

The Tin Drum Study Guide

The Tin Drum by Günter Grass

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Plot Summary

The Tin Drum is a fable of the mythical and diminutive Oskar Matzerath's life in the free city of Danzig, Germany during World War II. Oskar is a mythical figure, perfectly cognizant from the moment he is born. At his birth, Oskar's mother announces that at the age of three he will be given a drum. His father proclaims that at maturity, Oskar will inherit the family business, a small grocery shop. At that very moment, Oskar determines never to grow to maturity, but to stop growing after receiving the drum on his third birthday. The drum becomes Oskar's solace and his favorite method of communication. The novel follows Oskar's experiences during the war, defending a Polish post office against the Germans, and later entertaining the German soldiers with a troupe of dwarfs.

After his mother's death, the teenaged Oskar's amorous adventures with his babysitter, Maria, lead him to believe he is the father of her son, Kurt. Oskar is disappointed when Maria marries his father, but soon becomes involved in a gang of young hoodlums. Overcome with guilt at his father's funeral, Oskar throws his beloved drum into the grave, and magically begins to grow again, although he remains twisted and never gains full adult stature. Eventually Oskar is confined in a mental hospital in West Germany. Through Oskar's complex exploits during and after the war, Grass explores the relationship between war and art, and sex and religion, without resolving their intermingled roles in human affairs. While it contains many supernatural elements, the post-modern novel is not a simple allegory, but a complex mix of realism and myth that defies easy understanding or reduction to symbolism.

After the war, Oskar, Maria and Kurt flee to West Germany. Kurt develops a gift for commerce, and is soon operating a highly profitable black market business with Maria. Oskar, reluctant to accept their ill-gained profits, works as a stonecutter's apprentice and an artist's model. Soon, he has enough income to rent a room in a boarding house where he meets his friend Klepp and develops an unrequited love for Sister Dorothea, a nurse. Oskar and Klepp, a clarinetist, begin playing in a jazz band at a popular nightclub. After the nightclub owner's death, Oskar accepts an offer to tour solo, becoming a successful concert and recording artist.

When Oskar finds a severed finger near the river, he is tempted by his friend Vittlar to keep it preserved in a jar. Oskar worships the finger, while Vittlar keeps the aquamarine ring. Craving fame, Vittlar turns Oskar in to the police. Oskar is arrested and found guilty of the murder. He is confined to a mental asylum after insisting that he is Jesus.

Oskar is an unreliable narrator since those closest to him, including his male nurse Bruno, his friend Vittlar and even Maria herself, clearly do not believe much of his story. In particular, everyone including Maria denies that Oskar ever had sex with his stepmother. Therefore, Kurt could not possibly be Oskar's child. Oskar's continued protests that he is Jesus, and his confinement in a mental asylum, seem to support this view.



In true post-modern tradition, Grass's work allows multiple interpretations and fully supports none of them. Perhaps the most remarkable thing about this novel is that it was written at all. As late as 2001, a prominent American citizen of Austrian descent, Arnold Schwarzenegger, confessed that he was ignorant of his father's role in World War II. Discussion of the war was completely prohibited in Germany and Austria. Grass's moving novel of sex and guilt during the war, published in 1961, challenges that tradition of silence and breaks many taboos.



Chapter 1, The Wide Skirt

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The Tin Drum is a fable of the mythical and diminutive Oskar Matzerath's life in the free city of Danzig, Germany through World War II. Oskar is a mythical figure, perfectly cognizant from the moment he is born. At his birth, Oskar's mother announces that at the age of three he will be given a drum. His father proclaims that at maturity, Oskar will inherit the family business, a small grocery shop. At that very moment, Oskar determines never to grow to maturity, but to stop growing after receiving the drum on his third birthday. The drum becomes Oskar's solace and his favorite method of communication. The novel follows Oskar's experiences during the war, defending a Polish post office against the Germans, and later entertaining the German soldiers with a troupe of dwarfs.

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The narrative is told by an adult Oskar, a resident in a mental hospital who is, all things considered, fairly satisfied with his situation. The story opens with Oskar's grandmother, Anna Bronski, a sturdy peasant girl attired in four voluminous skirts, roasting potatoes for a snack in an empty field. A short but powerful young man runs into the field, pursued by the police. He convinces Anna to conceal him beneath her four wide skirts. The police demand that Anna tell them where Koljaiczek has gone. Anna replies that she knows no one named Koljaiczek but points them down the road. As evening falls, Anna rises to leave the field, exposing Joseph Koljaiczek to the cold elements. He hurriedly buttons his pants and follows Anna to Bissau.

Chapter 1, The Wide Skirt Analysis

As the narrator, Oskar seems quite comfortable in his asylum home. He refers to his male nurse, Bruno, affectionately. Grass introduces elements of the magical early in the narrative. It is unlikely that Joseph Koljaiczek would actually be short enough to hide under the voluminous skirts of a sitting woman, and even more unlikely that the stupid policemen don't suspect he is hiding nearby.



Grass's gift is that for all the improbability of their actions, his characters are so clearly and realistically portrayed that their existence is never in doubt. The magical realism of Joseph's hiding place is counterbalanced by the squalid sexuality of the scene. While concealed under Anna's skirts, he has impregnated her.



Chapter 2, Under the Raft

Chapter 2, Under the Raft Summary

In the insane asylum, Oskar's drum tells him that his mother Agnes was begotten by the short, stocky Joseph Koljaiczek under the eyes of the police, hiding inside Anna's skirts. That night, he was married to Anna Bronski by a priest who was generous with the sacraments. Anna followed Joseph to the provincial capitol. The priest is summoned by Vincent Bronski, a violently religious Polish nationalist, and Anna's brother. Vincent has a four-year-old son, named Jan Bronski.

Joseph remains in hiding for three weeks before assuming the identity of Joseph Wranka, an oarsman killed in a raft accident. Koljaiczek's crime is painting a fence in the Polish national colors of red and white, and setting fire to the sawmill when his boss, the owner, objected. The couple lives happily in the unnamed provincial capitol, with Agnes taking refuge in her tiny playhouse much as her father once took shelter under her mother's skirts. Joseph has repudiated his former ways so strongly he now turns red and trembles at the very sight of a match.

One day in 1913, the new sawmill manager asks Wranka for a light for his cigarette. In that instant, he suspects the man is actually the fugitive, Koljaiczek, and initiates a police inquiry. Joseph realizes the new manager is his old boss. He flees on a raft across the river, where a gala is in process to celebrate the launch of the H.M.S. Columbus. Wranka's raft crashes into two motor launches and he is drowned, his body washed out to sea and never recovered. At least that is one version. The second version, which Oskar prefers, is that Koljaiczek/Wranka, Oskar's grandfather, somehow escaped and sailed to the U.S., where he became a wealthy lumber importer, match factory owner, and shareholder in several fire insurance firms. Wranka's bodyguard reputedly wears fireman's uniforms and sings in Polish, calling himself the Phoenix Guard.

Chapter 2, Under the Raft Analysis

The first intimation of war occurs when Agnes Koljaiczek's birth in July 1900 coincides with the decision to double Germany's naval force. Both Koljaiczek and the Bronskis are Kashubians, a Slavic people unrelated to the Poles. Koljaiczek's crime is arson, but his credo is the unification of a Poland now divided by Germany. The name of the newly christened ship is ironic, since Germany is about to launch not one, but two wars with the U.S. as an enemy.

Elements of magical realism are evident in Oskar's discussion of several possible fates for his grandfather, the fugitive Joseph Koljaiczek/Wranka. The man is, in turns, reported as living in the Netherlands, escaping on a Greek tanker, floating out to sea

like driftwood, being forever trapped on the bottom of the river, as well as gaining wealth in America.



Chapter 3, Moth and Light Bulb

Chapter 3, Moth and Light Bulb Summary

Oskar reads his grandfather's story to Bruno and to his friends Klepp and Vittlar. Joseph's disappearance is witnessed by Agnes, Anna, her brother Victor and his son Jan. Gregor Koljaiczek, Joseph's brother, is also there. Gregor, from Berlin, stays on in Danzig. He finds work in a gunpowder factory and after a year, marries Anna.

At 20, Jan Bronski moves in with the family to begin training at the main post office in Danzig. Jan is called up by the draft board three times, but rejected as too delicate and sickly each time. Oskar notes that Jan's condition must have been truly deplorable, given that nearly every man capable of standing up was quickly being converted to permanent horizontal status. Agnes quickly falls in love with Jan's beautiful blue eyes.

Nevertheless, while working as an auxiliary nurse at a hospital in the summer of 1918, Agnes meets Alfred Matzerath. He is a wounded soldier from the Rhineland. Soon, his gaiety has made him a favorite of all the nurses, Sister Agnes included. After the war, he remains in Danzig as the sales representative of a Rhineland stationary firm. In response to Agnes's fickle ways, Jan Bronski transfers to the Polish post office in Danzig. After Jan meets and marries the bovine Hedwig, the two couples become friendly. Agnes takes over her mother's struggling grocery shop, and soon business is booming. Matzerath quits his job to deal with the salesmen and wholesalers in the shop.

Oskar was born at home. He is that rare infant who is perfectly cognizant from birth, this, according to Oskar himself. His earliest memory is the two sixty-watt bulbs over the bed where he was born. His parents, unaware that the infant understands their words, immediately begin to make plans for Oskar. Matzerath proclaims that the boy will run the grocery shop when he grows up, so his parents don't have to work their fingers to the bone. Immediately, Oskar decides never to grow up. Already, he can tell it is an ugly, boring business. Agnes insists the child will have a tin drum for his third birthday. Oskar eagerly anticipates that day. Oskar watches a moth drumming hopelessly against the light bulb overhead.

Chapter 3, Moth and Light Bulb Analysis

The sexual farce continues as Anna marries Gregor Koljaiczek, her dead husband's brother, not because she is in love with him, but because of the Koljaiczek name. Gregor's work in the gunpowder factory keeps him out of the wartime army, but he spends all his salary on drink. Anna begins selling a variety of items, from pins to cabbage, from a small shop on the ground floor to earn extra cash. Agnes's love affair with Jan, her first cousin, is to be a recurring motif in the novel. Jan Bronski's infirmities must have been truly remarkable, for him to escape World War I, when nearly every man in Germany and France was sent to the front.



Part of the sexual farce within the novel relates to paternity. Even on the day of his birth, as Oskar relates Matzerath's words, Oskar questions whether Matzerath is actually his father. Questionable paternity is a motif that is repeated throughout the novel.

Oskar refers to the medium-sized furry brown moth that flings itself helplessly against the overhead lights in his birth chamber as his master. The moth symbolizes Art, which Oskar sees as both life-giving and deadly. It carries with it the promise of immortality, and the lull of oblivion. Oskar believes the moth drums against the light bulb because eventually it will give him freedom from sin, in the form of death. The artist, Grass argues, is as constantly and futilely striving for something as a moth courts the destructive flame.



Chapter 4, The Photograph Album

Chapter 4, The Photograph Album Summary

From his bed in the asylum, Oskar looks at a treasured album, full of photographs. He relates how in the early days of their friendship, Oskar and Klepp would have passport photos taken in a booth every week after attending the movies. The album also contains a photograph of Wranka, the arsonist, as a volunteer fireman, of Jan Bronski as a sickly child and of Agnes just before Oskar's conception. For some time, Oskar has been particularly interested in a photograph of Agnes seated between Matzerath and Jan Bronski. Using a compass and ruler, he has drawn and redrawn all the angles between the three until the photo is worn and creased. He has other pictures of Jan and Agnes or Agnes and Matzerath, but only in the pictures of the three together do they appear at peace. In another photo, the trio plays skat together. Agnes is holding a card so it is revealed to the camera, but not her fellow players - the Queen of Hearts.

There is also a photo of Agnes's friend Gretchen Scheffler, who is shy and always dressed in clothes she has knit herself from intricate patterns. Her husband, Alexander Scheffler is a bald baker who perpetually licks his lips. The greengrocer Greff lived across the street and was a scout master. The photo shows Greff in his scout uniform, with his arm around the shoulders of a strapping blond boy of about thirteen.

Even in his first photo, at the age of eight months, Oskar points out that his hands were clenched as if ready to hold the drumsticks, in anticipation of the driving force behind his life. Finally, he finds the full-length portrait taken on his third birthday. Oskar triumphantly holds the promised toy drum, red and white and made of tin and "in each of my eyes is reflected the determination to wield a power that would have no need of vassals or henchmen." Oskar determines again to stop growing, to avoid adult responsibilities, which he sees as boring, destructive and futile.

Chapter 4, The Photograph Album Analysis

Much of the sexual undertone in the novel is derived from unconventional sources, including the love triangle between Agnes, her husband Alfred Matzerath, and her cousin and first love, Jan Bronski. It is an unusual relationship, since all three seem to draw comfort and solace from the arrangement, instead of jealousy or rivalry. The Queen of Hearts symbolizes Agnes, in her guise as lover to both men as well as an object of sexual desire to her son, Oskar. It also symbolizes fidelity, as it was common to swear by the Queen of Hearts. Thus, the love triangle, although unorthodox, presents its own completeness and symmetry in the novel. The gentle boy scout eroticism that Oskar describes between Greff and his various recruits is another example of an unconventional love.



The long-awaited drum symbolizes all Art. By embracing it wholeheartedly, Oskar is choosing a life devoted to the perhaps frivolous undertaking of creating something ethereal, mere airwaves. Yet, his drumming will prove to do much less harm than more common earthly pursuits. Grass seems to suggest that at heart, all artists are about three years old. They willfully choose to remain mere infants, rather than assume full adult responsibility.

Through art, musicians and painters wield a power that requires neither master nor servant, but is complete in itself. Oskar insists that although, for many years, he grew no more physically "something did grow - and not always to my best advantage - ultimately taking on Messianic proportions." The author, Gunter Grass, suggests that Art is both sacred and profane, that Oskar is growing into the savior. This touches on one possible interpretation of the novel, as the feverish delusions of a lunatic, confined to an asylum for the insane, who suffers from delusions of grandeur and, in fact, believes himself to be an incarnation of Jesus Christ. In this interpretation, Oskar becomes the ultimate unreliable narrator. This is just one of several possible interpretations. Grass courts ambiguity by taking care never to fully confirm - or refute - any of the possible interpretations.

If understood literally, Oskar's medical condition is psychogenic dwarfism. The body, in reaction to extreme stress, stops producing growth hormone sometime between the ages of 2 and 15. Physical and cognitive growth is limited. Normal growth resumes once the stressor is removed, although individuals with psychogenic dwarfism may never attain normal height. The most famous case of psychogenic dwarfism is J.M. Barrie, author of Peter Pan. The condition is most common amongst children who are severely abused physically and/or psychologically. Often this includes isolation from human contact, such as being locked in a cellar for many years. Grass's portrayal of psychogenic dwarfism is unrealistic in two ways. Oskar is not severely abused, and he does not suffer the cognitive impairment associated with the condition.



Chapter 5, Smash a Little Windowpane

Chapter 5, Smash a Little Windowpane Summary

Even while making the fateful decision to grow no more, Oskar realized that adults must be given a reason for such unusual behavior. Otherwise, they would act in strange and uncomfortable ways, dragging you to doctors and calling you retarded. Walking out of the room where the neighbors congregated around a birthday cake with three candles, Oskar wanders into the first floor shop. He notices that the trap door to the basement is open. Matzerath had gone down to get a can of mixed fruit from the store room, and forgotten to close it. Oskar carefully carries his drum down the stairs and lodges it amongst the flour sacks. Then he climbs back up to the ninth stair and flings himself toward the bottom, coming to rest with a loud crash, toppling a shelf of raspberry syrup.

Oskar lands on his head. He loses consciousness just as everyone from the parlor and kitchen runs toward him. In later years, doctors would blame Oskar's lack of growth on the fall. He remained in the hospital for four weeks. After that, his mother took him for weekly checkups, but there was no hopeless round of expensive experts because the adults believed they knew the cause of Oskar's deformity. When Oskar is out of the hospital, he begins to drum constantly. Oskar's drumming assumes many mythical powers during the story. The first is its ability to create the distance between himself and grownups that Oskar finds so necessary. At the same time, Oskar develops an ability to sing-scream in such a high pitch that it shatters glass windowpanes and cabinet fronts. Oskar makes use of this tactic whenever an adult tries to take his drum away from him.

After four weeks of constant drumming, there is a hole in the tin drum head, with sharp edges. The adults are afraid Oskar will cut himself on the drum. Oskar's mama, Agnes, tries to bribe him to give it up with chocolate. Matzerath tries to wrest it from him by brute force. That's when Oskar lets loose with his scream for the first time, shattering the crystal of the family's mantle clock. On his fourth birthday, the adults try to distract Oskar with toy soldiers, a sailboat and a fire engine. He refused to be tricked into giving up his drum, and let out a scream that burst all four bulbs in the overhead fixture, plunging the room into darkness. When Oskar's screams plunge the party into darkness, Mama, as expected, is found in dishabille on Jan Bronski's lap. Soon the light is restored, and Mama, Jan Bronski and Matzerath settle down to a round of skat, the three-handed card game to which they are addicted. Oskar hides under the table with his drum, undetected.

Oskar develops an unhealthy attraction to Sister Inge, the nurse at his weekly doctor's visits. When the doctor tries to take his drum away, Oskar destroys an entire shelf of specimen bottles with a single high-pitched scream. The doctor, impressed, publishes an article in a medical journal about the experience.



