The Viceroy of Ouidah Study Guide

The Viceroy of Ouidah by Bruce Chatwin

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Plot Summary

Bruce Chatwin originally intended The Viceroy of Ouidah to be a biography of a Brazilian who became a slave trader in Africa during the nineteenth century. However, afterr his on-site research was disrupted by a coup attempt, he changed the names of the principal figures in the book and used his imagination to fill in the factual gaps. Chatwin, who died of AIDS in 1989, was an adventurous travel writer and novelist. He was known to play fast-and-loose with facts and although this book is sometimes identified as non-fiction, it is a historical novel that depicts the slave trade out of the West African kingdom of Dahomey, now known as Benin, which lies between Togo and Nigeria. The story revolves around a Brazilian whose real name was Francisco Felix de Souza, changed in the book to Francisco Manoel da Silva. It begins in the Dohomean port city of Ouidah, with a family commemoration of Da Silva's death, which had occurred 117 years earlier. Many family members are introduced in rapid succession because Da Silva had fathered sixty-three sons and an unknown number of daughters by the women in his harem or seraglio. He had been befriended by the King of Dahomey, to whom he supplied guns, rum, and finery through Da Silva's shipping trade with England. In turn, Da Silva was made Viceroy of Ouidah, a position that included the sexual favors of the seraglio.

The story covers the entire life of Da Silva, but emphasizes the period from his arrival in Dahomey from Brazil in 1812 at age twenty-seven to his death in Ouidah in 1857. It also deals with the lives of several people around Da Silva, especially his youngest daughter, Eugenia da Silva, who was born to a white woman and lived to a very old age. Other key figures in the book include Taparica the Tambour, who was Da Silva's right-hand man, Da Silva's African wife, Jijibou, and his Brazilian business partner, Joaquim Cutinho. When Da Silva, who came from a poor background, was sent to Dahomey by Cutinho and other rich business associates, they secretly believed that he soon will be killed by the dangerous king. Instead, the king and he become friends and Da Silva's fortune was made. He proved to be an efficient and cold-hearted slave trader, driven by a lust for riches, who even orchestrated slave-taking wars for the king. Da Silva maintained a hope and expectation of returning to Brazil someday but as the years passed and the slave trade became a public embarrassment abroad, his employers gave him no opportunity to leave Dahomey. In Da Silva's old age, after the king had taken everything from him, Da Silva even failed to sneak aboard a trading vessel in disguise. This dark book is full of mysterious rituals, disease, violence, greed, and suffering. Written with compact eloquence and a powerful sense of place, it has a mesmerizing visual style and was adapted as a film titled Cobra Verde by the noted German director, Werner Herzog.

Preface and Chapter One

Preface and Chapter One Summary

The Viceroy of Ouidah, by Bruce Chatwin, is the story of a nineteenth century Brazilian slave trader in Africa named Francisco Manoel da Silva. It is a frightening tale of ambition, violence, and superstition in an eerie shipping port of West Africa. The Preface, written in first person, tells how Chatwin first goes to the Kingdom of Dahomey in 1971, and then returns six years later, by which time a new president has changed the country's name to the Republic of Benin. Chatwin has returned to research the life of De Souza, work which goes well until a coup attempt occurs, during which he is mistaken for a mercenary and jailed for two days. When he is set free, he leaves Benin and never returns, but travels on to research De Souza's earlier life in Brazil. Chapter One of the book begins in 1974, when descendants of De Souza, who are renamed Da Silva by Chatwin, meet for their annual commemoration of his death 117 years ago. People arrive from Ghana, Togo, Nigeria, and the Ivory Coast, and a long procession of characters is introduced, only a few of whom reappear later in the book. All these people, who call Da Silva "Dom Francisco," are colorfully sketched in a manner similar to that of the author's carefully selected details, which create a vivid picture of Ouidah. The services include a requiem mass at the decaying Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, now festooned with the red stars and scarlet drums of a Marxist-Leninist regime. Many people wear their national costumes, complete with pith-helmets.

