer, and meets his two daughters, Sarah and Miriam. This family is Dutch, and they share ideas with Minke that he has not heard before. They banter with Minke, at times criticizing him and trying to rile him. The sisters are graduates of the H.B.S. school and try to display their superior knowledge over him, especially when they introduce him to the Association Theory, which proposes that select educated native Javanese be promoted to co-govern with the European government, so that middle-men between the native government and real government could be removed and greater cooperation and understanding could exist between the two races. Minke finds the sisters somewhat annoying and departs.

## Chapter 7 Analysis

In this chapter, the reader sees Minke in a new light. The setting is his family's home in the bupati residence in a town a day's travel from Surabaya. The theme of class differences continues in this setting, where Minke's mother accuses him of being "a brown Dutchman," in other words, a native who has received a European education and who now acts European. Rather than Robert Mellema, who views being European a good characteristic, Minke's mother seems to view this as a bad thing. To her, Minke has forsaken his Javanese heritage. Yet in a later conversation with his older brother, Minke exclaims, "What's the use of being Javanese only to have one's rights violated?" This statement is ironic, because throughout the novel the reader continually sees instances where the Javanese have no rights. Minke's question makes the point that being called European or Dutch may not be such an insult, because at least those peoples seem to have rights. However, he then apologizes to his mother, and the reader sees Minke

participating in the traditional Java customs around his father's celebration. Minke quite literally throws off his European clothes and is dressed in traditional attire of a Javanese knight for the ceremony. This shows the reader the ties Minke has to his family and ancestors, and makes the internal struggle of class and race tensions within Minke that much more apparent.

These tensions are highlighted in a different way when Minke meets Miriam and Sarah, who are both Dutch. They tell Minke of something called the Association Theory, which proposes that educated natives could cooperate with Europeans and would govern with them, rather than beneath them. They have already shown that Minke himself is an educated Native, so their mentioning the theory foreshadows that perhaps Minke himself may be a candidate for proof of this theory. Minke, however, feels that the theory is too late in coming and should have been proposed three hundred years earlier, before the Javanese had lost their faith in Europeans and would have been willing to cooperate.



# Chapters 8-10

## Chapters 8-10 Summary

In Chapter Eight, Minke decides to return to Surabaya, but must first return to the de la Croix household to say goodbye. He leaves on friendly terms with the family, and they promise to write letters to one another.

On the train ride back, Minke notices a Chinese man, whom he mentally names Fatso. After he gets off the train, the Chinese man appears to follow him. Darsam and Annelies meet him at the station, but Darsam takes a detour and tells Minke that Robert Mellema ordered him to kill Minke. Darsam, of course, only takes orders from Nyai and Annelies, and as such has sworn to protect Minke. Darsam tells Minke they must not let Annelies and Nyai know of Robert's intentions. Darsam insists on Minke returning to his boarding house to live temporarily while Darsam sorts out things. Annelies is confused on why Minke is not returning to Wonokromo with her, and he passes it off as he needs to concentrate on his studies. Alone in his room, his mind swirls with thoughts of someone killing him, and then to Robert's motives.

In Chapter Nine, Minke tells what happened to Robert Mellema after Minke's departure from Wonokromo to B—. Nyai orders Robert to ride to town and discover what has happened to Minke, since she and Annelies know nothing yet. Annelies literally becomes sick with fear. Robert rides off towards town, but instead ends up in the neighboring brothel-house, which is owned by a Chinese man. There, he is introduced to a Japanese prostitute and led to her room.

In Chapter Ten, Minke interrupts Robert's story to tell the story of the Japanese prostitute, Maiko, in her own words. She tells of a hard life, being sold from boss to boss, from her home country to Hong Kong and eventually, to Java. Along the way, she contracted syphilis, and her life became even harder as she had less value as a prostitute and lived in constant fear her newest boss would find out she had the disease. Eventually, she was sold to Ah Tjong, who kept her for himself until the day that Robert appeared. He assigned her to Robert, and she tells of their meeting and then spending the whole day together, after which he was exhausted.

Then the narrative switches to telling the story from Ah Tjong's point of view. Ah Tjong greets Robert after Robert leaves Maiko, and invites him to return to his house at any time, where he can use her exclusively. He then gets Robert a haircut, pours him a drink, and sends him home.

Minke then returns to narrating the story, in which Annelies and Nyai anxiously await Robert's return all day long. When he finally appears, Nyai immediately can tell where he has been, and indicates that this is the same place his father has been visiting the past five years. Nyai accuses him, and Robert leaves the house, after which he rarely returned to it.



## Chapters 8-10 Analysis

Chapter Eight serves as a transition chapter. It wraps up events in the town of B— and brings Minke back to Surabaya, where he is followed and finds out he has a hit on his life by none other than Robert Mellema. This leads into chapter nine, which explains Robert's motivations that led to his placing a hit on Minke. Nyai and Annelies clearly side with Minke and force Robert to investigate what happened. This fills Robert with resentment and jealousy, and so when he is presented with an opportunity to procrastinate on riding to town, he immediately accepts. He is easily lured into the brothel, showing a lack of honor and character which is consistent with his characterization throughout the novel.