Chapter 5, Smash a Little Windowpane Analysis

Only Oskar knows that his growth stopped before the fall. Oskar has no doubt that remaining the size of a three-year-old was the conscious choice of a mature mind, considering all the consequences. Oskar's major concern is that the drum will be injured, but it was safe. Grass suggests that the life of an artist is a conscious choice, and perhaps an irrational one. Artists, like dwarfs, are deformed, but it is a deformity they willingly embrace. Grass captures the obsessive quality of artistic endeavor with Oskar's furious, almost uncontrollable drumming.

Oskar's drumming takes on a mystical quality. Grass uses magical realism to imbue drumming - and by extension, all Art - with mystical powers. Oskar's drumming gives him independence. His voice, which develops simultaneously, gives him control over adults.

Throughout the novel, Grass refers to the non-artistic world as grownups. There is, however, little about Oskar's world that is joyous or full of wonder. His childishness is limited to the ability to avoid work, and a certain measure of independence. Art seems to prevent full maturity while conferring few benefits of its own. Oskar admits that he never played as a child. Instead, he worked on his drum.

Skat, the three-handed card game, is a passion shared by Agnes, Jan Bronski and Matzerath. The game symbolizes the trio's complicated relationship. By equating complicated human relationships to a trivial pastime, Grass reduces human love to an absurd, and somewhat monotonous, entertainment. From under the table Oskar watches as Jan works his stocking foot under the hem of Mama's skirt. Jan Bronski's skill at cards was greatly impaired by this clandestine behavior, while Mama's actually seemed improved.



Chapter 6, The Schedule

Chapter 6, The Schedule Summary

Oskar's friend Klepp spends weeks devising a schedule for the upcoming year while devouring sausage and lentils. This confirms Oskar's theory that dreamers are also gluttons. The schedule is devoted primarily to lying in bed, contemplation, coffee in bed and flute playing in bed. However, going to the movies, and drinking beer on Saturday evening are also included. Two other items on the agenda are a half hour of discreet propaganda for the Communist Party several times per week, and forty-five minutes of hygiene with a girl, followed by coffee and cake.

Oskar's first experience with a schedule was Kindergarten, which he loved. Unfortunately, his Kindergarten days ended when his cousin Stephen Bronski, just a few months younger than Oskar, was beaten by another boy for being a Polack. The teacher recommends that Stephen, not the bully, be expelled from school. Oskar does not consider himself Polish and has no great affection for Stephen, but he refuses to attend Kindergarten if Stephen is expelled.

The following Easter, their parents enroll both Stephen and Oskar in school. When the children break into a disorganized, un-rhythmic song, Oskar plays his drum to establish some order. The teacher seems to nod approvingly, so Oskar continues drumming. Eventually he notices that everyone has stopped singing long ago, and the only sound in the room is the drumming. When the teacher tries to put the drum in a locker, Oskar screams repeatedly, breaking all the windows in the room and finally shattering the teacher's glasses.

Chapter 6, The Schedule Analysis

Grass ridicules post-war East German citizens with the carefully prepared schedule, based mostly on lounging in bed, which gives more time to lukewarm Communist proselytizing than to sex, but is enthusiastic about neither. Grass's commentary on the traditional rivalry between Germany and Poland is equally biting. He compares it to a children's schoolyard dispute, with Germany as the overfed bully and Poland as the thin, sickly weakling.

The teacher chooses to torment Oskar, the artist, rather than the uncivilized, unruly mob of children behind him. This clearly illustrates the role of artists in society, but may also relate to the danger posed by Art.



Chapter 7, Rasputin and the Alphabet

Chapter 7, Rasputin and the Alphabet Summary

Oskar never returned to school. Instead, Mama amused herself by constantly reproaching Matzerath about the trap door left open. Oskar, however, was eager to learn to read. Oskar decides if he can't attend school he needs a private tutor. He tries to persuade his Aunt Hedwig or Sister Inge, the nurse, without success. Mr. Meyn is a drunken trumpet player with four cats who lives under the eaves in the apartment house. Oskar plays with him from time to time, but the man keeps falling asleep every time Oskar asks him about the alphabet. Mr. Greff, the scout leader and greengrocer, is not eager to teach Oskar, although he has many magazines with pictures of half-naked young men in athletic pursuits. Greff, a frustrated amateur inventor, is preoccupied with disagreements with the Bureau of Weights and Measures.

Finally, Oskar seizes on Gretchen Schiffler as his tutor. First he has to endure modeling the baby clothes the childless woman is constantly knitting. Oskar chooses two books from the limited Schiffler library - *Elective Affinities* by Goethe and *Rasputin and Women*. These two volumes would form his canon for many years to come.

Oskar rapidly learns to read, while his mother and Gretchen breathlessly read accounts of orgies in Rasputin. Oskar patiently begins to steal pages from both volumes, one at a time. He collects them at home to form his own combined book.

Chapter 7, Rasputin and the Alphabet Analysis

In choosing Goethe and Rasputin as his deities, Grass illuminates the two sides of the Teutonic character and the artistic personality. On one side is Goethe, the influential, admired novelist, scientist, critic philosopher and cabinet minister. Goethe was a post-Enlightenment poet who rejected both sentimentality and cold logic in favor of organic growth in harmony with the natural environment. His scientific writings inspired Charles Darwin, among others. Goethe's most famous work, *Faust*, *Elective Affinities*, is the one Oskar studies, although the hero's name is never mentioned. Faust sold his soul to the devil in a theme first memorialized by Goethe. Faust's pact is symbolically the plight of the entire German citizenry, who sacrificed their moral beliefs in a bid for world domination through an alliance with Adolph Hitler. In this novel, Grass speculates that Goethe frequently succumbed to the charms of women, although some later sources have claimed that Goethe was homosexual.

The second icon of Art that Grass offers is Rasputin, the un-bathed faith healer, charlatan, scapegoat, mystic and drunken seducer of the Russian Tsars. Rasputin was widely and somewhat unfairly, blamed for Russia's ineffectiveness in World War I, and for the downfall of the Tsars. By contrasting Goethe and Rasputin, Grass illustrates the enormous potential for good - and evil - inherent in Art. He may also be making a similar

statement about the benevolence of Science, personified by Goethe compared to the potential evils of Religion, personified by Rasputin.



Chapter 8, The Stockurm Long -Distance Song Effects

Chapter 8, The Stockurm Long -Distance Song Effects Summary

Oskar's psychiatrist, the Frau Dr. Hornstatter, claims he was isolated as a child. Oskar admits that with drumming and his studies, he had little time to play with the neighborhood children, whom he calls little cannibals. In the courtyard between apartment buildings, were racks for beating the carpets every Tuesday and Friday. When carpets were not being beaten, the children played on the racks. One day the children pretend to make soup in a discarded pot. The soup ingredients include brick dust, water and frogs. Oskar watches as each of the children in turn urinates into the pot. Frightened, Oskar tries to run away. The children catch him and make him drink a spoonful of the vile soup. From that point on, Oskar avoids the neighbor children and accompanies his mother on errands beyond the immediate neighborhood whenever possible.

Every Thursday, Oskar accompanies Mama when she goes into the city shopping. She often stops at Sigismund Markus' shop off the Kohlenmarkt to purchase a new drum for Oskar. The proprietor, Markus, always compliments Mama extravagantly. Mama ignores his advances, although she accepts the silk stockings that he sells her at prices so cheap they are practically gifts. Every week Mama leaves Oskar in the toy shop for an hour. Then Mama meets Jan Bronski at a cheap hotel in Tischerlergasse, where the two spend forty-five minutes in a room together. Oskar knows this because, when he was younger, his mother let him accompany her. Oskar drank soda-pop with the landlady while Mama and Jan were upstairs. Afterwards, Jan, Mama and Oskar go to a cafe in Wollwebergasse where Mama has mocha and Oskar drinks lemon ice.

One Thursday, bored with the toy shop, Oskar wanders away and climbs the tower of the nearby Stockurm. From the top of the tower overlooking the city, for the first time, Oskar screams for no particular reason. Always in the past he has screamed because his drum was being taken away. Now, he screams simply because he has the power to. He aims his silent screams at the glass of the Stadt-Theater. After shattering most of the building's glass in fifteen minutes, Oskar runs down the stairs to the toy shop.

There, Oskar finds Markus on his knees in front of Mama. The shop owner is begging her to have nothing more to do with Jan Bronski, because he is Polish. Markus tries to woo her with the assertion that soon the Germans will be on top and the Poles will be on bottom.



Chapter 8, The Stockturn Long -Distance Song Effects Analysis

In the soup incident, Grass suggests that cruelty and domination are natural human traits, present from childhood. He asserts that, from birth, humans terrorize those weaker than themselves. Thus, Grass suggests that the atrocities committed during World War II were simply expressions of human nature, carried to extreme.

By climbing the Stockturn and shattering the glass of the Stadt-Theater for no particular reason, Oskar demonstrates that power corrupts. Grass suggests that using power destructively, simply because there is no one to stop us, is an essential facet of human nature. This foreshadows the coming of World War II, which Markus warns Mama about. Markus's warnings also illuminate a pragmatic explanation for the war - that many people supported the German cause simply because they realized the Germans were far more powerful than the Poles.

Sexuality is apparent again in seven-year-old Oskar's frank discussion of the clandestine meetings between Mama and Jan Bronski. Oskar's accompanying his mother to lover's trysts and observing the couple caressing under a cafe table suggests perversion and moral decay. This general immorality, which Oskar accepts as very common prior to the war, may have contributed to it.



Chapter 9, The Rostrum

Chapter 9, The Rostrum Summary

Mama takes Oskar to the theater to see *Tom Thumb*, to the opera with Matzerath and Jan Bronski, and to the circus. At the circus, Oskar first encounters the midget acrobatic clown, Bebra, who claims to be descended from Louis XIV through Prince Eugene. Bebra invites Oskar to join the circus. Still only nine years old, Oskar declines. Oskar is called away by his parents and departs, but before he leaves, Bebra gives him some advice: Find a place on the rostrum or under it, but never out front. It proves to be good advice as the era of parades has begun.

At home, nothing changes. In the parlor, the gloomy picture of Beethoven faces the gloomy picture of Hitler on the opposite wall. While Matzerath is out in his Nazi uniform demonstrating each Sunday, Jan Bronski visits Mama. By this time Oskar regards Jan Bronski as his biological father. Oskar leaves the apartment each Sunday before Jan arrives, to avoid the sight of Jan and Mama fondling each other on the sofa.

Oskar attends the speeches on the Maiwiese each week during these enforced Sunday absences. Because he is still as short as a three-year-old, Oskar has the chance to see the rostrum from the back, where it offers an unflattering view of very ordinary people.

At one rally, Oskar sneaks underneath the rostrum and disrupts the proceedings by playing a waltz on his drum. The crowd begins to dance and sing. He then breaks into a Charleston, *Jimmy the Tiger*. The demonstration is completely disrupted and SS men search for the culprit. They overlook Oskar, seemingly a toddler, in their quest for Communist saboteurs or a Socialist.

Chapter 9, The Rostrum Analysis

Like most of the citizens of Danzig, Mama realizes that Poland and Germany are headed for war. She chooses to remain with Matzerath, who has joined the German Nazi Party. They see Jan Bronski less often, and Matzerath always warns Jan about the dangers of remaining with the Polish Post Office. Mama's decision, symbolic of the decision of all German people, is simply pragmatic. She believes Germany is more likely to win the war, and she will fare better with a Nazi Party member. Matzerath seems to object more to Jan's Polish alliance, than to Mama's infidelity.

In this chapter, Oskar overtly states for the first time that he believes Jan Bronski is his biological father, although he gives few reasons for it. The theme of unsavory sexuality continues as Mama and Jan Bronski continue to make love, in front of Oskar, each Sunday in Matzerath's absence.

The opposition of Art and War is suggested again in the placement of the two opposing portraits in the Matzerath parlor. The two portraits face each other, suggesting



confrontation. Oskar contends that one should always see the rostrum from the back, to avoid being impressed by the grandeur of those occupying it. He then adds that the same is true of the altar in church. Grass is implying that both politics and religion are charades designed to dupe the unsuspecting. This contention was especially offensive to some people who assumed that religion, especially the Roman Catholic Church, had different aims from Hitler's Nazi Germany. The power of Art to affect Politics and everyday life is apparent in Oskar's disruption of the rally.



Chapter 10, Shopwindows

Chapter 10, Shopwindows Summary

Every Tuesday Oskar accompanies his grandmother Koljaiczek to market day. There, the old Kashubian woman sells the butter, eggs and geese she raises on her farm. In the cold, a vendor named Schwerdtfeger supplies heated bricks for warmth. Every hour, he slides a heated brick under Anna's voluminous skirts with an iron rake, while drawing out the previous hour's brick, now grown cold. Oskar violently envies the bricks, wishing to take shelter under his grandmother's skirts. This experience makes Oskar understand temptation, which fuels his nocturnal wanderings.

Oskar and his drum continue to sporadically disrupt rallies and demonstrations until November 1938. At night, he plays the tempter. He slips away in darkness and stands in the darkened doorways of the city, overlooking the shop windows with their enticing displays. Oskar observes the window shoppers who linger on chilly nights, focusing on a single coveted object. When his victim is alone, Oskar soundlessly uses his voice to cut a circular hole in the display glass, toppling it into the shop's interior. Faced with overwhelming temptation, Oskar's victims almost invariably reach into the display and steal the coveted prize. Only one or two elderly men resist the temptation, rushing off in a cold sweat.

One night Oskar spies Jan Bronski gazing into a jewelry store display at a ruby necklace. Unbeknownst to Jan, Oskar cuts a hole in the glass, and Jan steals the jewels. A few days later, Jan gives the necklace to Mama. She wears it only when the three of them are alone. After the war, Oskar sells the necklace on the black market for twelve cartons of Lucky Strikes and a leather briefcase.

Chapter 10, Shopwindows Analysis

Oskar denies that his urge to hide beneath his grandmother's skirts is a sexual impulse, or a wish for oblivion. Instead, he claims that adventure lies under the skirt, Africa, Naples, the devil, the Heavenly Father and angels.

Grass uses magical realism in describing Oskar's supernatural technique in incising glass with an inaudible sound. Relying on almost universal greed, Oskar finds that nearly everyone will steal, when it is possible to do so without being caught. None of Oskar's victims are aware of the source of the magical hole in the glass. This incident again illustrates the power of Art for evil, as well as good, purposes. An alternate explanation is that Art is neutral, but people are unfailingly corrupt.

Grass also uses the ruby necklace incident to comment on the changes in the social and moral climate before and after World War II. The ruby necklace symbolizes sex, and Jan Bronski's devotion to Agnes. It is the greatest gift he can give her. Yet, just a few years later, Oskar exchanges it for tawdry trade goods in order to survive. After the

war, cheap American cigarettes and business were more precious than sex and love, because they alone could ensure survival in an uncertain world.



Chapter 11, No Wonder

Chapter 11, No Wonder Summary

Mama suspects Oskar's power to break glass is related to the mysterious thefts in Danzig. She also realizes that Jan must have stolen the ruby necklace, perhaps with Oskar's help. "No doubt it was her association with Jan Bronski, the stolen necklace, the delicious misery of an adulterous woman's life, that made her lust after sacraments." Mama continues to take Oskar to the city on Thursday to share her guilt. In addition, she begins to take him to the Sacred Heart Roman Catholic church with her on Saturdays, while Mama makes her confession.

Oskar still remembers his baptism at the church. Father Wiehnke blew into Oskar's face three times to drive out Satan, but Oskar is convinced that he remains. Afterwards, the tiny Oskar mentally asks his inner Satan if he survived the ordeal intact. Satan can only exclaim over the beauty and vulnerability of the Church's stained glass windows.

Each Saturday while Mama confesses, Oskar slips off to the side of the church and admires the statues. One statue, of Jesus with his tomato-red heart exposed, reminds Oskar uneasily of his godfather, cousin, and presumptive father, Jan Bronski. Another statue, however, fascinates him. It shows Mary holding the infants John the Baptist and Jesus. Both Jesus and John the Baptist are Oskar's own size. All of Mary's attention is focused on John the Baptist while Jesus holds his fists up in a perfect imitation of drumming. All he needs are drumsticks in his clenched hands.

Oskar climbs the three seductive steps up to the statue and scratches the paint with his fingernails, exposing plaster beneath. He feels the Virgin's shin first. Then he feels Jesus's penis, which Oskar calls a watering can, stroking it and noting that it should have been circumcised, but wasn't. Climbing onto the pedestal, Oskar places his drum in Jesus's lap and his drumsticks in the clenched fists. Mentally, Oskar urges Jesus to prove he is real by beating the drum. The silence lengthens and Oskar loses his faith, realizing he is more real than Jesus. Eventually Oskar roughly jerks his drum away from the statue, breaking the halo, just as the Vicar and Father Wiehnke catch him. Infuriated, Oskar summons his voice but finds it useless against the church's stained glass.

Chapter 11, No Wonder Analysis

While Oskar's talent for drumming may be good, his ability to shatter glass with his voice clearly comes from Satan. Writing as a good post-modernist, Grass's meaning is unclear. He may suggest that all Art carries the capacity for both good and evil, or that only those who retain Satan in their soul can truly become artists.