The older Da Silvas rue the loss of the slave trade days, when their family was rich, famous, and the mulatto offspring of Da Silva thought of themselves as white. After the service, the family goes to the nearby Portugese Fort, where "fetish" priests, who conduct sacrifices to various gods in West Africa, are slaughtering a fowl to the Market God, and where dinner is served to people from booths by lamplight. The mourners lay a wreath for Dom Francisco. The story shifts to the mud-walled compound of the Da Silva ancestral home, called the Simbodji, where women have prepared food for a week prior to the commemoration day. The mansion has been thoroughly cleaned, including the portraits of Dom Francisco's successors as family head, and his own bedroom and marble tomb. Two days before the ceremony, young Lieutenant-Colonel Zossoungbo Patrice of the national police arrives, shouting that such family festivals are fetishistic practices of the colonial period, but he accepts a modest cash payment and goes away, commanding only that the group listen to the President's speech on the radio. The feast is huge: pigs' heads, guinea fowl and seri-flowers, fried coxcombs, fish, beans, nuts and salads, mostly Brazilian dishes. Food is set out at Dom Francisco's bedroom window, so the "Father" can eat first. Meanwhile, a procession with drummers calls the Ancestor back to Earth, and a goat is sacrificed. During dinner, the radio is turned on, and the President denounces capitalism, but no one pays attention. Mostly, they talk about the loss of Dom Francisco's fortune, and whether he had stashed any of it in a bank in Brazil or Switzerland, and the fate of his fleet, which they think was either sunk by the British or confiscated by Brazil. This talk of a fortune made and lost intermingles with the President's voice, loudly praising Marxist-Leninism.

Preface and Chapter One Analysis

In the Preface, Bruce Chatwin immediately foreshadows the darkness and mystery of his tale by summarizing the Kingdom of Dahomey in the nineteenth century, calling it a "Black Sparta" whose fiercest regiments were female, and whose only income was from the sale of its weaker neighbors. Chatwin's research there turns bad when he is mistaken for a mercenary and jailed for two days, which he declares he would prefer to forget. He has had time to compile a number of vivid impressions, but has to leave before he gets enough first-hand research from descendants of his principal character, so he explains that he decided to change names and make the book a work of the imagination. In Chapter One, he quickly sets a strange and compelling scene at an annual family commemoration of the slave trader Dom Francisco's death 117 years earlier. The characters he sketches comprise a morose, squabbling, lost group who pine for the glory days when their family traded slaves. They have no sense of shame or mental conflict about the horrors their ancestors inflicted upon others, nor do they display any anger toward the imperialistic Europeans and South Americans who exploited their country. Chatwin shows that their religious beliefs blend voodoo or "fetishism" with Catholicism, and that they created a mythology of greatness around their slave- trading ancestor. The President's radio speech shows that the family members have no interest in the revolutionary politics of their own time, as they prefer to dream of a bygone, golden era, hungrily hoping that some of Dom Francisco's fortune might still be found in a bank somewhere. The whole picture, sad and disturbing, makes one wonder what Dom Francisco was really like.

Chapter Two

Chapter Two Summary

During the commemorative dinner, a woman wails from within the compound, and a girl rushes into the room, shouting that Mama Wéwé, the White One, will not eat. Mama Wéwé's real name is Mademoiselle Eugenia da Silva and she is the ancient daughter of Dom Francisco and the family's proof that their ancestor was white. Dressed in black, Mama Wéwé lies on a carved couch of jacaranda wood, looking like a breathing skeleton. She is about to die and the other Da Silvas are amazed at this prospect. More than twenty years earlier, on her hundredth birthday, she had pointed at her relatives, said, "Remember you are Brazilians!" and never spoke again. One of the Founder's four surviving grandchildren on the day of this commemorative feast once tried to get Mama Wéwé to tell what happened to Dom Francisco's fortune, but she refused to answer. The story shifts in time to ninety-eight years earlier, when Eugenia falls in love. She is a tall and beautiful virgin, with golden skin, black hair, and greenish amber eyes. One evening, when trade winds known as the harmattan are blowing, she meets an English agent on the beach named Mr. Townsend, who tells her a British merchant ship is at anchor nearby, and a professor is on board who has come to study plants and animals. That evening, Eugenia puts on a bonnet and muslin dress and goes to welcome the newcomers. When they come ashore, she is disappointed at first to see that the professor is old, but then she notices the blue-eyed, red-haired young lieutenant behind him, and her heart pounds.