Chapters Nine and Ten delve into the details of Robert's downfall. Chapter Nine tells the events of that day in the brothel from Robert's point of view, and Chapter Ten tells it from Maiko's and Ah Tjong's points of view. In doing this, it also provides a glimpse into prostitutes' life in Java and reveals how even among that profession there are class differences, with Japanese prostitutes being favored over Chinese ones in Java. It also highlights the fate of women in general. Maiko has no choice in her prostitution just as Nyai had no choice in becoming a concubine. For underclass women of this time, few options for independence existed.

These chapters also introduce in more detail the setting of the brothel house, which foreshadows its involvement as a setting for more action later in the novel.



# Chapters 11-12

## Chapters 11-12 Summary

In Chapter Eleven, the narrative returns to the present day, with Minke narrating in first-person again. He awakes the day after returning to Surabaya with a headache, which is the result of his worries over the death threats against him. He goes to Jean Marais' home, where he discusses his fears about Fatso, as well as his decision to stay at Wonokromo and immerse himself in the life of the Mellema's. Jean advises that it may be serious, or it may only be his imagination. While talking outside, Minke notices a Chinese person across the street, and decides to confront him. Jean and Mr. Telinga join him. Minke discovers it is Fatso, and the confrontation turns ugly, eventually ending when Mr. Telinga's temper gets the better of him and he tries to beat up Fatso. Fatso escapes, and the men part. Back in his room, Minke becomes even more fearful. He resolves to cut out Annelies and Nyai from his life. He also receives a letter from Miriam, in which she tells of her father's good opinion of Minke, and insists that they want Minke to become an example for all Javanese and lead his country for the sake of his own people. This letter temporarily cures Minke's headache, but Darsam interrupts and brings him back to reality with a letter from Nyai. Annelies is very ill and Nyai wants Minke to return. Minke goes with Darsam.

In Chapter Twelve, Minke is led by Nyai to Annelies' room, where she does not recognize him. Her doctor tells him that he has given her drugs to make her sleep. The doctor also tells Minke that he will ultimately be responsible for her healing, since she loves him only and depends on him. He says she has a weak psyche and must be treated gently and with great kindness. The doctor places all responsibility for her on Minke, not only now but in the future. Minke accepts this responsibility, while feeling some degree of self-pity for himself as well. This does not last long, however, because the drugs begin to wear off and Annelies recognizes Minke. Minke is overcome by her beauty and resolves he will do whatever it takes to heal her and protect her.

## Chapters 11-12 Analysis

In Chapter Eleven, Minke shows his youth in his fearful imaginings of being murdered and in becoming sick from this. He vacillates back and forth between resolving to stay away from the Mellema's, to running to them when they call. Minke seems to have two options. One is to side with the de la Croix's, and become the educated Javanese who works for the good of his country. The other is to return to the Mellema family and satisfy his emotions and needs. At the end of this chapter, Minke decides upon the Mellema's as thoughts of Miriam's letter vanish. Emotions have won the battle over reason and education, for Minke.

In Chapter Twelve, Minke is told by Dr. Martinet that he must be the one to cure Annelies. This represents somewhat of a turning point within him, because Minke



decides to take on this responsibility and works to heal her. He realizes in doing this that he is committing to her both now and forever. He is casting his lot with Annelies, and whatever future that may hold for him.

The themes of education, class, and race appear again in this chapter. Dr. Martinet, an education European, is impressed with Nyai's self-education and with the fact that Minke is a native with a European education. He is not condescending, but is appreciative of these attributes. The doctor plays a central role in this chapter in promoting Minke and Annelies' love and future.



# Chapters 13-14

## Chapters 13-14 Summary

In Chapter Thirteen, Minke returns to school, but finds things changed. He has less in common with his school friends and finds them different. Likewise, they find him changed. His teachers even treat him differently. Minke asks at school about the Association Theory, and when no one responds to his questions, he explains his understanding of it. His teachers forbid discussing of this subject at school, and change the subject to an article that Minke has written under his pen name. Robert Suurhof then gives a negative review of the article and reveals that Minke is the author. Magda Peters gives a defense of Minke, but everyone else avoids him.

Minke tells about school and the rest of his daily routine, now that he has settled back into life at the Mellema's. He still receives letters from Miriam and Sarah, and reads these in front of Annelies. The letters make Annelies jealous, but don't threaten their relationship.

Minke visits with Jean Marias, who discusses colonial wars with him and Mr. Telinga, and then visits with Magda Peters, whom he talks into visiting the Mellema home. Ms. Peters is impressed with Nyai's self-education, but does not get along well with Annelies, who is jealous of her.