Oskar is fascinated by the Catholic Church, although it inspires him to new heights of blasphemy. He regularly repeats portions of the Mass to himself while brushing his teeth

or using the bathroom. Grass somewhat ambiguously explores the relationship between sex and religion when Oskar fondles the statue's genitals. When Jesus proves to be unable of even a small miracle like drumming, Oskar abandons his faith forever. Despite this disappointment, the power of Religion proves to be the only force equal to Oskar's voice so far in his life.



Chapter 12, Good Friday Fare

Chapter 12, Good Friday Fare Summary

On his way home, Oskar manages to shatter a store window with his voice, reassuring himself that he has not lost his power forever. Mama pays the church for the damage to the statue. On Good Friday, the entire family group, including Jan Bronski, takes the Number 9 streetcar to a sea resort. The foursome walks along the breakwater, passing a man fishing with clothesline, without a hook. On the way back, the man pulls the line in and reveals the dead head of a horse. From out of the horse's head, the man pulls small light-green eels, which are writhing around it. He continues to pull dozens of eels from the carcass, prying them out of the mouth and squeezing larger, darker eels from inside the throat.

Mama is violently ill at the sight of the eels, although she has eaten little for breakfast. Oskar tries to drum against the eels, to distract her, but no one pays attention. She continues to stare, horrified, as the man pulls more and more eels out. Finally the man pulls an enormous eel from the ear, followed by a white glob of the horse's brains. By this point even Matzerath, the family chef, is looking a bit green, but he buys two small and two large eels from the man. Jan Bronski leads Mama away, to rest on a nearby rock.

Matzerath carries the eels in a sack with salt, to draw the slime from their skin so they can be smoked. The eels writhe in misery in the salt. This is forbidden by the law and the SPCA, but Matzerath thinks it's only fair, since the eels crawled into the horse's head. They crawl into the corpses of drowned men, too. The fisherman tells them a story of a married woman who took her pleasure with a live eel. It bit her and now, according to the doctors in the hospital, she can't have any children. Matzerath merely laughs at Agnes's discomfort, and reminds her that she has always enjoyed eating eels.

Back at the apartment, Oskar sinks into a slumber filled with visions of the nurse Sister Inge while Matzerath prepares eel soup with boiled potatoes. When Jan Bronski and Mama refuse to eat the eels, Matzerath begins to extol them. Mama begins to scream in Kashubian. All three adults launch into a shouting match, until Mama retires to the bedroom in tears. Eventually Matzerath throws the eels down the toilet and the three settle down to play a homey game of skat.

Chapter 12, Good Friday Fare Analysis

The chapter's title somewhat sardonically refers to the practice of eating eels or other seafood on Good Friday. The horse's head symbolizes decay, while the eels symbolize evil and death. Mama is horrified by what she sees, but Matzerath chooses not to notice. The story linking sex and the eels is truly disgusting, implying that female sexual

pleasure leads inherently to evil. Thus, the passage implies that Mama's eventual decline is linked both to the shock of seeing the eels, and to her carnal appetites.



Chapter 13, Tapered at the Foot

Chapter 13, Tapered at the Foot Summary

After Easter, Mama's decline begins. It is not true that Matzerath forced her to start eating seafood. Possessed by an undefined demon, she began, of her own accord, to eat huge quantities of fish. She eats sardines daily for breakfast, sprats for snack, flounder or codfish for lunch, and eels in jelly in the afternoon. If Matzerath refused to prepare fish for dinner, Mama would fetch a chunk of smoked eel from the store and gluttonously scrape the fat off the skin with her knife. She ate so much fish she would have to vomit at times during the day, but still craved more fish.

Matzerath says Mama must be pregnant. He protests that it doesn't matter whose child it is. One evening after drinking the oil from several cans of sardines, an ambulance takes Mama to the hospital. She is found to be three months pregnant. She patiently endures visitors, while retching helplessly. When she finally dies after four days, it was a relief not to see her vomiting anymore. Oskar is impressed with the way the coffin tapers harmoniously at the base.

Oskar, now fourteen years old, wishes that he could be buried with his mother and the fetus. Markus, the toyshop owner, comes to pay his respects and is chased away by the other mourners. After the funeral, Leo Schugger greets each mourner. He is a homeless man who turns up in a black suit at every funeral, shaking white-gloved hands as a sort of official greeter. Oskar takes refuge with Schugger and Markus, the other rejects, while Jan Bronski and Matzerath try to find a third for skat at the funeral luncheon. Finally Oskar falls asleep safely sheltered under his grandmother's four skirts.

Chapter 13, Tapered at the Foot Analysis

Oskar refers to Mama's decline as her passion, giving it the double meaning of religious resurrection and sexual ardor. This implies that the illness and death are sin and salvation, combined. To Oskar, it seems that Mama has waited for years to find a way to break up the love triangle so that Matzerath will be left with all the guilt, while Jan Bronski will be free to remain at the Polish Post Office. Finally, through the eels, she has succeeded where the Catholic Church failed. Oskar thinks the shape of the coffin shows that the entire bulk of the human torso must rest on the narrow base of the feet, a massive facade on a humble base. Oskar's continual seeking of shelter in his grandmother's skirts is tinged with sexuality.

Markus, the toy shop owner, is chased out of the Catholic cemetery because he is Jewish. Leo Schugger represents the type of petty bureaucrat who inevitably appears after crisis or tragedy, ineffective, but feeding off the survivor's pain.



Chapter 14, Herbert Truczinski's Back

Chapter 14, Herbert Truczinski's Back Summary

After his mother's death, Oskar lives a dismal existence without anyone to take him to the toy store for a new drum, or to take him to church on Saturday. Because of increasing political tensions, Jan Bronski visits less often. One day while walking through the city streets, Oskar encounters Bebra, the aristocratic midget from the circus. Bebra and his companion, the diminutive Neapolitan somnambulist, Signora Roswitha, invite Oskar to tea at the Four Seasons cafe. The two invite Oskar to join their troupe of circus performers, but he declines. Instead, Oskar asks the waiter for a stemmed glass and sings a heart-shaped hole in it. Underneath, he inscribes "Oskar for Roswitha" using only his voice.

Finally, Oskar seeks companionship with an elderly woman, Mother Truczinski, who lives under the eaves in his building. Her children are all grown and moved away, except Herbert, who is a waiter in a seaman's bar on the waterfront. Herbert is constantly breaking up fights, and although he doesn't have a single scar on his powerful chest, his back is a mass of healed fissures and welts. That's because the only way anyone can get to Herbert is by jumping him from behind. Tiny Oskar presses his drumstick into each scar in succession, and Herbert fondly relates the fight that caused it. After Herbert kills a Latvian ship captain in self defense, he is guilt-ridden and quits his job. Herbert exclaims that he'd sooner go to work for the Customs office than go back to fighting in the bar.

Chapter 14, Herbert Truczinski's Back Analysis

Oskar develops affection for Signora Roswitha, but is still unwilling to leave his family. Again Bebra lectures Oskar about maintaining autonomy, but Oskar senses his friend has become just a pawn in the increasingly political world. Oskar finds solace with Herbert Truczinski, who is kind and gentle, although his work requires him to fight often to restore order in the bar. When Herbert loses his job, he alternately prays to God, Marx and Engels, while simultaneously cursing them. In this way, Grass illustrates his disregard for all three. He clearly feels the German people have elevated Marx and Engels, communist icons, to godlike status.

Herbert Truczinski's various scars are a permanent record of the ethnic and political tensions of the area. Oskar uses his drumstick - symbolic of his power as an artist - to coax Herbert into describing the various conflicts and rivalries.



Chapter 15, Niobe

Chapter 15, Niobe Summary

In 1938, customs duties were raised. The border between Poland and the free city of Danzig were temporarily closed, and Oskar's grandmother could no longer bring her eggs and butter to market. During Herbert Truczinski's unemployment, he and Oskar commit two robberies. They find the stolen goods difficult to fence, and soon abandon theft. Finally, Herbert finds a job as a guard at the Maritime Museum. The museum's centerpiece is a figurehead, a beautiful naked woman carved in wood, called Niobe. "The Green Kitten" is supposed to be bad luck, since every ship she has been attached to has sunk. Even the museum directors have suffered mysterious fatal accidents since the acquisition of Niobe. Herbert is paid a bonus for the dangerous job of guarding the nubile, bare-breasted wooden maiden.

Each day Oskar accompanies Herbert to the museum. Each day they spend more time in the room admiring Niobe, although Herbert insists she is too skinny for his tastes. Finally, one day the ticket taker refuses to allow Oskar to enter with Herbert. Oskar waits outside for his friend. In the late afternoon, Oskar sneaks into Niobe's gallery. There, he finds Herbert, naked to the waist, frozen in position as if trying to mount the wooden woman. When the emergency squad arrives, they find Herbert has impaled himself on a double-headed ax buried deep in the figurehead's chest. Herbert is dead, and Niobe is put into storage in the museum's basement.

Chapter 15, Niobe Analysis

Grass employs magical realism in the story of Niobe, the amber-eyed wooden enchantress who has lured many men to their death. There is little doubt that the figure contains mystical powers over men. This passage is a commentary on the perfidy of women, the dangers of lust, and the pervasive nature of magic. The name Niobe is from Greek mythology, where Niobe was a mortal woman whose 14 children were all killed by the Gods. Niobe, in her grief, retired to a mountain and was turned to stone.



Chapter 16, Faith, Hope, Love

Chapter 16, Faith, Hope, Love Summary

Meyn, the drunken trumpet player, has become a sober member of the Nazi Mounted SA band. Sobriety has greatly impaired his talent, but Meyn gets drunk for Herbert's funeral and plays beautifully. After the funeral, Meyn goes home and continues to drink in his lonely room in the apartment house. Later, in a drunken temper, Meyn bludgeons one of the neighbor's cats to death. He stuffs the carcass into a trash can, where the owner discovers it and reports Meyn to the SPCA. The neighbor also informs the local party office of the disgraceful conduct. The case goes to trial and Meyn is fined. He is expelled from the SA for conduct unbecoming a storm trooper, despite his record of bravery from setting fire to a synagogue and destroying several shops during Krystal Nacht. Meyn was not reinstated until a year later, when he joined the Home Guard, which later became part of the SS.

On Krystal Nacht, Oskar's father closes the store and takes him by the hand. They take the Number 5 streetcar to see the synagogue on fire. Matzerath warms his hands on a bonfire of books and religious relics. One of the stores destroyed during Krystal Nacht is the toy store owned by Markus. Oskar finds the display window shattered, Markus dead, and the Nazi soldiers playing with the toys. Their "play" includes defecating all over the toys. Oskar takes three drums, one of which is undamaged.

Chapter 16, Faith, Hope, Love Analysis

Oskar clearly believes that Art is closely akin to depravity and drunkenness, and impaired by sobriety and the middle-class work ethic. In some respects, the entire novel may be viewed as a paean to the artists of the early 1920s, the bad boys of their era. In social consciousness, artists seem to have occupied a place held today by gangs and organized crime. The story of Meyn killing the cat assumes increased importance as Oskar tells it a dozen times, in different ways, from different perspectives. The irony of a Nazi soldier being discharged for cruelty to animals, while committing atrocities against humans, is Grass's main point in this chapter. A second point is the changes in truth rung by the slightly different retellings of the same anecdote, similar to the way we rationalize events over time. By shifting the emphasis from a story about a people being destroyed, to a story about a drunk killing a neighbor's cat, Grass both introduces perspective and illuminates the horror.

Through the retelling, the story changes into Oskar's personal memories of Krystal Nacht or Krystal Nacht, the night the Nazis attacked and burned the Jewish ghetto. The reader, knowing the fate of Jews in World War II, can appreciate the irony fully. Grass also uses this anecdote to label the SS as immoral, cowardly and cruel. In one version, Oskar remarks that the citizen's faith had been transferred from Santa Claus to the gasman, a reference to the Nazi program of killing Jews in concentration camps.



Chapter 17, Scrap Metal

Chapter 17, Scrap Metal Summary

Maria brings Oskar a new drum when she visits him in the asylum. Oskar has worn out his previous drum in telling the story of Herbert, Niobe, and Krystal Nacht. Oskar refers to Krystal Nacht as his "rather arbitrary interpretation of the first Epistle of the Corinthians." Oskar instructs her to number the worn out drum and save it in the basement, with all the past drums.

After taking the drums from the toy store, Oskar conserves them by drumming less. He begins to waste away, losing weight because drumming is all that has made life bearable. After a visit to the doctor, Oskar eats more to gain weight, but in the process wears out his drum. In searching for another, Oskar seeks out Jan Bronski. Bronski's visits are now limited to a quiet tap on the door after midnight one or two days a month. He and Matzerath still play skat whenever they can, but the neighbors are not very keen on playing with a Pole. Oskar waits for Bronski outside the Pole's apartment. Jan takes Oskar by the hand, leading him to the Polish Post Office, where a janitor can repair his drum.

When they reach the post office, it has been besieged by the German Home Guard. Jan is greeted warily by his coworkers turned citizen soldiers. Oskar finds a windowless room and goes to sleep in one of the large mail carts.

Chapter 17, Scrap Metal Analysis

By comparing the Nazi's Krystal Nacht to the Christian gospel of the Apostle Paul, Oskar draws attention to the religious conflict. Irony is apparent in the contrast between the Christian teachings of kindness and forgiveness, and the atrocities committed by the Christian Nazi's against the Jews during the war. Oskar's preservation of past drums dates from the destruction of the toy store, symbolizing the destruction of Art. Referring to his drum as his body and blood, Oskar claims Art as his religion. Certainly, it is a faith more benign than Christianity, which is being used as a justification to kill people.

Jan Bronski has deserted his comrades at the Polish Post Office when he encounters Oskar. It is not clear if he really returns in hopes of fixing the drum, or if the sight of Oskar somehow inspires him to his patriotic duty.



Chapter 18, The Polish Post Office

Chapter 18, The Polish Post Office Summary

Oskar dreams on top of letters in the mail cart until machine gun fire wakes him up. He goes in search of Jan Bronski and the janitor, hoping to have his drum repaired. He finds the Post Office staff behind barricades of sand bags and office furniture, exchanging sporadic fire with the Germans outside. The post master, Dr. Michon, wearing a Polish steel helmet, directs their efforts. As Oskar watches, two shells strike the building, scattering debris and wounding two soldiers. The remaining postal workers carry the injured to Oskar's windowless room and deposit them in the mail carts. Oskar becomes convinced the Germans are actually after his drum, which is buried in the wreckage.

Looking for Jan Bronski, Oskar wanders into the living quarters of the Chief Postal Secretary. Jan Bronski and the janitor are firing from a window in the nursery. There, Oskar finds an assortment of toys, including a new drum. Bronski purposely fires over the heads of the Germans, and screams each time a howitzer shell hits the building. Kobyella, the janitor, fights bravely. A shell bursts on Kobyella, who is badly injured. The body lands on top of a whimpering Jan Bronski. Oskar helps Bronski up. In the explosion, a deck of skat cards that Bronski carries in his pocket has been scattered. Oskar finds the seven of spades, and gives it to Jan. They carry Kobyella to the storeroom for undeliverable mail, since Oskar's windowless room is full.

Chapter 18, The Polish Post Office Analysis

In the midst of battle, Oskar is struck by the notion that the Germans are trying to take his drum away, symbolizing an end to all artistic expression, instead of occupying the Polish Post Office, a symbol of power and autonomy. At fifteen, Oskar is certainly old enough to understand the situation, yet in this area seems to have the comprehension of a small child. This misunderstanding may be the author's statement on the true meaning of war, in the Art versus War debate. An alternate explanation is that Oskar is deluded, making him an unreliable narrator. Oskar's current confinement in a mental asylum would seem to support that theory. The novel supports either conclusion.



Chapter 19, The Card House

Chapter 19, The Card House Summary

A man named Victor helps Jan Bronski carry the janitor to the storeroom. Just as Mama becomes "poor Mama" after her death, Victor becomes "poor Victor" after the war, due largely to losing his eyeglasses. Jan Bronski, seized with terror, exaggerates his flesh wound and remains in the makeshift infirmary. Jan and Oskar play skat with Kobyella, although the janitor is increasingly weak and they have to prop the cards up in his hands. Jan becomes disoriented, calling Oskar "Agnes" and Kobyella "Matzerath."

Finally there is a lull in the fighting outside and Kobyella expires in the middle of the hand, depriving Jan of a sure-thing grand slam. Oskar urges Jan to leave the dead janitor in peace, suggesting they can play a two-handed game called Sixty-six instead. For the first time, Oskar calls Jan Bronski "Papa." Victor comes to the door and suggests they run for it, but Jan Bronski is too distraught to understand. Instead, he begins to build a house of cards. The Germans use flame throwers on the building. Jan leans the Queen of Hearts against the King of Hearts carefully. A few men, including Victor escape, but thirty are captured, including Jan Bronski.

After the battle, Victor showers, changes clothes and visits an optician for new glasses. He has a beer on the Holzmarkt before fleeing from his perpetual pursuers, who chase him to this day. Oskar, remembering that he still looks like a three-year-old, slips away while the men are being taken into custody.