He comes to dinner that night at the mansion and promises he will help her to improve her pidgin English. The next morning he comes to her with gifts and in the evening they walk to a pavilion on the beach, but he quickly becomes rough and tears her dress as she pulls away. She runs and the next morning when he comes to apologize, she falls into his arms and asks him to take her away. He says he will and immediately regrets it. He goes upcountry with Mr. Townsend and the professor to see the King of Dahomey but the lieutenant contracts malaria. When he recovers, he goes back to England, promising to send money for Eugenia's passage. Waiting, she learns to read English and to knit, but several years pass and she hears nothing of him, until Mr. Townsend finally tells her that the lieutenant married in England. Over the years, her appearance slowly changes to a hardened look, even as her circle of acquaintances shrinks to her maid, a slave boy, her father, and her living memories of the lieutenant. She befriends her father's macaw, and after it dies, transfers her affections a scabby dog, even as Dom Francisco's empire crumbles and Simbodji falls to ruins, is taken over by the Portugese, and then by the King of Dahomey. Eugenia takes in a boy named Cesário, the son of one of Dom Francisco's youngest sons, but he dies of cholera that had arrived with the crew of a ship.

Over the next years, a new king ascends to the throne, the French bombard and occupy Ouidah, Mama Wéwé's maid dies of smallpox and is replaced by another maid, whom Eugenia calls by the same name as the first one. The chapel at the Portugese Fort falls

into decay, and from it she takes an African sculpture of John the Baptist's head screwed onto a meat dish. She adds to this a Holy Ghost made from a chicken-shaped teapot and other strange items, all of which she uses to convert Dom Francisco's bedroom into a Catholic shrine. When the Bishop arrives and views it, he is horrified, which sends Eugenia into a rage that lasts for days. For the next sixty years, Mama Wéwé sits in the slowly rotting mansion, her eyes glued to her father's portable oratory or shrine from Brazil of the Last Supper. When it finally collapses, destroyed by insects, only the glass eyes stand out from the stump of Christ's head. The story shifts back to the present, when a priest gives the last rites. Mama Wéwé says something, and relatives want to ask her about paperwork concerning the lost fortune, but she is speaking in Portugese and nobody there knows the language.

Chapter Two Analysis

This chapter is devoted to the life story of Eugenia, who is important to the Da Silvas because she is white, and is therefore proof that their long-dead ancestor was white. This is meaningful to them because they long to be associated with the wealth and stature of white people, yet with each generation, the original mulatto sons and daughters of Dom Francisco intermarry with Africans to create progeny that become increasingly darker. Chatwin presents this situation without commentary, allowing the reader to determine what it means. Certainly, there is the implication that it is sad that the people are not proud enough of their African heritage to embrace it. Beyond that, the doleful fate of the white woman suggests a life that is tainted, even cursed, by its close association with the slave trader. No explanation is given for the lieutenant's immediate regret that he had promised to send for Eugenia, but his callous treatment of her indicates that he regards her as beneath himself. Eugenia's long-held hope that the lieutenant will contact her, during which time she studies English and domestic skills to prepare herself as his wife, is followed by a slow, steady collapse. Her attachments and interests contract. She stops speaking. Her world shrinks steadily, until it becomes nothing more than a decaying room, and even it falls apart. Even so, she persists in living long past the normal span, as if all that remains of her are half-crazed memory and will. Just before dying, she speaks, telling the Africans not to forget they are Brazilians. The tragic life of the White One symbolizes the sins of the father visiting their punishment upon the child.