In Chapter Fourteen, Annelies pulls Minke away from his studies and insists that he tuck her into bed and tell her a story. The only story he can make up is one about her. He tells of a beautiful princess whose prince finally comes. Mid-story, she pulls him to her in a hug, and this close touching sets off sparks in both of them that turns them "into a pair of prehistoric animals." In other words, they make love. Afterwards, Minke asks if he is the first, to which Annelies regretfully replies no. He insists that she tell him, and so she shamefully tells the story of how her brother raped her. Minke tells her he believes what she says, and hugs her tightly, and they fall asleep together.

## Chapters 13-14 Analysis

Chapter Thirteen shows the maturity that Minke has developed, because upon returning to school, he finds things changed. He is now different from his peers and on a more equal status with his teachers. As a result, he develops a closer friendship with Magda Peters, especially after she defends him, and all Natives, in front of the school. She is shown as a more liberal European who recognizes that Europeans themselves are mixed-bloods of other races, and as such should not judge native Javanese. This is also shown in her treatment of Nyai during and after her first visit to the Mellema's.

Chapter Fourteen reveals the source of the animosity between Annelies and Robert. He raped her in the marsh of reeds, which explains why Annelies was averse to that area of the farm when she showed it to Minke earlier in the novel. The revelation of her rape



also reveals a strength in Annelies that has not been apparent before now. She has been portrayed so far as a weak, beautiful girl, yet this chapter reveals that "she knew how to defend herself [ . . . ] She knew the meaning of death and trust." Minke, along with the reader, realizes that Annelies has depths of character no one knows. She fought off her brother, although unsuccessful, and then kept this secret from her mother and everyone else. For months she alone bore the burden of what she considered a shameful secret, which helps to explain some of her seeming weaknesses. She has been carrying a tremendous load by herself.

Also in this chapter, the reader sees Minke's strength of character in his reaction to her story. He believes her and still loves her, going so far as to make love to her again after she finishes her tale.





# Chapters 15-16

## Chapters 15-16 Summary

In Chapter Fifteen, Minke learns that he may be expelled from school and also that Robert Suurhof is spreading rumors about him to try to bring him to public disgrace, yet he is not particularly concerned about this, feeling that he is strong enough to handle anything. With this bad news, he also learns good news. The local newspaper, S.N. v/dD, hires him to work part time writing. Shortly after this, he has a meeting with Dr. Martinet where they discuss Annelies' health and the doctor provides a psychological interpretation of her, even though he is not a psychologist by training. In the course of this, he tells Minke that Annelies is dominated by her fears, especially her anxiety at the thought of losing him. He tells him "to leave her would mean to break her." He then grills Minke on his and Annelies' relationship, and learns that they are sleeping together. He gets Minke to tell him about her rape by her brother, but by that point Minke has had enough and leaves. However after this, when Dr. Martinet visits Annelies, Minke has a deeper respect from him and observes him more closely.

During one of these visits, Dr. Martinet advises Nyai, in front of Annelies and Minke, that the two should get married. Before discussion can ensue, Jean and May Marais show up, having finally accepted Minke's offer to visit. Annelies and May quickly become friends.

In Chapter Sixteen, Minke sees Fatso and begins worrying again. He puts Darsam on alert, but does not want Darsam to confront Fatso. However, Fatso comes too close to the Mellema home for Darsam's liking, and Darsam begins chasing him. Minke chases Darsam, calling out for Darsam not to do anything to Fatso, and a domino effect begins. Annelies chases after Minke, and Nyai chases after Annelies. Fatso turns for shelter to the brothel, and the rest follow him inside. Once inside, there is no sign of Fatso, but instead they discover the body of a dead Herman Mellema. Robert Mellema emerges from a back room with Maiko, but flees once he sees Darsam. The family turns back to Herman Mellema, and the police arrive to investigate. It does not take long for stories and rumors about the family to begin circulating. The family learns that Herman was poisoned over a long period of time, and had received a particularly high dose of the poison the day of his death. The police begin searching for Fatso and for Robert as suspects in the case.

Minke's own family is upset upon learning that he is mixed up in the case, and his father threatens to disown him.

Dr. Martinet becomes the public face of the Mellema family as he defends them, but rumors continue to circulate. Minke writes articles explaining the truth of the situation for the newspaper.



When Fatso and Robert cannot be found, eventually Ah Tjong is tried for the murder of Herman Mellema. During the trial, Nyai admits to footing the bill for both her husband and her son to stay at the pleasure-house. Minke also is questioned about his relationships with Annelies and Nyai, and he is amazed that "Europeans, my teachers, my civilizers, could behave in such a way," as they make innuendos about the relationships.

The trial comes to an unsatisfying end when Ah Tjong is relinquished into temporary custody while the search for Fatso and Robert continued.

## Chapters 15-16 Analysis

Minke continues to grow towards adulthood in Chapter Fifteen. He engages in frank, adult conversation with Dr. Martinet and accepts more responsibility for caring for Annelies. He also continues to be more distant from his classmates and school, while entering more into the adult world. He reflects on wisdom from Dr. Martinet, that people's trials define their strength and develop them into adults, or turn them insane or criminal.