Chapter 19, The Card House Analysis

The entire story of the defense of the Polish Post Office has a quality of unreality about it, as it is extremely unlikely that a midget who looks like a three-year-old would be involved in a firefight. The presence of a nursery in the post office building, fortuitously containing a drum, also seems fantastic. Grass clearly engineers the plot to reveal his beliefs on war and the nature of heroism. Jan Bronski unwittingly and unwillingly becomes a Polish war hero while trying to play cards. Cowardly and in denial, Bronski imagines that he is playing skat with Agnes and Matzerath, instead of hiding in the infirmary of a besieged building. Grass implies that terror and banality are often the causes of "heroism." His final act, propping the Queen of Hearts against the King of Hearts, symbolizes his lifelong love of Agnes. This act, and Oskar's decision to finally call Jan Bronski "Papa," seem far more vivid and lifelike than the improbable and inept battle.



Chapter 20, He Lies in Saspe

Chapter 20, He Lies in Saspe Summary

Oskar escapes by befriending two avuncular German soldiers, and, with gestures, accuses Jan Bronski of dragging a toddler into a war zone. Sometimes he looks back on this with shame, but consoles himself with the thought that Jan Bronski was too dazed by events to understand the betrayal. Oskar learns from Leo Schugger, the cemetery greeter, that the men were held in prison. In early October, they were marched to Saspe, shot in front of the wall in an abandoned cemetery, and buried in a mass grave. Leo Schugger finds a leftover cartridge case in the sandy cemetery soil and gives it to Oskar.

After the Post Office is captured, Oskar is hospitalized. Each day until the executions, his grandmother and his great-uncle Vincent come to convince him to sign a statement clearing Jan Bronski. Each time Oskar attempts to give a statement, he is seized with convulsions. In late November, Leo Schugger takes Oskar to the cemetery in Saspe, and gives him the cartridge. Oskar finds a skat card, the seven of spades, lying in front of the freshly painted cemetery wall. Encountering his grandmother at her market stall, Oskar gives her the skat card and cartridge, and whispers Jan's fate in her ear.

Chapter 20, He Lies in Saspe Analysis

Oskar leaves the hospital with the awareness that there is something else to give his life meaning, in addition to his drum - nurses. His lifelong fetish for women in white uniforms, which began with Sister Inge, blossoms in the hospital.

Oskar sarcastically comments that the men were buried in a mass grave to save the families the expense of planting flowers. Oskar bears the guilt for the death of Jan Bronski, his father, due to his silence. The skat card Oskar finds in the graveyard, the seven of spades, is the same card Oskar handed to Jan in the nursery during the post office siege. The seven of clubs symbolizes both bad luck and Oskar betraying Jan Bronski, signing his death warrant. Oskar's failure to act to free his father seems strange. Neither Oskar's own safety nor the explanation offered - involuntary convulsions - seem sufficient. Perhaps most surprising is that Oskar seems to feel little guilt over Jan's death. This episode is Grass's way of dramatizing the collective guilt of the German people for all the atrocities during World War II.



Chapter 21, Maria

Chapter 21, Maria Summary

Discharged from the hospital, Oskar misses the nurses and begins to drum furiously. In just a few weeks, he has worn out the drum from the Polish Post Office. Oskar is haunted by the thought that Victor will pursue him. He is not afraid that he will be turned over to the authorities as one of the Polish Post Office traitors. Instead, Oskar fears that Victor will denounce Oskar for betraying his father.

Oskar associates this guilt with the drum from the Post Office, and is determined to wear it out by Christmas Eve. Oskar is confident he will receive a new drum for Christmas. To his dismay, Oskar receives a lavish assortment of gifts, including a rocking swan, a set of blocks and several picture books, but no drum. Infuriated, Oskar demands a drum. When the adults refuse, he lets forth a scream that shatters all the beautiful, fragile glass decorations on the Christmas tree.

Matzerath seems oblivious to his son's need for a drum. He hires Maria Truczinski, Herbert's youngest sister, to assist in the shop. At first, Maria offers Oskar an overturned washbasin as a substitute drum. Soon, Maria begins to supply Oskar with a new drum every four or five weeks. Even during the later years of the war, when toy drums were rare, Maria ungrudgingly and matter-of-factly trades black market sugar or coffee for them. She continues to fulfill Oskar's drum needs, even to the present day.

Maria was Oskar's first love. Soon, in addition to her shop duties, she has taken to bathing him at night and tucking Oskar into bed like a child. In summer, Maria frequently takes Oskar swimming in the Baltic Sea. The first time, while changing their clothes together in a bathing cabin, Oskar buries his face in Maria's pubic hair and bursts into tears.

Chapter 21, Maria Analysis

Oskar's relationship with Maria is undoubtedly sensual and carnal, at least in his own mind. Yet, the sexuality is complex, associated with many other events and forces. Maria's pubic area reminds Oskar of his own mother. Oskar prefers to think that Maria would never act as his unfaithful Mama did with both Matzerath and Jan Bronski. Maria seems to consider Oskar a toddler, and is uninhibited in appearing naked before him. When Oskar throws himself on her in the bathing cabin and bursts into tears, Maria laughs. For Oskar, Maria's pubic hair carries the wholesome bakery scent of vanilla. The smell quickly changes into mushrooms or an acrid spice, and then becomes the smell of the earth, of Jan Bronski's grave. Through these metaphors, Grass equates sex with deceit, decay and death. No wonder Oskar bursts into tears!

One of Grass's most interesting techniques is that while *Tin Drum* has war as one of its central themes, the war is seldom discussed overtly. Instead, Grass sets war in the

background of the daily lives of the main characters, although it eventually exerts a major influence on the characters. The war is only peripherally mentioned in this chapter, when Oskar notes that the trip to the beach was in July 1940, "shortly after the special communiquys announcing the rapid success of the French campaign."



Chapter 22, Fizz Powder

Chapter 22, Fizz Powder Summary

In the shop, Oskar's mother sold woodruff fizz powder in disgusting little green packets. The packets are designed to be mixed with water as a less expensive substitute for soda pop. They also come in raspberry, orange and lemon. A few days after Oskar's sixteenth birthday, a package of fizz powder fell out of Maria's beach bag. After much hesitation, Maria empties the powder into her palm. Oskar spits on the powder, which begins to hiss and bubble. Maria flushes, and licks the powder from her hand.

Matzerath joins a skat club. Because he will be away from home one evening per week, it is decided that Oskar will sleep at Mother Truczinski's with Maria. When Oskar refuses to sleep on the sofa, Maria agrees to share a bed with him, saying Oskar is only an eighth of a portion. The second week, Oskar brings a packet of fizz powder and the two repeat their ritual many times in the following weeks. Finally one week Oskar summons the courage to put the fizz powder in Maria's navel instead of her palm. In a poetic flight, Oskar says he acquired a third drumstick and had intercourse with Maria.

Chapter 22, Fizz Powder Analysis

Oskar goes to great lengths to deny that he initiated the sexual exploits with Maria, although he doesn't accuse her of starting the relationship, either. Either way, it is clear from Oskar's description that he believes Maria experiences intense sexual desire during these escapades. Because of Maria's denials later in the novel, it is unclear if Oskar is deluding himself. In fact, the entire sexual relationship with Maria may well be a fantasy. Many of Maria's supposed reactions - such as laughing when he buries his face in her pubic hair while they are changing into swimsuits - seem highly unlikely. The author may also be making a statement about the disgusting nature of sex. Maria licking up Oskar's saliva in fizz powder may symbolize her taking another bodily fluid, semen, into her own body. Oskar's account of the couple's one experience of intercourse is ambiguous and perhaps imaginary.



Chapter 23, Special Communiquys

Chapter 23, Special Communiquys Summary

Oskar sends Bruno, his male nurse in the asylum, to the store to buy fizz powder. After searching several shops, Bruno reports that the powder has not been produced since the middle of World War II. Finally Bruno finds a pharmacist who combines chemicals to produce a woodruff fizz powder. Oskar's friends Klepp and Vittlar visit. Klepp, a devoted communist, is in mourning because Stalin has died. After Klepp and Vittlar leave, Maria comes to visit, giving Oskar a peck on the cheek. As usual, they speak about little Kurt, Maria's son. Oskar asks Maria for her left hand. She is puzzled when he pours the fizz powder into it, and disgusted when he spits on the powder. Maria rushes to the sink and washes the mixture off her hand. When Oskar tries to explain, Maria looks at him as if he's crazy.

After their interlude in Mother Truczinski's bed, Maria is pregnant. Oskar is convinced that he is the father. Oskar insists that it was at least ten days after their encounter before he caught Matzerath and Maria having sex. When Matzerath learns Maria is pregnant, he marries her, although he is forty-five and she is only seventeen. After Maria and Matzerath quarrel, Oskar tries to console her with a packet of woodruff fizz powder. Maria sends Oskar sprawling with a kick in the chest. Maria shouts that Oskar is a crazy gnome who should be in an asylum. Then, forgetting her anger, she turns on the radio and strokes Oskar's hair. Infuriated, Oskar aims a punch at the same spot where she had admitted Matzerath. Then he bites her in the same spot.

Chapter 23, Special Communiquys Analysis

Maria's current behavior suggests that Oskar has, in fact, fantasized their physical relationship. Maria denies that Kurt could possibly be Oskar's son. She is clearly disgusted when he pours fizz powder into her palm, and doesn't remember it ever happening before. The novel's generally negative view of sex is further explored in this chapter. Oskar catches his father, Matzerath, with Maria. When she becomes pregnant, he realizes his father expects him to accept his either real or imagined, sweetheart as a stepmother. Oskar is also expected to accept his real or imagined son as his brother. Oskar vilely attacks Maria's female parts, symbolically trying to destroy their powers, which he both loves and fears.

Again, the war furnishes a background to everyday life, with Maria and Oskar's argument punctuated by announcements of the brave exploits of U-boat captains.



Chapter 24, How Oskar Took His Helplessness to Mrs. Greff

Chapter 24, How Oskar Took His Helplessness to Mrs. Greff Summary

Oskar dislikes Greff the greengrocer. Greff, a former scout leader, likes young people but prefers boys to girls. On Sundays in the winter, Greff bathes naked in the frozen Baltic with several muscular youths. Oskar is furious at Maria's betrayal and tries to force a miscarriage by knocking her off a ladder in her fifth month of pregnancy. Oskar is banished to Mother Truczinski's apartment. In June, Maria's son Kurt is born. Oskar's grandmother and Vincent Bronski, Jan's father, are invited to the baptism party. Oskar interprets this as a sign that Kurt is actually his son, although it is clear that Matzerath is certain that he is the father. After the feast, Oskar collapses at the feet of Lina, Greff's wife.

Chapter 24, How Oskar Took His Helplessness to Mrs. Greff Analysis

None of the neighbors seems to suspect Greff's homosexual tendencies. Oskar does, and thoroughly disapproves. Oskar's delusion that he is Kurt's father continues. Oskar interprets even benign events to mention that he has fathered the child. Oskar swears to himself that although the child bears Matzerath's name, he will be given a drum on his third birthday.



Chapter 25, 165 lbs.

Chapter 25, 165 lbs. Summary

Oskar seeks physical solace with Lina Greff. The greengrocer's wife is ailing, and spends most of her time in bed. She seldom washes, and is grossly overweight. Distraught, Oskar visits the apartment above the greengrocers and climbs into bed with Lina. Soon, he is making love to her each day while she lies passive. Before Oskar arises from the bed, Greff brings a basin of hot water so that Oskar can wash Lina's stench from himself.

Greff has sunk into despair. The scout troop is dispersed, and youths no longer visit him. Greff's favorite Boy Scout, Horst Donath, has been killed in the fighting. Greff begins to neglect his appearance and devotes himself to inventing new contraptions. Shortly after Oskar's eighteenth birthday, Greff invents a marvelous drumming machine. It consists of two scales. When a potato is removed from one scale, the imbalance sets up a tremendous drumming finale. One morning Oskar is surprised to find the greengrocer's shop still closed. He bangs on the door, and Lina let him in while searching for her husband. She finds him in the cellar, where Greff has hung himself on a larger model of the drumming machine, using 165 pounds of potatoes as counterweight. Around the dead body are arranged four summons to appear in court on morals charges.

Chapter 25, 165 lbs. Analysis

Oskar's sexual exploits with Lina may also belong in the realm of fantasy. Certainly, the greengrocer's willing cooperation seems highly unlikely. Greff kills himself, not because his wife has been unfaithful, but because his scout troop has been disbanded and he faces morals charges.



Chapter 26, Bebra's Theater at the Front

Chapter 26, Bebra's Theater at the Front Summary

In January, there is much talk of Stalingrad, but to Oskar, the name means as little as previous names like Dunkirk and Pearl Harbor. He is more concerned that Maria has the gripe. Outside the Pestalozzi School, Oskar again meets the dwarf entertainer Bebra and his diminutive companion, Signora Roswitha. Oskar agrees to join their troupe, entertaining the German soldiers abroad.

Oskar travels on papers forged by Felix, one of the midgets.. The entire group wears field-grey Army uniforms tailored to their diminutive sizes. Oskar's uniform has the insignia of a corporal, while Bebra is a captain. The troupe travels by train through Berlin, Hanover and Cologne. In Berlin, they perform for the soldiers in an air-raid shelter. Oskar plays his drum, Signora Roswitha reads the soldiers minds and predicts their futures, and Bebra performs his clown act. After the performance, Oskar and Roswitha lie down together to take a nap. Soon, they become sexually intimate.

Chapter 26, Bebra's Theater at the Front Analysis

There are many elements of magical realism in this chapter. The descriptions of Berlin during the war and conditions during the air raid are realistic. As always, the characters and their actions are realistic. Yet, the prospect of the German soldiers being entertained by an illegal traveling troupe of midgets, wearing German Army uniforms is both other worldly and comical. Mental retardation and physical deformity were among the conditions that qualified German citizens for deportation to a death camp. The German Soldiers would likely have been enraged, rather than amused, at the prospects of little people in uniform. Grass uses these contrasts to illustrate the fact that all the German people were cooperative with the Nazis in World War II. He also suggests that the war has deformed the German people, turning them into absurd parodies of their former selves.

Once again, the novel is frankly sexual. For the first time, Oskar has a physical relationship with a woman of his own stature. Roswitha is described as ranging in age anywhere from her early twenties to her seventies. This opens the door to ambiguous interpretations of their affair - Roswitha may represent his mother or grandmother in Oskar's eyes.



Chapter 27, Inspection of Concrete, or Barbaric, Mystical, Bored

Chapter 27, Inspection of Concrete, or Barbaric, Mystical, Bored Summary

The troupe entertains for three weeks in Metz and near Rome. During his act, Oskar learns to destroy increasingly beautiful and expensive glassware, from relics of Louis XVI to Marie Antoinette, finally concluding with the Third Reich. Only the Eiffel tower makes Oskar homesick. Its slanting girders remind him of sheltering beneath his grandmother's skirts. Bebar emerges from his inward emigration. The troupe travels to Normandy, where they are given a tour of the concrete reinforcements. The soldiers, who are continually building more pillboxes, confide that they seal a live puppy inside the walls of each, for good luck. The men have also begun decorating the exteriors of the pillboxes. One man, a painter, calls his work *Structural Oblique Formations, or Barbaric, Mystical, Bored*.

The troupe retreats to the top of a concrete wall and enjoys a picnic that includes Danish butter, pate de foie gras, caviar from Stalingrad, Dutch chocolate, English corned beef and American cookies topped with South African ginger preserve while American pop music plays on the phonograph. As they eat, they see five nuns from nearby Lisieux searching for crabs and shellfish on the beach. Over the radio, the officers order the beach cleared. When the nuns fail to hear the order, they are shot. That night, the troupe performs, first for enlisted men, then for officers and Blitz girls. They fall into bed exhausted, only to be awakened the next morning by the sound of the invasion. Roswitha asks Oskar to fetch a cup of hot coffee from the field kitchen. When he refuses, she goes herself, arriving at exactly the same time as a bomb. After Roswitha's death, Oskar decides to leave the troupe. He receives six drums as a gift from Bebra, and returns to Danzig the day before Kurt's third birthday.

Chapter 27, Inspection of Concrete, or Barbaric, Mystical, Bored Analysis

The author ridicules the German cliché of the inward emigration, a tactic of withdrawing into oneself to disassociate from the Nazis. The title of the painting, *Barbaric, Mystical, Bored*, seems to sum up the spirit of the German soldiers as well as their civilian counterparts. The picnic scene is a farce. During this period, virtually all Germans were starving and could only dream of such delicacies.

Grass effectively contrasts the German soldier's prosaic interest in cigarettes, the troupe's lighthearted gaiety, with the soldier's pointless brutality in trapping puppies inside the walls of the pillboxes. The corporal knows very well the nuns on the beach



are simply searching for food for the children in their school, and he initially argues with the officer about killing them. The officer, however, insists the nuns may be treacherous spies in disguise, and the soldier reluctantly complies. In this one exchange, Grass has captured the spirit and culpability of the German people during the war.



Chapter 28, The Imitation of Christ

Chapter 28, The Imitation of Christ Summary

Matzerath is so delighted to see Oskar that he bursts into tears, and Oskar begins to call himself Oskar Matzerath occasionally, instead of exclusively Oskar Bronski. Oskar's unexplained disappearance has caused quite a stir. Both his father and Maria had to go to the police station and sign statements swearing that they didn't kill him. Now, his unexplained reappearance is equally inconvenient. The Board of Health wants Oskar confined to an institution, but Matzerath refuses. Nevertheless, the Board sends letters every two weeks requesting that Matzerath commit Oskar to an asylum.

