

A Void Study Guide

A Void by Georges Perec

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Plot Summary

Georges Perec's novel, *A Void*, was first published in French in 1969, under the title *La Disparition*, which could be literally translated as "the disappearance." An Introduction warns that starvation haunts France, people are rioting in the streets, and the political leadership has been eliminated, but once the story proper begins, no such problems are again mentioned. Instead, the mental troubles of a man named Anton Vowl are explored. He sees mysterious patterns in objects, which he thinks hold clues to something vital that is missing from everyday life. His inability to identify this missing element is driving him to distraction. Eventually, Anton Vowl himself vanishes. Shortly before his disappearance, several of his friends received a postcard that mentioned a zoo in Paris, where three of these friends now go independently and encounter one another. They resolve to join forces in a search for Vowl. They also enlist the aid of a policeman named Ottaviani, who learns from his boss, Swan, that the police suspect Vowl was kidnapped. Not long after this, two of Vowl's friends, Conson and Olga, go to the home of the third person, Abbou, but shortly after their arrival, they hear a scuffle and find Abbou dead from a stabbing. At Abbou's funeral, Conson and Olga encounter a man named Savorgnan who also knew Vowl and received a postcard from him. Savorgnan and Conson go to a mansion in Azincourt, where they meet Olga and the mansion's owner, Clifford. These people exchange information about Vowl and voluminous materials written by him, in an attempt to unravel the mystery of his disappearance. Also at the mansion is Clifford's maid, Squaw, who has witnessed and shares many details that are useful to the investigators.

At the mansion, the group becomes convinced that clues to the mystery are contained in Vowl's various writings, but nobody can decipher the clues. Something vital is missing, but no one can identify it. When Clifford reads a particular poem, he suddenly drops dead. Conson calls the policeman, Ottaviani, who agrees to rush to the scene. While they await Ottaviani's arrival, Squaw tells the story behind the last word Clifford uttered before dying, which was "Zahir." It refers to the symbol of a family curse. Eventually, through sharing information based on investigations and travels by people in the group, it becomes clear that an old curse from a Turkish family steeped in black magic was transferred to Savorgnan's family. What's more, Savorgnan's family has a long tradition of killing all but the first-born sons of each father in order to avoid depleting the family fortune by dividing it among multiple inheritors. Astonishingly, it turns out that each member of the group, including Vowl, is related, although none of them was aware of it initially. Each member is subject to the family curse. As the mystery unravels, each of them dies.

Even the policeman, Ottaviani, who arrives with his boss, Swan, turns out to be a family member. Finally, only Swan, Ottaviani, Squaw, and Savorgnan remain alive at the mansion. Swan makes Ottaviani read a manuscript, which causes Ottaviani to drop dead. It becomes clear that the curse can be activated through reading manuscripts that are devoid of the letter "e," which is the missing element that nobody could identify. It also is now evident that Swann has been the agent of the murders, working for

members of the accursed family. Swan then kills Savorgnan, gives a soliloquy and the novel ends.



Introduction and Part I, Chapters 1 and 2

Introduction and Part I, Chapters 1 and 2 Summary

A Void, by Georges Perec, is an experimental novel that derives from the author's decision to write a full-length novel without once using the letter "e." It also works on a literal level as a parody of a conventional murder mystery, in which many murders are committed and the weapon sometimes is this very lack of the letter. An Introduction titled, "In which, as you will soon find out, Damnation has its origin," begins with the news that the country is at risk of widespread starvation. People do not seem certain that this true, but as they begin to worry, fights erupt in the streets, storerooms of food are ransacked, and leaders of business and politics are vilified. Lawyers are hung, and a succession of attempts is made to assume control of the government, but each would-be leader is assassinated and quickly replaced by another. Chaos reigns, and the author warns that everyone must be on guard.

Part I is titled "Anton Vowl." In Chapter 1, titled, "Which at first calls to mind a probably familiar story of a drunk man waking up with his brain in a whirl," a man named Anton Vowl cannot get to sleep. Just after midnight, he paces restlessly about his apartment, drinks milk, smokes a cigar, listens to music, and looks at the patterns in his rug. He thinks he can see combinations of human and animal figures in the rug. Anton often becomes fascinated by such illusions, and he spends the next four days trying to decipher the figures he detects in the rug. He takes sleeping potions but still cannot sleep for four nights, which threatens his sanity and creates a choking sensation. A kindly neighbor takes him to the hospital, where a doctor examines and X-rays him, and says he has very high blood pressure, caused by a sinus blockage. The only remedy is surgery. Vowl stays in the hospital for six days. The operation eliminates his pain, but his insomnia continues.

Chapter 2 is titled, "In which luck, God's alias and alibi, plays a callous trick on a suitor cast away on an island." At home again, Vowl continues trying to decipher the visions he has seen in the rug. He begins to hallucinate, seeing himself in a giant hallway, on one side of which 25 books are shelved, with one missing, the book that should be labeled "5." Vowl does not know what the books contain, and cannot reach them. He reads a series of cryptic headlines in his newspaper, and sees visions of people advertising sexual potency potions and predicting the mass death of birds. He imagines a military man ordering a drink called a port-flip in a bar, and then Vowl worries that a Sphinx might attack him. For months, such hallucinations torture him. He sees insects and, still unable to sleep, imagines himself pinioned by claws, struggling to breathe. He loses weight, and believes he is dying. He sees a crow in his room, and then many other types of animals. He thinks of a book he once read, about a man called Ishmail on a deserted island, who is sick for six days with malaria but recovers enough to build a hut of sticks. After a month, Ishmail explores the island and finds vacant buildings with beautiful views. He takes tools and implements, and begins living in a nearby shack in the woods. After three months, a yacht arrives. On board are six people. Ishmail



develops a crush on a woman named Faustina, but she ignores him, and he begins to hallucinate. The yacht and people disappear and then reappear, and whether they exist or are imaginary becomes unclear to Ishmail. Faustina and the others look real to him, but their world is flat and rock-hard, and he feels alienated from both worlds. He begins to believe he is living in a movie. Anton Vowl wonders how his situation is connected to that of Ishmail in the book. He thinks that the patterns he sees in the rug look normal, but something critical is missing that he cannot identify.

Introduction and Part I, Chapters 1 and 2 Analysis

The novel's Introduction, depicting France in the midst of starvation and rioting in the streets, is the only mention in the book of such conditions. Clearly, this means the situation is symbolic. France may be starving, but the lack of sustenance is not food. Something is missing in society, and its absence is capable of creating chaos or damnation, as the Introduction's title puts it. As the story continues, it becomes apparent that the lootings and assassinations of leaders are not actual, but represent a loss of discipline and direction in the art of writing that this book attempts to help correct. Anton Vowl's insomnia in Chapter 1 and the indecipherable but somehow important patterns he detects in his rug are likewise symbolic of the intensity of concern Vowl has about this mysterious situation, which is so serious that it drives him to distraction and illness. No medicine or operation can cure him.

In Chapter 2, the visions that he sees include an important clue to the problem in the 26 books, one of which, number five, is missing. His hallucinations morph into life-threatening situations, and then in a dream, he becomes Ishmail, a slight variation on Ishmael, the first-born but illegitimate son of Abraham, and also the name of the narrator of Hermann Melville's novel *Moby-Dick*, about the hunting of a great white whale. His hallucination of being on the island, and finding that neither it nor the real world seems real to him, as if he were in a film, indicates his dissociation from reality, which appears to be caused by something critical that is missing from daily life and experience. His inability to figure out exactly what is missing is driving him crazy.



Style

Point of View

Description

Setting

Description

Language and Meaning

Description

Structure

Description