Chapter Sixteen appears to be the climax of the novel, with much significant action occurring. Herman Mellema is murdered, the family must go through a trial, Minke is cast in a suspicious light, and his world is turned upside down. However, this chapter is not actually the resolution of the novel. The trial is not completed and many questions remain unresolved.



# Chapters 17-18

## Chapters 17-18 Summary

In Chapter Seventeen, Minke is expelled from school, supposedly because he is now too adult to mix with his classmates, since he has a sexual relationship with a girl. However, after writing an article about the relationships between Pures, Indos, and Natives, the school recognizes the truth in his writings and accomplishments, and reinstates him so that he can graduate. Minke discusses with his newspaper editor many things, including the fact that Magda Peters is a liberal who may very well get deported back to the Netherlands because she supports an independent Indies. Minke is warned to keep his distance from her. Shortly after this, Minke discusses with Jean Marais the possibility of marrying Annelies, and they decide that it should happen after he graduates.

In Chapter Eighteen, Minke graduates from H.B.S. and has a big graduation party. Annelies attends his graduation, but not Nyai, and both his parents are also absent. Minke learns he received the second highest score in all of the Indies on the graduation exam. At the graduation party, Minke invites his school to his wedding. Wedding preparations begin, and Minke's mother comes to help. She falls in love with Annelies and is proud of her son. Minke and Annelies have an Islamic wedding, with Darsam as their witness. Minke's mother speaks to him before the wedding ceremony, dresses him in traditional Javanese attire, and presents him with his grandfather's sword. She does her best to instill in him a sense of who he is as a Javanese, telling him the qualities of a Javanese knight and asking him to live these. After this, the wedding party happens, with the entire village present. Robert Suurhof also shows up late, and presents a ring to Annelies, who later removes it. They receive many other wedding presents, and learn that Magda Peters is leaving the Indies before she is expelled.

## Chapters 17-18 Analysis

The halt in the trial in Chapter Seventeen also puts a halt on the unsettling new lifestyle Minke and the Mellema's have begun, and they are temporarily able to pretend life is more normal. However, not that normal: Minke's school expels then reinstates him, he learns that his idol Magda Peters is actually a radical who could be dangerous by association for him, and he decides to marry Annelies. These tumultuous events continue to further mature Minke.

In Chapter Eighteen, in Minke's mother's speech to him before the wedding party, she tells him that the Dutch are powerful but have not stolen people's wives like historically the Javanese have done, and that she is glad he lives in the present day and not back then. If he had, he would not have been able to keep Annelies. This foreshadows future events.



His mother also berates him for being too Dutch and not Javanese enough. This again highlights the racial prejudice that is present between natives and Europeans, on both sides.

This chapter is ultimately the high before the low. It is full of happy, significant life events: graduation and marriage. Minke is on top of the world, yet the chapter closes with the line "Suurhof and Fatso kept on harassing my thoughts." This foreshadows that all may not end well, despite the current happiness.



# Chapters 19-20

## Chapters 19-20 Summary

In Chapter Nineteen, Minke receives a letter from Robert Suurhof, in which he confesses his love of Annelies and begs forgiveness, and indicates that he is leaving Java in order to try to forget her. Minke and Annelies live a few months in undisturbed happiness, but that ends with news that Nyai and Annelies are being brought to court. After much confusion, it is discovered that Maurits Mellema is claiming his inheritance as Herman's only legitimate son. He has gotten the Dutch courts to give him his share of the estate, and to also oversee Annelies and Robert's shares as they are illegitimate. The final blow is that since Annelies is still a minor, Maurits is going to bring her to the Netherlands, and also that since the marriage was neither Dutch nor Christian and because of her illegitimacy, the marriage is invalid and she will be separated from Minke.

Minke and Nyai resolve to fight this, hire and then fire an incompetent lawyer, and receive a new lawyer from Herbert de la Croix. They receive support from all of their close friends and all of the Natives, yet after battling their hardest, they lose and the courts hold up the decision of the Amsterdam courts.

In Chapter Twenty, Annelies is taken away from her family and forced to set sail without them on a ship to the Netherlands. Minke is able to arrange for Jan Dapperste to secretly buy tickets on the same ship so that at least he can keep an eye on her, but it is implied that Nyai and Minke will never see her again. In the end, Nyai with her self-education and Minke with his European education are both powerless against the greater colonial forces and are unable to keep Annelies. She sets sail, and the novel ends.

## Chapters 19-20 Analysis

In the denouement of the novel in Chapter Nineteen, all the themes and tensions come to a peak. Race, class, legal rights, gender, family ties—everything gets wrapped up in the trial of Annelies before the courts to determine if Maurits is able to take her away to the Netherlands. The judge favors Maurits, and thus everything that Minke and Nyai have worked towards during the novel comes crashing down around them.