Chapter Three

Chapter Three Summary

This chapter establishes Dom Francisco's background. He is born in the northeastern part of Brazil in 1785 and his father dies in a ranching accident when Francisco Manoel is one. He lives in a bare, three-bedroom hut with his bad-tempered mother and an Indian half-breed she quickly takes up with called Manuelzinho who kills snakes and sells their flesh for a living. Francisco's mother is content with Manuelzinho but he keeps wandering away after about a week at home.

Decades later, chained in the King of Dahomey's prison, Francisco remembers the year of the drought, when he is seven. The few animals the family had died, fires raged across the landscape, rats bit the boy as he slept and rattlesnakes came into the yard looking for food. Manuelzinho returns and digs deeply to find a trickle of brackish water, but the boy's mother soon dies. Manuelzinho takes him to a mission and leaves him. The priest there, Father Menezes Brito, is petty and cruel. He enjoys baptizing babies with his spittle. On occasion he brings Francisco into his bedroom and kisses him but no other evidence of sexual abuse is given. The boys in the village taunt and hit Francisco who soon becomes hardened by his sufferings. At age thirteen, he learns that Manuelzinho is dying at a ranch, so he goes there and Manuelzinho gives Francisco his horse, saddle, and waistcoat. This is all Francisco needs to run away from Father Brito. He drifts for seven years, doing odd jobs. He kills a man in self-defense, and is untroubled by it. One day he meets a potter's daughter in a village and they soon marry. He gets work on a ranch owned by absentee landlords named Cutinho. He is paid in cattle rather than cash, but he sells his stock and saves his money. Later, he buys and keeps a few animals. His wife becomes pregnant, but she bores him, and not long after the baby is born, he leaves.

Francisco goes back to wandering. One Lent, a priest shows him what he says is the corpse of Christ, and Francisco unexpectedly bursts into tears. His fear that he would turn into a killer leaves him, and he becomes more sociable. He goes to a town where his former employer, Colonel Octavio Cutinho, owns a factory. He meets Joaquim Cutinho, the son, and they become friends. They go to the Cutinhos plantation house at Tapuitapera, where Francisco is welcomed. He stays, and develops a thirst for possessions. He especially wants a portable oratory or shrine to the Last Supper, which is at the chapel. The slaves have a priest named Jerónimo who tells Francisco lurid tales of the Kingdom of Dahomey, which seems to be full of strange rituals and violence. Francisco is fascinated. The colonel has a stroke, and Joaquim says it is time for Francisco to leave the house. He goes to the big city of Salvador in the state of Bahia, where he lives roughly and dangerously. One day, he sees Joaquim buying slaves, and their friendship is renewed. Joaquim says the colonel has died, and he has joined a syndicate of army officers who want to sell slaves, the most valuable of whom come from the port of Ouidah in Dahomey. It's the only place north of the Equator where slaving is allowing, but the king there is crazy, Joaquim says. Three weeks later, the

syndicate hires Francisco to lead a crew to Ouidah, secretly expecting him to die there. His last night ashore, Francisco goes to a Mass with the crew, after which the prefect blesses the ship.

Chapter Three Analysis

The difficult circumstances in which Francisco Manoel is born and raised help to explain how he grew into a resourceful but ruthless young man. The death of his father leaves his mother poor and embittered, and Francisco's surrogate father, Manuelzinho, is a wanderer who abandons Francisco immediately after his mother's death. At age seven, having survived the death of both parents and a terrible drought, he is raised by a callous priest in a church orphanage until he runs away six years later. He comes of age quickly, living hard and by his wits. These events foreshadow the clever but cold-hearted adult he will become. The Catholic Church, in all its ceremony and mystery, symbolizes Francisco's yearning to find solace and meaning in a life that seems to offer only danger and confusion. The "sanctuary" of the church turns out to be a place of neglect and unhappiness for him, although nothing terrible happens to him there that might cause him to utterly reject Catholicism. His friendship with Joaquim Cutinho opens up a new world of possibilities for him, especially because he is allowed into the family home for a first-hand look at the splendors of wealth. His talks with the slave's priest, Jerónimo, put the thought of exotic adventure into his head, giving him a motivation to go to Africa.