The next day, Kurt proceeds to demolish his birthday presents, including a large yellow ball, a red sweater, a top with a whip, and a sailboat. Oskar proudly presents his son with a drum. He imagines them drumming together in perfect happiness in the protective tent of Anna's skirts. He imagines them looking in her portal to see his mother, who died of a heart too tender, and Joseph Koljaiczek, the dead American millionaire. Kurt throws the drum down and begins to lash Oskar with the top's whip, until he collapses. Then Kurt demolished the drum by bashing it with the sailboat.

Mother Truczinski has suffered a stroke upon receiving news of the death of her son, Fritz. Maria, devastated by her brother's death, fails to find solace in the Protestant church and begins to take Oskar to the Catholic Church. Oskar returns to the side altar, where the statue of Mary, John and Jesus is unchanged. For the first time, he recognizes how much Jesus looks like Oskar himself. Oskar thrusts his drum in Jesus's lap. Jesus plays "Everything Passes" and then "Lili Marlene." As the Christ child continues to play, Oskar demands his drum back, insisting that the cross should be enough for Jesus. The statue answers, "Thou art Oskar, the rock, and on this rock I will build my Church. Follow thou me!" Distraught, Oskar goes home and uses his voice to inscribe Jesus's name on light bulbs before shattering them.

Chapter 28, The Imitation of Christ Analysis

Years later, from his bed in the asylum, Oskar realizes that it is unfair to demand that Kurt follow in Oskar's footsteps as a drummer, just as it was unfair for Matzerath to expect Oskar to take over the grocery shop. At the time, however, Oskar saw his gift as saving Kurt from a hopeless existence. Oskar's fantasy of introducing Kurt to his ancestors is charming, although the image of them lodged in Anna's womb is disgusting. Oskar imagines himself Christ-like, with powers even beyond those of Christ. On rainy days, he insists he can snap his fingers and bring Jan Bronski, his mother and his grandfather all back to life inside his grandmother. These delusions add weight to the argument that the entire novel is the fantasy of an insane man. Jesus's words to Oskar are a repetition of Christ's words to the disciple Peter. Oskar's shocked and offended response, however, is very different.



Chapter 29, The Dusters

Chapter 29, The Dusters Summary

Oskar returns to the church many evenings, but Jesus never plays his drum again. Each night afterwards, Oskar destroys a window with his voice on his way home, out of frustration. One night, returning from the church, he encounters a threatening gang of young toughs. Oskar slips into a deserted chocolate factory to avoid them. The gang follows, and interrogates Oskar. Oskar tells them his name is Jesus. Furious, they "dust him," painfully digging their knuckles into his arm just above the elbow. They demand to know Oskar's real name, and he replies "Jesus" again. Just then, the air-raid sirens sound their warning. Several gang members rush off to their stations manning anti-aircraft guns. Oskar impresses the remaining members of the gang by shattering the windows of the chocolate factory with his voice. Awed, the gang leader gives Oskar his wristwatch and declares he is now the leader of the Dusters.

Chapter 29, The Dusters Analysis

The Dusters have two rival factions in Danzig and hope Oskar can help them defeat their opponents. Several of the Dusters are members of the Air Force Auxiliary, helping to man the anti-aircraft guns. Others are air raid wardens at a nearby prep school. Grass seems to imply that soldiers, or perhaps communists, are just juvenile delinquents in uniform, playing destructive games. The boys are far more impressed by Oskar's petty destruction than by the war raging over their heads during the confrontation. They are most interested in painfully pinching their enemies. With this comparison, Grass reduces war to the immature rivalry of schoolboys.



Chapter 30, The Christmas Play

Chapter 30, The Christmas Play Summary

There is much talk in the news of strategic retreat and evacuation. Rumors of Nazi secret weapons and a final, glorious victory are rife. Oskar's voice is the Duster's secret weapon. Their clubhouse is the cellar of one member's home, the son of a Nazi official. They boys have an impressive store of gasoline, parachute silk, canned goods, tobacco and Army watches, some machine guns and hand grenades. Oskar insists they bury the weapons and gasoline in the garden, saying, "our weapons are of a different kind." After dark, from his bedroom window at Mother Truczinski's, Oskar sends his voice out to demolish the windows at targeted buildings. The Dusters enter, destroying Party headquarters or robbing a print shop that produces ration cards.

Since Oskar remained at home, he is not sure if it was the Dusters who drowned two officers of the Patrol Service in the Mottlau. However, he does deny they had any involvement with the Polish nobility or Communists. Two new members, Felix and Paul Rennwand, both choirboys at Sacred Heart Catholic church, bring along their sister, Lucy. The girl has a triangular fox face and lounges around casually munching a sandwich, watching the gang members. The gang begins to redecorate their clubhouse with religious artifacts, include nativity figures stolen from nearby churches.

One evening in September, the gang enters Sacred Heart with the choirboys' key. They begin to cut apart the large statue of Mary, John and Jesus, to cart it back to their cellar. Once the statue of Jesus is removed, Oskar assumes its place, sitting on Mary's lap. One of the boys puts on the priest's vestments, and begins to celebrate a mass worshipping Oskar. When the police arrive, the boys remained kneeling before their "Jesus." Oskar pretends to be a tearful three-year-old to the police. Lucy picks him up, eating another sandwich. The two watch as the police drag the young hooligans away. Eventually Oskar, too is carried away to be acquitted in a trial he calls the second trial of Jesus.

Chapter 30, The Christmas Play Analysis

Several of the members leave the gang to form a communist cell, but the Dusters continue to be apolitical. They are against everything equally. When Oskar takes his place as the Christ child, the gang members spontaneously shine their flashlights on him like halos and begin worshipping him. This chapter may be a comment on the futility of religion, or on the dangers of worshipping Art.



Chapter 31, The Ant Trail

Chapter 31, The Ant Trail Summary

Oskar envisions the trial as a blue-tiled swimming pool without any water in it. At Lucy's urging, all of the gang members except Oskar dive into the empty pool, one by one. Only Oskar refuses to take the leap to certain death. The authorities are convinced Oskar is a gullible simpleton, used by the gang members. He is released into Matzerath's custody. For weeks afterwards, Oskar searches the streets for a skinny teenaged girl with a triangular face, who is always betraying men. Even now, from his asylum bed, he is constantly wary of her. The Ministry of Health resumes its efforts to have Oskar committed. Matzerath ponders for days, and then finally signs the commitment papers. He mails them just as the battle over Danzig begins, so it is likely they never arrived. Mother Truczinski is killed during one air raid, and Oskar insists her coffin be shaped properly, with one narrow end. He cannot bear to see her buried in a plain box.

The entire family moves into the cellar with Lina Greff to avoid the bombs. Matzerath has reinforced the beams, and accumulated a forbidden store of canned foods. Near the end of the battle, as Danzig burns, Matzerath for the first time expresses doubt that Germany will win the war. Matzerath takes off his party pin and looks around for somewhere to hide it. He drops it on the concrete floor, and Oskar snatches it away from Kurt. Before he can dispose of it, the door bursts open and six or seven Russian soldiers enter.

Everyone puts their hands over their heads except Oskar. Three Russian soldiers attack Lena Greff, "who, after her long widowhood and the lean years preceding it, had scarcely expected such sudden popularity, let out a few screams of surprise but soon reaccustomed herself to an occupation she had almost forgotten." An avuncular Russian picks Oskar up and playfully drums a few measures on his drum. Trying to free his hands, Oskar holds his loosely closed hand out to Matzerath, who takes the party pin back. Desperate to rid himself of the incriminating pin, Matzerath puts it into his mouth.

Trying to swallow the Nazi pin, Matzerath gags and begins to choke. The Russians are adamant that he keep his hands above his head, but Matzerath is dancing about, silently fighting for air. Oskar's friendly Russian casually sets him down and shoots Matzerath, emptying the entire magazine into the man before he can choke.

Chapter 31, The Ant Trail Analysis

Because Lucy testifies against the Dusters at their trial, Oskar assumes she betrayed them to the police. His fear and hatred towards her, and towards all women, continues

to grow throughout the rest of the novel. Grass's cynical description of the gang rape of Lena Greff may be an extension of this misogyny.

Matzerath's death is symbolic of the dilemma of Germans for many years after the end of the war. They could try to hide their Nazi involvement, and choke on it. On the other hand, they could expose their Nazi connections and be shot for it. Neither prospect is attractive, and both inevitably lead to destruction. This passage may contain the primary message of the novel. At the time of publication in 1961, it was unthinkable for Germans to discuss World War II. The German's involvement in World War II, and Nazi party membership, were forbidden topics. Grass boldly chooses to write a novel about the war. He suggests that unless the Germans become willing to discuss their wartime experiences, even those that are tragic or shameful, they will choke on the knowledge.



Chapter 32, Should I or Shouldn't I

Chapter 32, Should I or Shouldn't I Summary

The Matzerath shop and apartment was turned over to a man named Fajngold. Fajngold is all alone in the world, but does not know it. He believes that he is still surrounded by a large family, including his wife Luba. Fajngold speaks to his imaginary family constantly. He hires Maria as a salesclerk, and helps them bury Matzerath's three-day-old body. After the widow Matzerath was evicted, Fajngold lets her live in the cellar storeroom with Kurt and Oskar.

Matzerath was buried in a rectangular coffin fashioned from a margarine crate. On the way to the graveyard, they pass drunken Russian soldiers racing bicycles and wearing brassieres like earmuffs. One soldier gives Maria a lovebird in a cage. Oskar deliberates for a few minutes over the open grave, and then throws his drum in. With the end of the war, Oskar has decided to forsake drumming and grow up at last. Kurt is throwing stones, and hits Oskar in the back of the head with one. He falls into the grave and struggles out. Immediately, Oskar gets a nosebleed, the first violent sign of growth. On the way out of the cemetery, Maria gives Leo Schugger the lovebird in its cage. Leo calls Oskar "the Lord" and is the only person to recognize his growth.

Chapter 32, Should I or Shouldn't I Analysis

After the Russians took Danzig, private property was seized and turned over to displaced Poles, especially those who were Jewish. Oskar feels guilty for his father's death. He believes if he had not handed Matzerath the party insignia, with the pin open, his father would still be alive. Oskar feels he killed his father deliberately by handing him the open Nazi pin. Yet, he believed the situation could not continue.

Grass employs magical realism again in Oskar's ability to resume growing, at will. Oskar makes the fateful decision to abandon his drum, and become a responsible adult, over his father's grave. Although doctors blame the blow on the head for Oskar's growth and his deformity, Oskar is certain it is all due to abandoning his drum. Only Leo Schugger, the mythical cemetery greeter, recognizes the significance of Oskar's action. Symbolically, Oskar has rejected Art and now embraces the ordinary workday world of adulthood, perhaps signifying the German people's preoccupation with the prosaic after World War II.



Chapter 33, Disinfectant

Chapter 33, Disinfectant Summary

At Matzerath's funeral, Oskar was exactly 3 feet tall, the same height as on his third birthday. Today, in the asylum, Oskar has Bruno measure him. He is 4 feet 1 inch tall. Shortly after the funeral, Mr. Fajngold discovers that Kurt has lice. He begins to ceaselessly disinfect himself, Maria, Kurt, Oskar and the imaginary members of his family with carbolic acid, lime and Lysol. Oskar learns that Mr. Fajngold was the disinfectant in Treblinka Concentration Camp, cleaning the showers and the cremating furnaces.

Oskar's grandmother visits, bringing news of the family. Hedwig, the widow of Jan Bronski, was almost shot as a traitor for marrying a German. Her daughter Marga narrowly escaped a relocation camp because she belonged to the League of German Girls. Her son Stephen, a German soldier, was killed in the Arctic.

Mr. Fajngold calls to his wife less often. Soon, he proposes to Maria, who is still only twenty-two years old. Maria refuses, however. She has decided to relocate to Rhineland, in the West, where there is better medical care for Oskar and more opportunity. Maria completes the papers and in three days Maria, Kurt and Oskar are on the train with all their possessions. Fajngold runs after them, tucking a can of Lysol into the luggage.

Chapter 33, Disinfectant Analysis

Grass contrasts the fates of Matzerath and Fajngold after the war. Matzerath is shot for being a member of the Nazi party, while Fajngold, a Jewish collaborator, is rewarded with a home and business. Irony is also apparent in Grass's discussion of the fate of the Bronski family. Jan was executed as a traitor after the siege of the Polish Post Office. Hedwig, his disgraced wife, barely saved the family by marrying a German. After the war, Hedwig is almost hung. As the widow of a Polish patriot, it is now considered treason that she married a German. Grass clearly illuminates how the vagaries of politics make one a hero one moment and a traitor the next.



Chapter 34, Growth in a Freight Car

Chapter 34, Growth in a Freight Car Summary

In the asylum, Oskar's joints are too painful for him to drum or write, so he dictates to his male nurse, Bruno. There were thirty-two other people in the freight car headed west, including four nuns. One of the passengers is a girl with a triangular face that Oskar insists on calling Lucy, although that was not her name. Over the next four days, they are stopped repeatedly and robbed by young Polish hoodlums, who finally take all their luggage except a single knapsack. They would have taken the knapsack as well, but Oskar pulled the family photo album from it. He showed the young hooligans the photo of his grandmother, obviously Polish, and they let him keep the pack.

Along the way, Oskar grows three or four inches, but the jarring of the railcar makes his joints ache and prevents his spine from growing straight. He develops a hunchback. Arriving in Luneburg, Oskar has convulsions and is sent to the hospital. Maria and Kurt live in a refugee camp nearby. Finally, the doctors agree to allow Oskar to be moved to Dusseldorf, and Maria moves into an apartment with her sister.

Chapter 34, Growth in a Freight Car Analysis

This chapter, written by the male nurse, Bruno, offers perhaps the only objective view of Oskar, and fuels the argument that Oskar is not a reliable narrator. In his writing, Bruno calls Oskar "Mr. Matzerath." It is clear that Bruno does not believe much of what Oskar is dictating, including the fact that Maria was once his mistress and that Kurt is his son. Bruno reveals that Oskar is a famous recording artist who has been convicted of a crime, although Bruno believes him innocent. Bruno also notes he has omitted many anecdotes and rumors Oskar related about the nurses in the hospitals, which Bruno finds irrelevant and trivial. Oskar is clearly obsessed with female nurses in white uniforms, an obsession that will continue throughout his life.



Chapter 35, Firestones and Tombstones

Chapter 35, Firestones and Tombstones Summary

In Dusseldorf, the family lives with Maria's sister. Guste was engaged to Ktzster when was sent to the Arctic front, and the couple married on furlough. They have only spent a few nights together. Although the war is over, there is no word of Ktzster. Guste insists he is a prisoner in Russia and there will be big changes when he returns. She is referring to the highly profitable black market operation Maria and six-year-old Kurt conduct, selling ersatz honey and flints. Oskar also objects to the illegal activity, but he has a prodigious appetite due to his growth, and the extra money buys food.

Wandering the city, Oskar befriends Korneff, who owns a stonecutter and sells headstones. Soon, Oskar is working as his apprentice. Maria continually harangues Oskar, urging him to find a black market source of his own - perhaps in cocoa or powdered milk. Finally, Oskar digs deep into one of the packages of disinfectant that Fajngold gave them. He pulls out his mother's ruby necklace, the one that Jan Bronski stole for her. He sells it in an alley for a fake leather briefcase and twelve cartons of Lucky Strike cigarettes - unimaginable wealth. Going home, he dumps them all in Maria's lap and tells her to stop nagging him. One day as Oskar and Korneff are erecting a gravestone, Oskar sees a cemetery greeter. At first, Oskar thinks it is Leo Schugger but Korneff insists the man's name is Willem Slobber.

Chapter 35, Firestones and Tombstones Analysis

Although Guste objects to the black market enterprise, she is not reluctant to enjoy the benefits, including real coffee. Grass employs irony in his depiction of a six-year-old black market mastermind.

Korneff is afflicted with huge boils. During one scene, two inflamed boils threaten to pop during a Protestant funeral. In a scene symbolizing the contrast between corruption and religion, Oskar works to drain pus from the boils while the funeral cortige prays.



Chapter 36, Fortuna North

Chapter 36, Fortuna North Summary

Oskar and Korneff are paid for the gravestones in trade merchandise: potatoes, sugar, lard and cloth. A tailor's widow makes them each a suit, in exchange for a headstone. Splendidly arrayed, Oskar visits the hospital, bringing candy to the nurses. He asks a hearty Westphalian lass, Sister Gertrude, on a date. Oskar is disappointed that she does not wear her nurse's uniform on the date. After a flashy dance with Oskar, Sister Gertrude flees, embarrassed by his stature. Oskar stays, dancing all night with girls from the telephone exchange. Throughout the next year or two, he continues to socialize with the girls.

After months of soul-searching, Oskar gives up the telephone girls. The black market is drying up as goods become more available, and Oskar is now supporting the entire family. Oskar takes Maria to the movies, and asks her to marry him. After contemplating his proposal, Maria tells him no, saying they will always be friends.