In the novel's close in Chapter Twenty, Annelies departs and Minke is distraught. Everything he thought he believed in is lost. Nyai tries to comfort him, and comfort the reader, with the consolation that at least they fought back well and honorably. However, this rings somewhat hollow in light of the devastation. The novel closes with the tag "Buru Island Prison Camp, Spoken 1973, Written 1975."

This leaves the reader to wonder if Minke has been imprisoned in his later years, and why; or if the closing is actually from the author, Pramoedya Ananta Toer. The author, of

course, actually was imprisoned, so the reader is unclear on what parts of the story are fiction and what may actually be true.



# Characters

## Minke

Minke is the novel's main character and primary narrator. He is the son of unnamed parents who are relatively high-class native Javanese. His grandparents have been able to get him into one of the top high schools in the Indies, which is taught by the Dutch. Minke takes pride in the fact that he is well-educated, but during the course of the novel he learns that there is much his school education has not taught him. During the novel, he becomes educated by life and by non-European teachers.

Minke is not his given name. His mother calls him Gus and the reader must assume that Gus is his given name. Minke is a name that a teacher called him in elementary school, and it stuck. At the time, no one realized that the teacher was actually insulting Minke. The teacher almost said "monkey" in derision, but quickly changed it to "minke." Given that his class was young students who did not know English, no one suspected until Minke guessed it years later.

Minke meets the Mellema family and falls in love with the daughter, Annelies. His story is both a story of his growing up as well as a love story.

Minke starts out having faith in scientific reasoning and progress, as he has been taught at school. However, when he meets Annelies, he discovers the importance of emotions. He struggles to balance his feelings for Annelies against his belief in reason. This struggle plays out throughout the length of the novel, and neither is ultimately a winner. He learns to accept and give into his feelings, but also never quite gives up his faith in reason, using reason and logic in his battle for Annalies at the end. Ultimately, he loses this battle, and so in that way reason has lost. But losing the battle also means he has lost Annelies, so likewise, his emotions have lost. Minke ends the novel disillusioned.

## Annelies Mellema

Annelies is the daughter of Herman Mellema and Nyai Ontosoroh, the sister of Robert, and the love interest of Minke. Annelies sides with her mother in the family split and identifies herself as a Native, although she is actually Indo.

Her beauty is said to rival that of Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands. Annelies appears a beautiful, yet extremely fragile, girl. She is both shy and bold. When she first meets Minke, she is bashful at his compliments, yet boldly takes him away from the other company, gives him a tour of the farm, and dresses up for him. Yet after these obvious signs of her desire, she becomes shy again when he kisses her. In many ways such as this, Annelies is a puzzle. She gets anxious and literally sick when Minke is absent from her, and depends upon him and her mother to take care of her. Yet, she has gone through several great tragedies at a young age- her father's virtual disappearance, and being raped by her brother. Annelies is stronger than she appears.



Her love for Minke also encourages her growth. She blooms under his love and assurance. When she is forced to leave at the end of the novel, she does so with acceptance. She turns her back on her home and proceeds to her future with remarkable composure for one who has been so flighty throughout most of the novel.

## Robert Mellema

Robert Mellema is the son of Herman Mellema and Nyai and brother of Annelies. He is the antagonist to Minke. In the division of the Mellema family, he sides with his father. He identifies himself with Europeans, even though he is actually a Native. He is depicted as ruthless, smart, dangerous, and shallow. His actions hurt other characters in the novel: his sister, mother, Minke. His absence from the trial for his murdered father essentially convicts a relatively innocent man.

## Nyai Ontosoroh

Nyai Ontosoroh is also referred to as Mama by some of the characters. She is the concubine of Herman Mellema and mother of Robert and Annelies. She becomes a second mother to Minke, as well. She leads the family business in the absence of Herman Mellema, who had an accident in previous years and is not present most of the time. She is a Native. She is sold by her father to become a concubine, but with the help of Herman Mellema, has educated herself. She takes the knowledge of reading and writing that he gives her, and uses it to propel herself forward. She is determined not to let her daughter Annelies befall a similar fate. This is why she works so hard—to protect her daughter. She overcomes many hardships and runs a large business essentially single-handedly. She guides Annelies and Minke in love. Yet in the end, all her sacrifices amount to naught. She ends up losing her daughter after all. However, she feels that at least she fought honorably and to the best of her abilities, and so in that way, was not totally defeated.

## Robert Suurhof

Robert Suurhof is a classmate of Minke's at HBS School, who introduces him to Annelies. He secretly wants Annelies to fall for him, since he is European, and is taken aback when she falls for Minke instead. This explains his animosity towards Minke later in the novel, although in the end he begs forgiveness and leaves Java. He cannot stay on the same island as Annelies, which is ironic since she ends up also leaving the island.

## Magda Peters

Magda Peters is Minke's favorite teacher who supports and defends him throughout the novel. From a teacher, she becomes a friend, even though she is Dutch. Late in the novel, it is revealed she is a liberal who wants the island natives to take a greater part in





their own governance. This explains her fondness towards Minke, but it ends up forcing her to leave Java.

## **Darsam**

Darsam is the guard of the Mellema family, home, and business. In the family split, he remains loyal to Nyai and Annelies, and therefore, loyal to Minke as well. He protects Minke from death threats, but ultimately cannot protect Annelies from leaving the island.

## **Jean Marais**

Jean Marais is Minke's next-door neighbor at the boarding house. He is a Frenchman who has studied at the Sorbonne, but who ends up in the Indies. He enrolled in the Dutch Indies Army to keep from going broke, and fought in the wars. In the time of the novel, however, he is an artist who employs Minke to bring him orders for his furniture and painting business. He acts as a confidant and adviser to Minke.

## **May Marais**

May is the young daughter of Jean Marais whom Minke treats as a younger sister.

## **Mrs. Telinga**

Mrs. Telinga is Minke's landlady and Mr. Telinga's wife.

## **Mr. Telinga**

Mr. Telinga is Minke's landlord and husband to Mrs. Telinga.

## **Herman Mellema**

Herman Mellema takes Nyai as his concubine and is the father of Robert, Annelies, and Maurits. He essentially goes insane when confronted by Maurits, and retreats into life in a brothel house. He ends up murdered, and it is his murder that brings about the events which force Annelies to leave.

## **Maurits Mellema**

Maurits is Robert and Annelies' stepbrother and the only legitimate son of Herman Mellema by his European wife. After Herman's murder, he comes to claim his inheritance and to ruin the lives of his step-siblings, especially Annelies, in order to also get their inheritances.



## Herbert de la Croix

Herbert de la Croix is the assistant resident (government official) of the town of B—. He is Dutch, but befriends Minke and supports him in his legal battles.

## Sarah de la Croix

Sarah is the older daughter of Herbert and friend to Minke.

## Miriam de la Croix

Miriam is the younger daughter of Herbert and friend to Minke.

## Fatso

Fatso is the Chinese man who follows Minke and whom Minke thinks has been hired to kill him. He gets chased by Darsam, which ultimately leads to the discovery of Herman Mellema's body.

## Ah Tjong

Ah Tjong is a neighbor of the Mellema's and owns a brothel. He is Chinese. He is implicated in the murder of Herman Mellema, although not actually convicted.

## Maiko

Maiko is the Japanese prostitute at Ah Tjong's brothel. She is Ah Tjong's favorite and is also used by Robert Mellema.

## Dr. Martinet

Dr. Martinet is the Mellema family doctor who cares for Annelies when she is ill and befriends Minke. He supports them both in their legal battles and is a staunch defend of them in the public arena.

## Jan Dapperste

Jan Dapperste is a student at H.B.S. who is a Native who was adopted by Europeans. He is ashamed of his Dutch last name, since he is really Native. He is a friend of Minke's and ends up becoming involved in the Mellema family business. In the end, he is able to change his last name to a Javanese name.



## **Martin Nijman**

Martin is the owner and publisher of the local Surabaya newspaper, the S.N. v/d D. He hires Minke to work for him part time, and supports Minke during his troubles.

## **Kommer**

Kommer is a writer for a newspaper in another town who defends Minke during his struggles.



## Objects/Places

### Java

Java is an island in the Dutch Indies where the novel takes place.

### Surabaya

Surabaya is a city in Java where Minke primarily lives and goes to school.

### B---

B--- is a city (the full name is never given in the novel) where the regional government is housed. B--- is near Minke's hometown of T---.

### H.B.S.

H.B.S. is the Dutch-language, European-run senior high school that Minke attends in Surabaya.

### Wonokromo

Wonokromo is the district of Surabaya where the Mellema home and business are located.

### Boerderji Buitenzorg

Boerderji Buitenzorg is the name of the Mellema family business and home.

### Ah-Tjong's pleasure-house

The pleasure-house (or brothel) run by Ah-Tjong that is located near Boerderji Buitenzorg in the Wonokromo district.

### Holland or the Netherlands

Holland and the Netherlands are used interchangeably as the name for the country which has colonized Java. It lies many thousands of miles from Java yet still rules the country.



## **Amsterdam**

Capital of the Netherlands, where the governmental decisions for Java are ultimately made.

## **Natives**

Native inhabitants of the island of Java. Both a race and a class of people, although within Natives there are also class divisions.

## **Indos**

Indos, also known as Mixed-Bloods, have one parent who is a Native and one who is a European. They have more freedom than Natives and tend to think of themselves as superior to Natives, but are looked down upon as inferior by most Europeans.

## **Europeans**

Europeans, also known as Pures or Pure-Bloods, are of pure European descent. They are at the top of the racial and class systems in the Indies.

## **Europe**

Europe collective is viewed as the place where progress, technology, and knowledge originate. Europe is considered the epitome of civilization.