Chapter 36, Fortuna North Analysis

Oskar's obsession with nurses continues, although his date with Gertrude is disastrous. Gertrude is embarrassed to be seen dancing with Oskar, because of his short stature. Oskar has sacrificed his drum, and his life as an artist, to assume adult responsibilities. The culmination of those responsibilities is his marriage proposal to Maria, whom Oskar has always loved. Oskar has given up everything most important to him, to become the breadwinner and responsible husband and father of their little family. Maria ponders Oskar's proposal, but in the end tells him they will always be friends. This suggests the futility of an artist trying to live a normal life.



Chapter 37, Madonna 49

Chapter 37, Madonna 49 Summary

The currency reform ruins the headstone business and Oskar must capitalize on his hump to make a living. Before Korneff can dismiss him, Oskar walks off the job. He whiles away the hours sitting on a park bench until two young painters approach him, asking Oskar to become a model at the Academy. Soon, Oskar is being paid to pose full-time for portraits in charcoal, paint and clay. On Shrove Monday, Oskar attends an artist's party dressed as a jester. At the party, Oskar encounters Corporal Lankes from Normandy, the creator of *Barbaric, Mystical, Bored*. Lankes's tall, beautiful young girlfriend, Ulla, is with him. Soon she becomes an artist's model and muse at the Academy.

One of the instructors paints portraits of Ulla and Oskar posing as the Virgin Mary and Christ Child. The pair continues to model together with various props until one day the instructor tries to put a drum into Oskar's hands. Oskar begins to tremble and weep, but finally holds the drum. This pose produces the successful portrait Madonna 49. The painting is shown in several exhibits, to wide acclaim. Maria attends an exhibit and is shocked at the portrait. She berates Oskar, striking him with a ruler and calling him a pig, a pimp, and a degenerate. She insists she wants nothing to do with Oskar and will accept no more of his money. Maria soon changes her mind about accepting Oskar's money, but he decides to find his own lodgings in Dusseldorf.

Chapter 37, Madonna 49 Analysis

Oskar blames all his economic woes on Maria. Had she married him, he feels, he would today be the comfortably middle-class owner of a stonecutting business. By posing at the Academy, Oskar has re-entered the world of Art as a subject, not an artist. The famous portrait Madonna 49 recreates Oskar's crime at the Sacred Heart Catholic Church, and reinforces his messiah complex. Initially, Maria is happy to have the income provided by Oskar's modeling job. Only when confronted with the poster of Oskar posing nude with a naked Ulla, does she object. Maria's new career in a gourmet deli allows her enough economic freedom to denounce Oskar, although she soon accepts his money again.



Chapter 38, The Hedgehog

Chapter 38, The Hedgehog Summary

With Ulla's help, Oskar finds a cheap room to rent. The boarding house is across the court from a coffin warehouse. Zeidler, the landlord, resembles a hedgehog. Whenever he becomes angry with his wife, he smashes 8 glasses from their well-stocked cabinet against the stove in the kitchen. One of the boardinghouse residents is a trained nurse, Sister Dorothea. Although Oskar never sees her, she fascinates him. He begins monitoring the letters she receives, checking the post in the hall while she is at work. When she begins receiving decorous love letters from a doctor, Oskar determines to attend medical school.

Chapter 38, The Hedgehog Analysis

Almost as an afterthought, Oskar mentions that Maria has started seeing her boss, the owner of the delicatessen. As the romance blossoms, Oskar's interest in nurses grows. Nurses hold the same fascination for Oskar as drops of blood on snow, an image suggested by the Red Cross pin that holds the collar of their white uniforms. Oskar defends his obsession with nurses, pointing out the many popular movies featuring them. For Oskar, the nurse is the perfect blend of sex and war, of healing and death.

Oskar lost the ability to destroy glass with his voice at his father's funeral. Now, Zeidler's propensity for shattering fine goblets to express his anger and coerce cooperation is presented as a childish tantrum. This is a contrast to Oskar's power, which was a mystical gift. This clearly illustrates how tactics employed by others may seem negative, while the same tactics in ourselves are positive attributes. This insight has many ramifications for war, where bravery in battle may appear as savagery to the opposing side. Oskar's mystical, magical gifts have been reduced to wanton destruction and brutality, just as the end of World War II transformed many wartime exploits into crimes.



Chapter 39, In the Clothes Cupboard

Chapter 39, In the Clothes Cupboard Summary

Each day Oskar tries the door of Sister Dorothea's room and finds it locked. Finally, one day he finds the room left unlocked, and enters. He prowls around the small room, stealing the hairs from her brush. Inspecting her clothes, Oskar climbs into the cupboard. Her slender black patent-leather belt, for wear off-duty, reminds him of an eel and he remembers the outing with Matzerath, Jan Bronski and Mama. Reliving that fateful day, his mother's illness and death, Oskar drums a few measures on the back wall of the cupboard, to relieve the tension.

Chapter 39, In the Clothes Cupboard Analysis

Rather than finding the object of his desire in Sister Dorothea's room, Oskar finds the eel-like belt, a symbol of death and destruction. He relives the horrible encounter on the beach with the eels, and his mother's subsequent death. To dispel this intense emotional experience, Oskar begins to drum again, an action that will have far-reaching consequences.

Oskar initially gave up his drum in a bid to win Maria. Instead, Maria has rejected him for her boss at the deli. Sister Dorothea, embodiment of all things nurse-like, seems to be having an affair with a doctor. Worse yet, her belongings suggest she is an ordinary human being who even owns civilian clothes, not the mythical creature Oskar craves. Thus deprived of the idealistic objects of his love, Oskar returns to Art for solace.



Chapter 40, Klepp

Chapter 40, Klepp Summary

Surreptitiously exiting Sister Dorothea's room, Oskar hears a slight cough from the adjoining room. A few days later, Oskar steams open one of Sister Dorothea's letters from the doctor and reads it. Although phrased decorously, it is a passionate love letter. Resealing the letter and replacing it, Oskar hears a voice from the room adjoining Sister Dorothea's. It is Klepp M'nzer, asking Oskar to fetch him some water.

Klepp is an indolent, corpulent, unwashed jazz clarinetist who rarely leaves his bed. He cooks on a tiny bedside alcohol stove. The two quickly begin a conversation on the most frivolous topics including predestination and the existence of heaven. Klepp serves Oskar a disgusting meal of spaghetti on a greasy plate. Soon, Oskar is drumming Klepp his entire life story while Klepp is creating sweet and unnatural sounds with his clarinet. The two play for several hours. Rejuvenated, Klepp springs out of bed to wash himself and the two go out together. Over beer and blood sausage, they determine to start a jazz band.

Chapter 40, Klepp Analysis

The redemptive power of Art - or at least of creating Art - is illustrated in Klepp's story. An invalid confined to bed, filthy and morose, in a few hours Klepp is transformed into a confident jazz musician eager to start a band with Oskar. Oskar's resurging interest in music is fueled in part by his disappointment in love. Sister Dorothea proves to be less fascinating than Oskar imagined, and has a lover besides.



Chapter 41, On the Fiber Rug

Chapter 41, On the Fiber Rug Summary

Oskar, confined to bed in the asylum, believes Klepp is trying to get even with him. Now a devoted Communist, Klepp is trying to force Oskar to leave his refuge. After their initial meeting, the two men socialize. They go to the movies together regularly. They often go out for beer, sometimes sitting in with the band at the Unicorn, but fail to find a guitarist for their band.

Together, Oskar and Klepp lay a fiber runner in the hall of the boardinghouse. It was on this rug that Oskar met Sister Dorothea for the first time. Surprised by his sudden appearance, the nurse lets out a little scream. She initially mistakes Oskar for the Devil. Oskar, in his guise as Satan, vows his love for her, and Sister Dorothea faints. When she returns to consciousness, Sister Dorothea bolts to her room and locks the door. Oskar collapses on the floor, overcome with emotion. The Zeidlers arrive and disapprovingly assume he is drunk. Zeidler begins to throw a tantrum just as Klepp enters with their new guitarist, Scholle. The three musicians find a spot near the Rhine and play together for three hours. Afterwards, they all go to breakfast. Oskar proclaims the new band the Rhine River Three.

Chapter 41, On the Fiber Rug Analysis

Despite his messiah complex, Oskar fancies himself the devil in his dealings with Sister Dorothea. When she exclaims, startled by his appearance, he assumes the guise of Satan for their entire encounter. Once again, Art saves Oskar from his disappointment in romance, when Klepp fortuitously appears with the long-sought guitarist.



Chapter 42, In the Onion Cellar

Chapter 42, In the Onion Cellar Summary

A chance encounter with a bar owner named Schuman, leads to the Rhine River Three being hired to play in a night club called the Onion Cellar. The establishment is a genuine dank, damp cellar with unsteady stairs and smelly carbide lamps, which add to the prices. Before the performance, the owner passes out onions, which the audience cuts. This has the laudable effect of making the customers cry. One of the patrons is Miss Pioch. She met her lover, Willie Volmer, when he stomped her big toe on the streetcar. Miss Pioch was barely able to walk, and he helped her home. Willie began visiting her daily, caring for her wounded toe. They feel deeply in love. As soon as she had recovered, Willie lost interest in her. He suggested he injure her other foot, and Miss Pioch agreed. Again, the two were passionately in love until her foot healed. Finally, Miss Pioch refuses to allow Willie to injure her further, and the two part forever.

One night Schuman's wife, Billy, overcome by tears, reveals startling facts about her husband. The entire audience is shocked into silence, until Schuman appears with a second round of onions, on the house. An orgy of tears results, which Oskar barely controls with a brilliant drum solo.

Chapter 42, In the Onion Cellar Analysis

According to Oskar, it is not true that an overflowing heart always results in tears. In his own century, many people suffering great pain, anger, turmoil and remorse have been unable to cry. The great popularity of the Onion Cellar lies in its ability to make the patrons cry. Onions in this chapter symbolize alcohol, especially beer. The war survivors attend the cellar to cry over their experiences. Their grief is held somewhat in check by Oskar's band, which starts playing whenever the audience is in danger of being overwhelmed.



Chapter 43, On the Atlantic Wall or Concrete Eternal

Chapter 43, On the Atlantic Wall or Concrete Eternal Summary

Schuman, the Onion Cellar's proprietor, amuses himself by hunting sparrows in the park. He always shoots exactly a dozen birds, no more. On one excursion, accompanied by his wife Billy, Oskar and the other two band members, Schuman shoots a 13th bird. On the way home, hundreds of sparrows fly into the car's windshield. Schuman's black Mercedes runs off the road into a gravel pit. Schuman is killed. Billy, Klepp and Scholle have minor injuries. Oskar, who had opted to take the streetcar home, is unharmed.

At Schuman's funeral, Oskar is approached by a concert promoter called Dr. Dtzsch, a frequent Onion Cellar guest. Dtzsch offers to set up a solo concert tour for Oskar. Oskar hesitates, but finally agrees. First, he decides to take a brief pleasure trip. Accompanied by Lankes, the soldier turned artist, the tour takes them back to Normandy. The two camp in the concrete pillbox. In the evening, the two are visited by the ghostly specter of Sister Agneta and Sister Scholastica, two of the dead nuns, wearing green reporter's eyeshades. Lankes disappears into the pillbox with the younger nun for a time. Afterwards, she takes off her habit and bathes in the sea. Lankes is inspired to paint a successful series of portraits, including Nuns Drowning.

Chapter 43, On the Atlantic Wall or Concrete Eternal Analysis

Grass employs magical realism in both Schuman's death by swallows, and the reappearance of the slain nuns. Far from resenting their death at Lankes's hands, the younger nun disappears into the pillbox with him, hinting at sexual conduct. The ex-soldier's obsession with the woman he loved and murdered results in paintings of astonishing indifference, which are wildly successful.



Chapter 44, The Ring Finger

Chapter 44, The Ring Finger Summary

Maria plans to marry her boss, Stenzel, who is divorcing his wife. The jazz band has found another drummer after Oskar's disloyal solo. Therefore, Oskar goes on tour for Dr. Dtzsch. The doctor summons Oskar into his boss's office, where Oskar finds Bebra, the dwarf clown, confined to a motorized wheelchair. Bebra is disappointed over Oskar's growth in the past few years.

Oskar completes three concert tours in rapid succession, growing wealthy. With his newfound wealth, Oskar makes Maria a proposal. He will purchase a deli for her, and provide the operating capital, if she will not marry Stenzel. Oskar continues to live at the boarding house with Klepp, although he takes several more rooms, including the room abandoned by Sister Dorothea. After his seventh or eighth tour, Oskar returns to discover Bebra has died, bequeathing a small fortune to Oskar. Despondent, Oskar cancels his next two tours.

Oskar rents a glossy black Rottweiler and walks along the river with him. The dog often brings Oskar stones or sticks. One day, the dog brings Oskar a woman's severed ring finger, rather than a stick. On the finger is an aquamarine ring. Oskar wraps the finger in his handkerchief and returns to the boarding house. On the way, he encounters Vittlar, reclining in the crotch of a tree.

Chapter 44, The Ring Finger Analysis

Oskar's career as an artist reaches new heights with concert tours and records. With his newfound wealth, Oskar rents additional rooms at the boarding house, including the room where Sister Dorothea once lived and breathed. This passage seems to imply that Oskar knows of the nurse's death. Oskar offers to buy Maria a shop of her own if she will forsake the relationship with Stenzel, and she agrees. Oskar interprets this as an encouraging sign of her affection towards him.



Chapter 45, The Last Streetcar or Adoration of a Preserving Jar

Chapter 45, The Last Streetcar or Adoration of a Preserving Jar Summary

Vittlar questions what Oskar has in his pocket, but Oskar insists it is only a stick, or cooking apples. The scene switches from Oskar's point of view to Vittlar's testimony in court. After some disagreement, Oskar gives the aquamarine ring to Vittlar, keeping the finger himself. The two men converse, and become friendly. Together, they take a cab to the stonecutters, where Korneff makes several casts of the finger.

Over dinner in a restaurant, Oskar argues that he is entitled to keep the finger because he was promised it at birth. He insists that the finger is the "drumstick" for his drum, a word he has also used to describe his penis. The finger resembles the scars on his friend Harold's back, and the cartridge that killed Jan Bronski. Oskar preserves the finger in a jar of alcohol in Sister Dorothea's room, and worships it daily. Vittlar insists that this veneration does not disprove Oskar's assertion that he was unaware the finger belonged to Sister Dorothea, and had nothing to do with her death. Vittlar believes Oskar when he testifies that he never met Sister Dorothea face-to-face.

One night on the streetcar, Vittlar and Oskar encounter Victor, the nearsighted survivor of the Polish Post Office standoff. Two men on the streetcar are carrying an execution order from early in the war, and try to kill Victor. They all leave the streetcar and end up in Vittlar's mother's garden. There, Oskar drums furiously, raising the spirits of the Polish Cavalry. These ghostly defenders carry Victor and his would-be executioners off, towards Poland.

Vittlar admires Oskar's skill but resents his fame. He insists that it is hard to constantly accompany a famous artist, when one is unknown. Oskar tells Vittlar to take the finger to the police and testify against Oskar, which is sure to get Vittlar's name in the paper.

Chapter 45, The Last Streetcar or Adoration of a Preserving Jar Analysis

Vittlar clearly symbolizes the snake in the story of Adam and Eve's fall from the Garden of Eden. The finger is Oskar's temptation, his apple. At the same time, the author dismisses this interpretation as allegorical rubbish. Oskar's worship of the finger suggests idolatry. Despite their awkward meeting, they become friends and Oskar insists he is glad that it was Vittlar, and not some stranger, who turned him in.

The author again employs a change in point of view to raise questions of Oskar's veracity and mental stability. Vittlar believes, without any doubt, that Maria is Oskar's



stepmother, and Kurt his son. Oskar's contentions that destiny has promised him the finger seem to indicate mental illness, as does his worship of it. One of the most incriminating admissions is Oskar's assertion that he has never met Sister Dorothea face to face, which the reader knows is false. In fact, Oskar encountered her in the boarding house hallway shortly before Sister Dorothea disappeared. The event was so emotional that it caused Oskar's collapse.

Grass further explores the shifting nature of political loyalties during war in the encounter with Victor. Initially Victor was a Polish Patriot defending the Polish Post Office. During the war, the Germans considered him an enemy, and Victor's execution was ordered. When Victor eluded capture and execution, he was considered a traitor to the Polish cause. Now that the war is over, Victor is again seen as a surviving Polish hero, while his would-be executioners are now traitors. However, the two executioners insist that the original order to kill Victor is still legal. Victor is saved only by magical realism, when a corps of Polish Cavalry - the traditional defenders of the Polish nobility - carry him off to Poland.



Chapter 46, Thirty

Chapter 46, Thirty Summary

The chapter opens in the mental asylum where Oskar is celebrating his 30th birthday with Maria, Klepp and Vittlar. During the celebration, Oskar receives joyous news: the police are reopening the investigation into Sister Dorothea's death. They have uncovered a new suspect, the nurse's friend Sister Beata. Oskar tries to imagine what he will do if freed from the asylum, but he is uncertain.

Two years ago, when Vittlar first set the police on Oskar, our diminutive hero fled. Dr. Dtzsch had long hoped Oskar would perform in the United States, so Oskar decides to head there. He gets as far as the Maison Blanche Metro station in Paris before he is apprehended by the police. Oskar tells them "Ich Bin Jesus - I am Jesus."