# Themes

## Colonialism

Colonialism is a theme common in many works set in areas that were colonized. In this novel, the specific effects of colonialism by the Dutch on the Indies island of Java are explored. The novel begins with homage to the newly crowned queen of Holland and depicts island natives celebrating her coronation, leading to an initial impression that all is well in this Dutch colony. However throughout the novel, tensions are displayed between the colonizers and the natives. Ultimately, it shows the lack of basic human rights that were given to the colonized and how little control they have within their own country. Annelies, a native Javanese, is forced by Dutch courts to lose her inheritance and be deported to the Netherlands by her stepbrother. This epitomizes the dark side of colonialism.

## Education

Education is a major theme of this novel. The best way to be educated is constantly debated in the novel. In particular, the traditional learning gained in a traditional European secondary school is contrasted with both self-education and life education. Nyai is a perfect example of a self-educated person, although even she has a European teacher in Herman Mellema. However she shows that she has taken the education he taught her and then used her own knowledge and her life experiences to further her education. She exemplifies continuous learning. Minke is contrasted as the school-educated character. Much of the time he is prideful of his education at an elite high school, but he gradually learns that this has not taught him all he needs to know. He is educated in other ways by Nyai, as well as by his life experiences over the course of the novel. In the end, he emerges as a more fully educated person because he has added to his book learning with life learning.

## Class and Race

Class and Race are separate yet intertwined themes in the novel. Race refers to whether someone is Native, Indo, or European. Race often equates with Class, as Europeans are the top class, Indos are generally middle class, and Natives are the lowest class. However, within each race there are different classes. There are upper-class Natives who are part of the ruling party, although they are still well beneath the European rulers. Likewise, there are low class Indos and Europeans.

Class and race play a major role in the novel. In some ways, Native, Indo, and European almost seem like characters themselves. Almost every chapter uses these terms in depicting various events and situations. The combination of class and race is what ultimately dooms Annelies. Prejudices of class influence Minke at first, and he

must overcome the prejudices against the typically lower-class concubines when he befriends the Mellema family.



# Style

## Point of View

This *Earth of Mankind* is primarily told in first person by the narrator, Minke. However, there are times in the novel when other points of view are used. For instance, in Chapter Five, the narration switches to first person by Annelies. While she tells the story in first person, it is actually about a third person, her mother. Within Annelies' narration, the point of view switches to Nyai's first person, and it alternates between first person Annelies and first person Nyai, before finally resuming with first person Minke.

This switching of narrators happens mostly when something needs to be told where Minke was not present. Nyai's back-story, Annelies' rape, Jean Marais' experiences in wars, Robert Mellema's downfall, Maiko's prostitution, and Ah Tjong's involvement in these last two, are all told using first person by the individuals involved. This leads the readers to trust more in what they are reading, because they are reading a first-hand account. This also ties into the journalistic style in which Minke writes. As a reporter for a newspaper, he would naturally tend to using quotes from direct sources, such as he does by using these other narrators.

Ultimately, however, the story is the story of the Mellema family as narrated by an initially outside observer, Minke.

## Setting

The novel primarily takes place on the island of Java in the colonized Dutch Indies. Within Java, most of the action either occurs in the port city of Surabaya or in the Wonokromo district, which is just outside the city and is the home of the Mellema's. Being a port city, Surabaya was likely to have had a higher mix of races, religions, languages, and ideas than perhaps other parts of the island. It is set at the turn of the century, beginning in 1898 and follows Minke, the narrator, in his last year of secondary school.

One thing the reader notices about the setting is the many languages used by various characters throughout the novel. Javanese, Dutch, Malay, Madurase, and High Javanese are some of the languages used. These languages often indicate not just country of origin, but class. Malay was the somewhat "common" language that could be used by most people to communicate with different races. However, native Javanese who knew Dutch were often not allowed to speak it because Dutch was considered a language of the colonizers and the upper-class, and the reader sees this depicted in the novel.





## Language and Meaning

Because this novel is a translation, some of the meaning of language has no doubt been lost. However, the translator does leave in key words untranslated, and provides a glossary of these words. This helps the novel keep some of its original flow and add texture to the story which would otherwise be missing.

Adjectives are frequently used in the novel, and this fits in with the author's goal of having his narrator, Minke, tell a story. Not only is the author writing the story, but he is writing it using a narrator who is also a writer. By having Minke use descriptive words, he is showing Minke's own writing style and makes it more believable that Minke is a published author.

The author uses descriptions, but the book is not just one descriptive passage after another. It is also full of lively dialogues between a wide variety of characters. This gives the novel breadth and scope that it would not have without so much interaction between so many people. Through the dialogue, the reader gets exposed to other characters' thoughts without having to rely on the narrator to describe it.

The use of dialogue and description keeps the novel moving at a quick pace while still being full of details.

## Structure

The novel is composed of twenty chapters, but not all chapters are equal. The opening chapter is extremely short, and could almost more properly be called a preface. The following chapter is fairly lengthy, however. Chapter two informs the reader of the setting and introduces the main characters. Chapter five is another lengthy chapter which gives great detail on the character of Nyai Ontosoroh. The chapter needs to be long as it essentially tells her story from childhood through the present day. The author uses a mix of long chapters to provide depth of characters and events, with shorter chapters that keep the action moving. This combination succeeds in keeping the reader's interest throughout an almost four-hundred page novel. The author also uses flashbacks to advance the narrative. The change of time from past to present forces the reader to be mindful of the plot, characters, and setting at all times. The next-to-last chapter is extremely lengthy, as the author keeps all of the climatic action in one chapter. In contrast, the closing chapter is relatively short.



## Quotes

Ch. 1, p. 15

"That eternally harassing, tantalizing future. Mystery! We will all eventually arrive there—willing or unwilling, with all our soul and boy. And too often it proves to be a great despot."

Ch. 2, p. 45

"How foolish of us to think that the beauty bestowed by the gods does not always triumph over the inventions of humans."

Ch. 3, p. 56

"An educated person must learn to act justly, beginning, first of all, with his thoughts, then later in his deeds. That is what it means to be educated."

Ch. 4, p. 69

"And what can be obtained in this life without payment? Everything must be paid for, or redeemed, even the shortest happiness."

Ch. 5, p. 93

"Only then did I realize how evil the law was. You obtained a father, but lost a mother."

Ch. 6, p. 111

"Write, Nyo, always about humanity, humanity's life, not humanity's death. Yes [. . .] there's nothing more difficult to understand than humanity. That's why there's no end to the telling of stories on this earth. Every day there are more. [. . .] Stories about happy things are never interesting. They are not stories about people and their lives, but about heaven, and clearly do not take place on this earth of ours."

Ch. 8, p. 148

"Minke, if you maintain your present attitude, I mean your European attitude, not a slavish attitude like most Javanese, perhaps one day you will be an important person. You can become a leader, a pioneer, an example to your race."

Ch. 8, p. 154

"My earth, this earth of mankind, had lost all its certainty. All the science and learning that had made me what I am evaporated into nothingness."

Ch. 11, p. 188

"Whatever else, I still liked school. To mix openly with all my friends. To be free. Obtaining new, unlimited knowledge and learning. Absorbing everything from this earth of mankind from the past, the present, and the future."

Ch. 2, p. 46

"There were too many new things, which my teachers had never mentioned, that proceeded from her lips. Remarkable."



Ch. 12, p. 205

"Great artists [. . .] become great because their life has been crammed with and based upon profound, intense experiences: emotional, spiritual, or physical."

Ch. 13, p. 226

"Because it is not important where you reside. Especially when someone we call a nyai on the outside, miss, is actually no less than an educated person; indeed she is my teacher."

Ch. 15, p. 247

"I felt that whatever was going to happen, I was dependent on nobody. I felt strong."

Ch. 15, p. 251

"Love comes from a source of power that has no equal. It can change people, destroy them or cause them to cease to exist, build them up or smash them down."

Ch. 15, p. 264

"The resilience and strength—or otherwise—of a person's abilities, and his worth, are directly related to the size and number of the trials he has undergone."

Ch. 16, p. 278

"They can't stand seeing Natives not being trodden under their feet. Natives must always be in the wrong, Europeans must be innocent, so therefore Natives must be wrong to start with. To be born a Native is to be in the wrong."

Ch. 16, p. 280

"This is how it is in all the colonies: Asia, Africa, America, Australia. Everything that is not European, and especially if it is not colonial, is trodden upon, laughed at, humiliated, for no other reason than to prove the supremacy of Europe and of colonial might in every matter—not excluding ignorance."

Ch. 18, p. 301

"No one ever imagined that a Native could beat Europeans. Such an idea was taboo in the Indies."

Ch. 19, p. 329

"Years and years of schooling were overturned with just the three short sentences of a nyai."



## Topics for Discussion

How has Minke matured throughout the course of the novel? Give examples of his behavior at the beginning of the book and at the end to support your answer.

What does it mean to be "educated," according to the novel?

Compare and contrast two of the three mother figures in the book: Nyai Ontosoroh, Nyai's mother, and Minke's mother.

War plays a part in some of the minor character's lives. What do you think the author is trying to say about war?

The introduction to the book reveals that the author is Javanese. How do you think the author's background may have influenced the novel?

Minke begins the novel with faith in scientific reason and progress. Name two examples of when he is let down by this faith.

Discuss the differing roles China and Japan play in the novel. Why do you think these countries are characterized the way they are?

The narrator tells the reader in the opening chapter that the story is based on his notes, but that he has taken artistic license with them. How does this change your perception of the story, especially its ending?

At one point, Minke wonders why it was Holland who conquered Java, rather than England or Japan. How would you answer his question?