Chapter 46, Thirty Analysis

Oskar is gladdened by the prospect of exoneration and release from the asylum, but puzzled by the future. He still dreams of marriage to Maria, and considers resuming his modeling or musical careers, or buying a stonecutter's shop. Despite Oskar's imminent release, his statement to the arresting offices in Paris, that he is Jesus, casts further doubt on his sanity. Ultimately, Grass may be suggesting that insanity is the only reasonable response to war.



Characters

Oskar Matzerath

The protagonist of the novel, Oskar is the only fully realized character. Many aspects of Oskar's personality seem mythical, in both the tradition of German folklore, and the more modern conventions of magical realism. Oskar is the rare individual who is perfectly rational and cognizant from the moment of his birth. He instantly perceives that all human existence is as futile as a moth's search for the flame.

Oskar's most defining characteristic is his ability to drum. After receiving the tin drum for his third birthday, he continues to wear out a drum every 2-6 weeks for the remainder of his life. Oskar drums to distance himself from adults, and for companionship. He is, at least in his own mind, a fabulously talented drummer. Oskar's drum gives him power over others, even the power to disrupt Nazi political rallies.

Once he receives the drum, Oskar chooses to stop growing. This is purely a practical consideration, as he is aware that should he reach adulthood the demands of the family business will end his musical life. Oskar remains just three feet tall, with the physical appearance of a three-year-old, until he is about twenty years old. He uses his diminutive size to cling to childish ways, allowing others to bath and dress him even as a teen. Oskar is able to escape capture after the siege of the Polish Post Office by pretending to be a toddler.

Oskar presents a unique view of the typical artist as a willful, immature, intelligent but amoral toddler. The author suggests that artistic talent, rather than deriving from genius or divine inspiration, results from irresponsibility and Satanic influences. In choosing Rasputin, a licentious Russian courtier and faith healer, as one of his models, he embraces degenerate sex and fraud. In choosing the philosopher Goethe's *Faust* as his second cannon, he accepts the dangers of making a pact with the devil.

Maria Truczinski Matzerath

Maria is Oskar's most enduring love interest, although the feeling is unrequited. After his wife's death, Alfred Matzerath hires Maria, a seventeen-year-old neighborhood girl, to assist in the shop. Maria has a gift for commerce and has soon increased the shop's income. She begins to do the Matzerath's housework and care for Oskar, giving him his bath and dressing him as one would a tiny child.

Oskar, who is sixteen despite his short stature, finds Maria's attentions titillating. The two visit the beach, where Oskar is allowed on the private women-only side. He and Maria share a dressing room, and she casually disrobes in front of him. Oskar contends that the two begin a sexual relationship, although Maria denies that anything of the sort ever occurred. The mechanics of their relationship certainly resemble stepmother and son more closely than lovers.



Matzerath begins to court Maria, and the two are soon married. Oskar contends that Kurt, the son born months later, is actually his child. No one except Oskar believes this. After the war and her husband's death, Maria continues to provide for Oskar. She sells black market honey, and eventually goes to work in a deli. When Oskar becomes wealthy through recording contracts, he buys Maria a deli of her own, with the stipulation that she stop seeing the married man who is her former boss. Maria complies, and makes a success of the business.

Agnes Koljaiczek Matzerath

Oskar believes that his mother, Agnes, was conceived moments after his grandfather Joseph took refuge under his grandmother, Anna's, skirts, because that is what his drum tells him. As a young girl, Agnes falls in love with her first cousin, Jan Bronski. During World War I, however, she serves as a nurse in a local hospital and is attracted to Alfred Matzerath, a jolly salesman from the Rheine region. The two marry, much to Jan's disappointment. Meeting by chance after the war, Jan and the Matzeraths become fast friends. The trio is soon sharing long evenings indulging their passion for the card game skat.

Jan and Agnes conduct a shameless affair, engaging in sexual play including intercourse in front of Oskar anytime Matzerath is out of the room. Matzerath seems to be aware of this relationship, but values Jan's friendship and skat games too much to object. Often the three take Oskar on excursions, leaving Jan's own wife and children at home. On one such excursion to the beach, Agnes is nauseated by the horrible spectacle of an old man pulling writhing eels from the head of a dead horse. Oblivious to his wife's illness, Matzerath buys several eels and cooks them for the family.

Agnes develops an intense longing for fish and eels of all types. She eats sardines, herring, eel and smoked fish at every meal, even when it makes her throw up. She rapidly wastes away and soon dies in the hospital. Oskar loses both his beloved mother, and the provider of his drums.

Harold Truczinski

Harold Truczinski is Maria's older brother, an immense man. Initially, he works as a waiter at a rough waterfront bar, where he often has to break up fights between sailors. Harold is so strong and muscular that no one can harm him from the front, but his back is a mass of writhing scars from knives and broken bottles. Eventually Harold accidentally kills a ship captain during a brawl. Although exonerated by the police, Harold decides to become a museum guard instead.



Mother Truczinski

The elderly Mother Truczinski is Harold and Maria's mother. She lives in Oskar's apartment house in Danzig, and frequently cares for the boy when he becomes too much for Maria and Alfred Matzerath to handle.

Kurt Matzerath

Despite Oskar's delusion that he is actually the father of his half-brother Kurt, the two don't get along at all. Kurt is soon taller than Oskar, who is more than 17 years his senior. Oskar hopes to make a drummer of Kurt, but the boy inherits his mother's business acumen instead. Kurt resents Oskar, and throws a rock at him during their father's funeral. The doctors insist it is this blow that causes Oskar's body to resume its growth after so many years.

Alfred Matzerath

Alfred Matzerath is presumably Oskar's father, although that fact is in doubt. Undoubtedly, he is married to Oskar's mother. Alfred is a convivial man who loves to cook and is successful in dealing with wholesalers for the family grocery shop. Oskar's primary feelings toward Matzerath are apathy and contempt.

Jan Bronski

Jan Bronski is the first cousin of Oskar's mother, Agnes. Oskar strongly suspects that Jan is his biological father, since the two cousins have a long-standing affair. Jan has beautiful blue eyes but is extremely frail and sickly. He is rejected by the draft board repeatedly during World War I, when virtually every adult male was conscripted. Jan's passion for stamp collecting leads him to a government career with the postal service in Danzig. After Agnes betrays Jan by falling in love with a German, Jan opts to continue his career in the Polish Postal Service, an action that will eventually lead to his death.

Mr. Fajngold

After World War II, the Matzerath's shop and apartment are given to Mr. Fajngold, a Polish Jew. Fajngold has survived the war in a concentration camp by disinfecting the showers where thousands of Jews were sent to their deaths. The old man refuses to admit that his wife and all their children have perished in the camp. Instead, he hallucinates that they are alive and sharing his life. Fajngold allows the Matzeraths to live in the cellar and eventually offers to marry Maria. Maria refuses and decides to travel to West Germany instead.



Klepp

Klepp, a clarinet player, is Oskar's best friend and fellow jazz musician. He is an ardent communist. The two meet at the boarding house in Dusseldorf, where Klepp has confined himself to bed. A greasy, obese and filthy man, Klepp cooks spaghetti over an alcohol stove without rising from his bed. He reuses the same spaghetti water until it is viscous and scant. Klepp's self-confinement ends the day he meets Oskar. After cooking his new friend an unwelcome dish of spaghetti served on a filthy plate, the two go to the movies and a beer.

Sister Dorothea

Sister Dorothea is an elusive resident of the Dusseldorf boarding house. Oskar, intrigued by nurses from childhood hospital stays, is entranced to live near one. He sneaks into her room and hides in the clothes cupboard. There, Oskar rediscovers drumming, which he abandoned at his father's death. In a paroxysm of jealousy, Oskar steams open a letter to Sister Dorothea, to find an ardent but discreet love missive from a doctor.

Oskar and Sister Dorothea encounter each other in the flesh only once. Sister Dorothea abruptly opens the door to discover Oskar lurking in the hall. Startled by his grotesque appearance, Sister Dorothea lets out a shriek and faints. Oskar is overcome with emotion, and regains consciousness in the hallway several hours later. Sister Dorothea is never seen alive again, and the ambiguous nature of the encounter allows the possibility that Oskar killed her.

Vittlar

Oskar first encounters his friend Vittlar reclining in the fork of an apple tree in a garden near the Rhine, very much as the snake reclined in the Garden of Eden. The two are soon fast friends, although Oskar is less than honest with Vittlar at first. After weeks of close friendship, Vittlar confesses that he is jealous of Oskar's fame as a recording artist. Oskar suggests that Vittlar turn him in for the murder of Sister Dorothea, thereby gaining his own moment of glory.

Bruno

Bruno is Oskar's male nurse at the insane asylum. He is an artist himself, who crafts miniature sculptures from string hardened with plaster and glue, often inspired by Oskar's tales. Bruno is affectionate with Oskar, but clearly disbelieves much of his story, including the affair with Maria.



Anna Bronski Koljaiczek

Anna is Oskar's grandmother and the sister of Jan Bronski's father. Anna is a simple peasant girl of the Kashubian ethnic group, tending her fire and cooking a snack of roasted potatoes in an empty field at the beginning of the story. A tiny man, a stranger, runs by and Anna shields him from the law. The two are soon married, and Oskar's mother, Agnes, is conceived that very day. Anna sells butter and eggs in the market in Danzig. She always wears four layers of voluminous skirts. Throughout his life, Oskar longs to take refuge under his grandmother's skirts, and continues to do so, even as an adult.

Bebra

Bebra is a dwarf clown who Oskar first encounters at about the age of nine. The two are kindred souls and continue to meet sporadically for many years. Eventually, Bebra invites Oskar to join his troupe entertaining the German soldiers during World War II. After the war, Oskar is surprised and delighted to find Bebra is the driving force behind his recording contract.



Objects/Places

The Tin Drum

Oskar receives a red and white toy drum, made of tin, as a gift on his third birthday. Oskar immediately begins drumming as a form of communication, recreation, companionship and to keep adults at a distance. Oskar continues to drum, wearing out each drum in a few weeks.

Skat Cards

Albert Matzerath, his wife Agnes, and her lover Jan Bronski love to play skat together. The game symbolizes their strange three-way relationship. The Queen of Hearts symbolizes Agnes Matzerath, beloved by both men as well as her son Oskar. The Seven of Spades, an unlucky card, comes to symbolize Jan Bronski, who is holding the card when he is executed.

The Finger

According to Oskar's account, he finds a mysterious severed ring finger while walking along the Rhine with a borrowed rottweiler named Lux. The woman's finger still wears an aquamarine ring. Oskar never considers going to the police with the grisly discovery. Instead, he buys his friend Vittlar's silence with the ring. Oskar preserves the finger in a jar of alcohol in his room, and worships it. This behavior is inexplicable until it is revealed that the finger belongs to Oskar's beloved Sister Dorothea, something Oskar could not have known unless he killed her.

The Ring

When Oskar discovers a woman's severed finger near the river, it is wearing an aquamarine ring. Confronted by Vittlar, Oskar hands over the ring to ensure the man's silence.

The Polish Post Office

Jan Bronski chooses to work in the post office in Danzig's Polish-controlled sector, against Matzerath's advice. When German soldiers attack the post office, the government employees defend it, expecting support from French ships to arrive quickly. The ships never arrive and all the survivors are taken into custody and later executed. After the war, these men are admired as heroes.



Danzig

As a citizen of Danzig with a German father and Polish mother, Oskar offers a unique perspective on World War II. Danzig, the sixth largest Polish city, is an important seaport that connects to most of Poland by rivers. It has long been a center of shipbuilding. After World War I, Danzig became a free city controlled by the U.N.'s predecessor, the League of Nations. Most citizens of Danzig were German, and in 1933, they elected a Nazi government.

West Germany

After World War II, German citizens were expelled from Poland, including Danzig. Along with Maria and Kurt, Oskar flees to the territories that later become West Germany.

Normandy

Oskar's travels with a troupe of midget entertainers takes him to the French seashore at Normandy the day before the famous allied invasion that led to Germany's defeat.

The Asylum

Oskar writes his autobiography from his crib-like bed in an insane asylum, where he has been confined for the murder of Sister Dorothea.

Eels

Walking along the beach on a family outing, Oskar's mother Agnes is nauseated when a man pulls dozens of writhing eels from a dead horse's head. Oblivious to his wife's discomfort, Matzerath buys several eels and cooks them for the family. Agnes begins to crave fish and eels three times a day, and soon dies.

Social Sensitivity

Despite Grass's assertions that his novels have no specific meanings, it is obvious that his social concerns and themes are inextricably interwoven in all of his works. The Tin Drum covers the period from the 1920s through the 1950s and ranges from Danzig to Germany and France. Oskar Matzerath's odyssey through the nightmare of Nazism has been interpreted as a parable for the German experience, but it should not be seen as a precise allegory. As do many Postmodern stylists, Grass insists that there are no "meanings" in his works, that he is interested in language and style, not extraneous abstractions. He has said, "So many of them [critics] look for symbols and allegories and deeper meanings, but sometimes I write of potato peels and mean potato peels."

His denials to the contrary, all his work is rich with archetypal overtones, which are simultaneously universal and specific to the German people.

Although readers certainly would not accept the events in *The Tin Drum* on a literal level, they have the resonance of mythology. Oskar has been compared to Apollo, for example, in that the sound of his drumming or his voice wreaks vengeance from afar. Incredibly, he traces his descent from a man hiding in a potato field under a woman's large skirts. Grass converts an historic period, still within the vivid memory of many people, into a period of legend. Supernatural feats occur.

Complex interconnections are drawn between people and events that belie the frayed fabric of common reality.

One sees similar thematic qualities in the great novels of Herman Melville, whom Grass acknowledges as an influence. Against the verifiable reality of whaling in *Moby Dick* (1851), a cosmic, archetypal game is played out. Magic mingles with realistic detail, creating a world far more evocative than a straightforward tale of whaling and obsession. In *The Tin Drum*, numerous hints of a larger meaning are sprinkled through the novel, although they are never allowed to form a simple crystal.

Mystery is maintained in both novels and thereby each is enriched, yielding up varied meanings. The "power of blackness" that Melville sought is manifest also in Grass: His fictional world, apparently so clear, becomes more perplexing as one examines it. For example, *The Tin Drum* may be the fantasy of an unreliable, perhaps insane, narrator as in so many modern novels, or Oskar may be a Christ-child figure in a world gone mad. He simultaneously seems both, a strange combination of opposites. There are no easy answers in *The Tin Drum*, which is why it is one of those rare great novels that may be mined many times for its themes of guilt, national identity, and the artist's role, yet never become exhausted.

Techniques

Although Grass is renowned for his linguistic playfulness and his careful avoidance of simplicities of theme, W. Gordon Cunliffe points out that Grass uses all the skills of a Realistic author.

He can re-create the behavior of shopkeepers, peasants, policemen, and waiters. His sensitivity to dialects is extraordinary. His details make skat players, gypsies, party officials, and schoolmasters come vividly to life, even when they are the subject of satire or direct ridicule. Much of this derives from his specific interest in the locale of Danzig. Grass is thereby part of the tradition of modern authors like James Joyce, William Faulkner, and Cesare Pavese, whose works are intimately related to a particular place. He often uses the actual names of shops and people from Danzig. Much of the vividness of *The Tin Drum* derives from its careful, sometimes shocking, observations of such things as an eel-infested horse's head in the sea, a potato dumpling, or the inside of a toy shop. They create a solid background upon which the archetypal, supernatural elements can be played out.



Themes

Art versus War

The Tin Drum discusses World War II primarily by contrasting it with Art in Oskar's life. An underlying theme of the novel is that Art has the power to defeat war in human society. Oskar escapes fighting in the war by his devotion to music. He even manages to disrupt Nazi rallies by drumming waltzes and jazz tunes that set the audience dancing. Despite this power, Oskar never makes a concerted effort to prevent the war, although the reader is left with the lingering impression that such an effort, by many artists, would have been successful. In fact, later in the war, Oskar and other artists support the war effort by entertaining the German troops. This is a professional decision, rather than an ideological one for Oskar, but seems to imply that the war could not have existed without the collaboration of many people, artists included.

Grass's view of Art is very different from that of the average 21st century American reader. Today, Art is regarded as the honorable pursuit of Truth and Beauty. Artists are thought to exist on a separate, ethereal plane outside of the everyday concerns of war, jealousy and hate. In Grass's world, however, art is a selfish, juvenile pursuit that precludes adult responsibility. In embracing the artistic life, Oskar rejects the middle-class work ethic. In many ways, Oskar represents the dangerous and illegal element of art typified by "Gangsta" rappers in modern culture. By repeatedly emphasizing Oskar's kinship with Satan, Grass suggests that art is inherently evil, or at least carries the potential for evil. Oskar often uses his gifts to help steal or to help the Dusters, a gang of young hoodlums, to break the law. Oskar's art represents a rejection of sobriety, and a startling lack of purpose.

Oskar symbolizes the artist as a grotesque sideshow freak, rather than a uniquely talented, divinely inspired genius. The author seems to suggest that Art is incompatible with maturity and adulthood. The artist is a stunted, childish, selfish individual capable of contributing little to society. As misshapen and ugly as this portrait is, it is more attractive than the war being waged by ordinary, colorless citizens all around Oskar. One interpretation of the novel is that it is the disjointed, delusional ramblings of a mad man. Another is that insanity may be the only rational response to war.

Magical Realism

Throughout the novel, Grass uses elements of magical realism to illustrate the mystical yet improbable quality of life during wartime. Elements of magical realism, treating the mystical or supernatural world as a routine part of everyday existence, are present in the novel from the beginning. In the first chapter, Oskar's grandfather hides under the skirts of Anna, a young peasant woman. The theme of hiding under his Kashubian grandmother's skirts is repeated many times throughout the narrative. It becomes



Oskar's preferred way to deal with crisis. This symbolizes a return to an apolitical world, as well as the return to the eternal female source of life.

Many of the elements of magical realism in the novel are related to Art. Oskar's very ability to communicate through his drum is magical. Oskar's drum gives him accurate accounts of events that transpired far beyond the protagonist's reach. Through the drum, Oskar can learn of events he had no access to. Oskar's second gift, the ability to shatter glass with a piercing scream that can be either nerve-racking or inaudible, is similarly magical. To Oskar, this gift seems connected to his gift for drumming. When Oskar finally gives up his drum, throwing it into his father's grave, he also loses his magical voice, and the power it provides.

Two notable post-war incidents of magical realism seem to hint at forgiveness. In the first, Oskar and Lanske, the artistic soldier, return to the concrete pillbox fortifications at Normandy. There, they are joined by the spirits of a group of innocent nuns that Lanske gunned down, on orders from his superiors. The nuns are far from angry, and seem carefree and even amorous. The painter is so inspired that he creates an incredibly successful series of portraits with titles such as *Nun Drowning*.

The second example of post-war magical realism occurs when Victor is discovered. Victor was one of the defenders of the Polish Post Office, alternately seen as hero and coward, patriot and traitor. Victor symbolizes every soldier in the novel. The transient nature of political alliances and social acceptance is illustrated through Victor's trials. After the war, Victor's execution seems imminent, although he is now considered a patriot. His death is only prevented by the magical appearance of the ancient and dashing Polish cavalry, which bears him back to Poland.

Sex

Sexuality is a key component of *The Tin Drum*. Yet, it is often a perverse type of sexuality involving manipulation, incest, adultery, or pedophilia. It is unclear if this is a commentary on the era, a remnant of Victorian ethics, or simply a reflection of Grass's worldview. The novel contains many alliances and liaisons, but is devoid of a single example of mutual attraction between unattached equals. Initially, Joseph Wranka hides under a Kashubian stranger's skirts, impregnating her in the process. Oskar also hides under these accommodating skirts as an infant, and longs for the security of the enfolding fabric throughout his life. This longing takes on incestuous overtones when a young adult Oskar peers up his grandmother's "opening" and describes the visions of ancient Poles he sees inside her womb.

A central feature of Oskar's life is the unique three-sided relationship between Matzerath, Oskar's mother Agnes, and her cousin Jan Bronski. The trio meet frequently to play their favorite card game. The game of skat is used to symbolize this unique affair, in which each person cooperates with the others but also competes against them. Jan and Agnes have weekly trysts at a hotel. They engage in sexual play including intercourse in Oskar's presence, whenever Matzerath is away. Improbably, Matzerath



seems fully aware of the situation and, while he loves Agnes and is sexually active with her, prizes Bronski's companionship enough to share his wife with few objections. Oskar, the instantly cognizant infant, questioned his own paternity from birth, based on this relationship.

Oskar's own exploits include a stealthy and possibly illusory physical relationship with Maria. He conducts a lengthy and intimate exploration of the body of the corpulent, bed-ridden, slatternly, stinking and passive Lina Greff with her husband's knowledge and tacit consent. Greff himself is apparently a pedophile, preying on members of his Boy Scout troop. He commits suicide when his crimes are discovered. Oskar's infatuation with a series of nurses, icons of ideal femininity, results in the ill-fated obsession with Sister Dorothea.



Style

Point of View

The novel is told from Oskar Matzerath's point of view, although Oskar believes he has access to events outside his direct experience, through his drum. Oskar is both the protagonist of the novel and an extremely unreliable narrator. Oskar asserts that he willfully decided to stop growing on his third birthday in order to avoid the adult responsibilities of operating the family business. He insists that he had a carnal affair with Maria during their first summer together, and that Kurt is his biological son. Oskar insists that he decide to grow again after his father's funeral.

The point of view shifts away from Oskar briefly, and tellingly, twice. First, Oskar's joint pain causes him to dictate his autobiography to his male nurse, Bruno. Then, during the narration of Oskar's arrest, the point of view shifts briefly to Oskar's friend and accuser Vittlar. From these two sources and Oskar himself, the reader learns that others do not agree with Oskar's interpretation. Bruno, Vittlar and even Maria herself vociferously deny any carnal relations between Maria and Oskar. They uniformly refer to Maria as Oskar's stepmother, and Kurt as Oskar's half-brother. Bruno and the medical authorities believe Oskar's dwarfism has physical roots. It was caused by a fall down the stairs on his third birthday, and reversed by a blow to the head at his father's funeral. Bruno clearly views Oskar as delusional, and raises the question whether everything Oskar relates may be fictitious, or the fevered dream of someone who has been certified insane.

Oskar denies ever meeting Sister Dorothea in person, although the reader knows otherwise. He also denies killing the nurse, which the evidence seems to contradict. Sister Dorothea collapses during the pair's only meeting, and disappears forever immediately afterwards. Oskar seems aware in Chapter 44 that the nurse is dead, although he has not yet discovered the finger. In Oskar's account, he never considered turning the severed finger in to the police. If Oskar did not murder Sister Dorothea, the coincidence of his finding her finger is wildly improbable and his religious adoration of the preserved finger inexplicable.

Oskar's repeated assertions to the authorities, at both his trials, that he is Jesus Christ seem to be evidence of a messiah complex. Yet, Oskar's private thoughts are almost without reference to himself as a divine being. Instead, Oskar's assertion seems to be that he is a Christ-like figure with supernatural gifts and the power to influence world events. Regardless of the rationale, these assertions do nothing to bolster Oskar's contention that he is entire sane, and confined to an asylum only because he is unusually short.



Setting

The novel is set primarily in Poland in the period from the early 1900s to the years after World War II. Oskar's childhood and young adulthood are spent in Danzig, a free city in Poland governed by German citizens. As a German citizen of Polish extraction, Oskar is uniquely positioned to watch the events of World War II unfold, including the German occupation of Poland. Matzerath takes the young Oskar to watch the destruction of Jewish shops and synagogues on Krystal Nacht, much as one might watch fireworks. Oskar's conflicted loyalties, never addressed directly, are symbolized by the fact that he considers he has two fathers, the German Matzerath and the Polish Jan Bronski. In fact, none of the characters in the novel seems to feel passionate about the Nazi cause. The novel derives much of its power from the fact that each character is simply an ordinary, mundane person coping with the business of living as well as they can.

During the war, Oskar travels throughout Europe including France and Belgium entertaining German troops. This device allows him to be at the beach at Normandy the day before the Allied invasion. Oskar quickly returns to Danzig for Kurt's momentous third birthday, although his friend and lover Raithwaitha is killed first.

After the war, Matzerath is dead and a Jewish concentration camp survivor displaces the family. Maria moves the trio to Dusseldorf in West Germany, where she and Kurt soon develop a thriving black market trade. Oskar continues to live in Dusseldorf for the remainder of the novel, although he travels widely in Europe on concert tours.

Language and Meaning

The Tin Drum was written in German. In the translation by Ralph Manheim, the language is complex, at times convoluted and slightly remote. Many sentences are passive, further distancing the reader from the events in the novel. Oskar often refers to himself in the third person. It is not unusual for complex paragraphs to extend over several pages without a break. Descriptions of people and places are largely absent from the novel. Oskar's account focuses on his actions, revealing his thoughts indirectly. His emotions are rarely discussed. Oskar employs place names, particularly for districts of Danzig, as if every reader is a native of that city.

The war features only obliquely in Oskar's account of his life. He relates events he was present for, such as the defense of the Polish Post Office and Krystal Nacht, but chapters covering years are without any reference to the ongoing war. The only direct reference to attitudes regarding the war occurs in Chapter 30, when Oskar says only when the Russians actually invaded Danzig did Matzerath begin to suspect that the Nazi's would not win the war. Despite repeated shelling, the war seems to be a highly theoretical, emotionless phenomenon taking place on a distant planet, rather than a constant unpleasant fact.



Structure

The Tin Drum is Oskar's autobiography, framed within his current experiences in an asylum for the insane. The story is episodic, relating a jumble of discrete events that are thematically unrelated. Just as we often do not understand the import of events in our own lives, Oskar fails to contemplate the significance of his experiences. One of the author's most potent commentaries on the German war experience may be to refuse to try to extract greater meaning or ultimate truth from the episodes. The same weight is given to every incident, from the decoration of the Duster's cellar to the events of Krystal Nacht. Some events widely considered pivotal to the experience of World War II are never addressed. For example, Oskar never reveals when he became aware of the existence of concentration camps, their purpose, or his feelings about them. The issue is addressed only obliquely, through Fajngold, the Jewish collaborator and concentration camp survivor who is rewarded after the war with the Matzerath's shop and apartment.

The 46 named chapters each deal with a specific incident in Oskar's life. Some chapters combine to relate cohesive anecdotes; many do not. Book One, containing 16 chapters, from *The Wide Skirt* to *Faith, Hope, Love*, relate Oskar's antecedents and childhood in Danzig. This book covers the period from the early 1900s to just before the war, including the death of Agnes, Oskar's mother. Very early in the book, Oskar decides to permanently remain three years old.

Book Two comprises 18 chapters, from *Scrap Metal* to *Growth in a Freight Car*. This book includes the entirety of World War II in Germany, from the invasion of Poland to the establishment of West Germany. Oskar's real or imagined affairs with Maria and Mrs. Greff, Greff's suicide and Matzerath's death are covered. At the close of this book, Oskar decides to abandon his drum and begin growing again.

The third book contains 12 chapters relating events after the war in West Germany, in what may be the least relevant section. It covers the chapters from *Firestones and Tombstones* to *Thirty*. Oskar's exploits as a stone carver inscribing headstones, an artist's model and a jazz musician are described. In this section, Oskar develops an obsession with Sister Dorothea and preserves her severed finger as an object of worship in a jar of alcohol.



Quotes

"'It's a boy,' said Mr. Matzerath, who presumed himself to be my father. 'He will take over the store when he grows up. At last we know why we've been working our fingers to the bone.'" Chapter 3, pg. 47

"Mama thought less about the store than about outfitting her son: 'Oh, well, I knew it would be a boy even if I did say once in a while that it was going to be a girl.' Thus at an early age I made the acquaintance of feminine logic. The next words were: 'When little Oskar is three, he will have a toy drum.'" Chapter 3, pg. 47

"Grownups have it in them to be creative, and sometimes, with the help of ambition, hard work, and a bit of luck they actually are, but being grownups, they have no sooner created some epoch-making invention than they become a slave to it." Chapter 5, pg. 67

"The trap door! You left it open, didn't you? You were in the kitchen and before that you'd been down in the cellar, hadn't you? You brought up a can of mixed fruit for dessert, didn't you? You left the cellar door open, didn't you?" Chapter 7, pg. 85

"Lobsack had wit. He derived all his wit from his hump, which he called by its name; the crowd always likes that. Before the Communists would be allowed to take over he would lose his hump. It was easy to see that he was not going to lose his hump, that his hump was there to stay. It followed that the hump was right and with it the Party - whence it can be inferred that a hump is an ideal basis for an idea." Chapter 8, pg. 117

"I must admit that the floors of Catholic churches, the smell of a Catholic church, in fact everything about Catholicism still fascinates me in some inexplicable way, just as redheaded girls fascinate me though I should like to change the color of their hair, and that Catholicism never ceases to inspire me with blasphemies which make it perfectly clear that I was irrevocably though to no good purpose baptized a Catholic." Chapter 11, pg. 137

"Then with a sign and a sidelong glance at Signora Roswitha: 'it is not easy for people our size to get through life. To remain human without external growth, what a task, what a vocation!'" Chapter 14, pg. 171

"'I would have won it Agnes. It was a sure thing.' So he lamented to me in my poor mama's stead, and I - his son - threw myself into the role, yes, he was right, I said, I swore that he would have won, that to all intents and purposes he actually had won, that he simply must believe what his Agnes was telling him." Chapter 19, pg. 242

"We dwarfs and fools have no business dancing on concrete made for giants. If only we had stayed under the rostrums where no one suspected our presence!" Chapter 27, pg. 345



"Oskar can't deny it: I had a monstrous appetite in those days: it was thanks to Kurt and his source, which brought in more than the honey, that Oskar was able to regain his strength after the meager hospital fare." Chapter 35, pg. 435

"Despite the formality and coldness bordering on arrogance of these lines, I had no great difficulty in seeing through Dr. E. Werner's epistolary style and recognizing the note for what it was, a passionate love letter." Chapter 40, pg. 500

"Sister Dorothea seemed to have mistaken me for somebody, for she began to tremble and whispered: 'Oh, heavens, it's the Devil!'" Chapter 41, pg. 514

"The records sold like hotcakes. Oskar was rich. Did that make me give up my miserable sometime bathroom in the Zeidler flat? No. Why not? Because of my friend Klepp and also because Dorothea had once lived and breathed. What did Oskar do with all his money? He made Maria, his Maria, a proposition." Chapter 44, pg. 557

Adaptations

A West German film production of *Cat and Mouse* was released in 1969, starring Lars and Peter Brandt, the sons of ex-chancellor Willy Brandt, for whom Grass tirelessly campaigned in the elections of 1965 and 1969. Directed by Hansjurgen Pohland, the film caused much outrage because of a masturbation scene, and was not notably successful. The West German/ French co-production of *The Tin Drum* in 1979, however, was a tremendous success. Director Volker Schlöndorff stuck closely to the novel and chose the perfect Oskar in David Bennent. The film also starred Angela Winkler, Mario Adorf, and Daniel Obrychski, and, among other awards, won an Academy Award for Best Foreign Language film.



Topics for Discussion

Is Oskar Matzerath a reliable narrator? Why or why not?

Oskar insists that he had sex with his stepmother Maria, and is actually the father of his half-brother Kurt. This allegation is denied by Maria, and the male nurse Bruno. Do you believe Oskar's version of events?

Oskar has a talent for drumming and a magical ability to shatter glass with his voice. How does he use these talents?

What are some of the crimes Oskar commits, or assists in committing?

Do you believe Oskar killed Sister Dorothea? Why, or why not?

If Oskar didn't kill Sister Dorothea, why does he worship the severed finger in the jar?

Gunter Grass presents a view of artists as grotesque, physically and spiritually stunted people who act immaturely, are immoral and avoid responsibility. Do you agree? Why or why not?

What is the relationship between Matzerath, his wife Agnes and Jan Bronski?

How does Oskar's mother, Agnes Matzerath, die?

Throughout most of his life, Oskar longs to imitate his grandfather in finding shelter under his grandmother Anna's voluminous skirts. Why?

Literary Precedents

Besides the previously mentioned affinities of the works of Melville, Joyce, Faulkner, and Pavese, critics have also pointed to the picaresque *Simplicissimus* (1669) by Johann Jakob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen. One of the most interesting comparisons, however, has been drawn with Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759-1767). Grass admits admiring the great eighteenth-century novel and critics have pointed out several influences. First, much of *The Tin Drum*, despite the many real horrors it depicts, consists of humor. Many scenes are irreverent or silly or filled with slapstick. With the detachment and narrative distance of *Tristram Shandy*, Oskar watches the world around him go through its madness, and with the cold eye of a child, reveals it for all its ludicrousness. Like Sterne, Grass has a keen eye for absurdity, even in the midst of the ideas and events which most people take with great seriousness. Secondly, a great deal of the humor is linguistic. Puns, as well as unbelievable and inexplicable metaphors, are crucial parts of Grass's style.

Like Sterne, he is interested in invention for its own sake, playing of word games, and imitating dialects. When asked about the peculiar form of his prenatal autobiography, *Tristram Shandy* says, "Ask my pen; it governs me; I govern not it." Grass, who denies the necessity of thematic abstractions to fiction, is arguing a similar view. The novel creates itself in its most suitable form. If the author attempts to force it to play philosophical parlor games, the integrity of the work is destroyed.

Neither Uncle Toby nor Colonel Tim in Sterne's novel is the definitive symbol.

Likewise, Oskar is not, and must not be, reduced to a single symbol.

Related Titles

Grass followed *The Tin Drum with Cat and Mouse* (1963; *Katz und Maws*, 1961), and *Dog Years* (1965; *Hundejahre*, 1963), and the three have been dubbed the "Danzig Trilogy," because they share many elements. *Cat and Mouse* features a deformed character, like Oskar, from *Danzig*. Joachim Mahlke's deformity is an extraordinarily large Adam's apple, and he is desperate for acceptance by his peers. His solution is to acquire an Iron Cross which will hide his bulging throat. Although a successful athlete, he does not achieve acceptance and comes to a mysterious end. As the "mouse," Mahlke has been called the most admirable person in Grass's fiction and the entire work a moral parable. Critics, however, have been somewhat bewildered by this novel. *The Tin Drum* was a long, complex novel. By comparison, *Cat and Mouse* seems tiny and obvious in its meanings. Limiting itself to the war years in Danzig is seen by some as an overcoming of the weakest parts of *The Tin Drum*, those episodes that take place outside Danzig. Others think the shortness a liability as it caused the allegorical structure to be too prominent.



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