The one-sidedness of his friendship with Joaquim is revealed by the cavalier manner in which Joaquim dismisses Francisco from the house after Colonel Octavio Cutinho becomes ill. Joaquim and Francisco meet again only after Francisco has been living a hardscrabble existence in the big city, which makes an offer of sailing to Africa all the more appealing to him. By this time, Francisco is a hardened young man who does not question for a moment whether he wants to be involved in the slave trade. Even so, he readily goes to Mass before the ship sails, seeking blessings from God, an act that indicates his awareness at some level that the business he is about to undertake is bad. This chapter is full of foreboding. It is as if the cloudiness of Francisco's life is building now to the real storm.

Chapter Four

Chapter Four Summary

When Francisco lands at Ouidah, he is the only one to go ashore, because the crew is afraid to set foot in Dahomey. His meets the Yovogan, who is the Dahomean Minister for the Slave Trade. Francisco visits the old Portuguese Fort, which is in ruins. The lieutenant has died of fever and the king's soldiers have looted the fort, marching the troops off to the king's palace at Abomey. Only a freed slave named Taparica the Tambour of the Black Militia has survived, and he joyously welcomes his rescuer, the new Lieutenant da Silva. Next morning, the Yovogan demands Francisco's presence, but Taparica counsels him that the king needs guns, so he should come to Francisco. The Yovogan arrives and asks for gifts for the king, but Francisco says he has nothing, which angers the Yovogan's entourage. That afternoon, the Yovogan sends workers to repair the fort, and Francisco pitches in, which amazes the local people. Francisco gets a shipment of guns and other supplies for the king, and within two years, his slave trade is flourishing. He is rewarded by being made a member of Joaquim's syndicate, and Francisco comes to believe it is his heaven-sent mission to supply Brazil with slave labor. He becomes renowned as a straightforward businessman, and he provides many gifts for the widely hated and feared king, whom he has never met. The fort and chapel are restored completely, and Francisco has his pick of the village girls, whom he rotates frequently. The ancient Yovogan becomes his friend but Francisco dreams regularly of returning some day to Brazil, even though he has a presentiment that he will never leave Africa.

Over time, Joaquim's letters to Francisco become cold and businesslike. The syndicate wants to keep its slave trade profits quiet, because slaving has becoming socially unacceptable in Brazil. The old Portuguese Fort at Ouidah, which has long been the conduit for the slave trade, officially no longer exists, although the syndicate members don't tell this to Francisco, who hopes to someday be made Governor of the Fort. Gradually, Francisco lets his rigorous attention to the manners of the Brazilian gentleman slip, and he begins to adopt the natives' habits of clothing, superstition, and health potions. He becomes addicted to the mysteries of animal sacrifices and other rituals, and his distance from the ways of Dahomey finally collapses completely when takes an African bride named Jijibou. She is young, beautiful, and an alluring dancer. Taparica, who has counseled Francisco to never become attached for any length of time to an African woman, is appalled by this marriage. Jijibou bears Francisco a son named Isidoro, an event which is the signal for her relatives to move into the fort. Yovogan dies, and Taparica says he was poisoned. The king, who is having troubles with the enemies of his wars, replaces Yovogan with a man who refuses to pay Francisco for guns and cargo, and who stops supplying slaves. Soon, Francisco is taken prisoner and brought to Abomey. He is brought before the king, who has the severed heads of two children at his feet as sacrifices to the spirits of the Dead Kings. Francisco braves the threat of execution with a smile, which impresses the king, who declares Francisco to be a friend and sets him free. Francisco knows his position is perilous but he also befriends

Kankpé, the king's supposedly mad half-brother, who is the rightful king awaiting his chance for the throne. Within months, the king turns on Francisco. He has Francisco's head shaved and dyed indigo, because white is the Dahomean color of death, so whites are not beheaded. Francisco's head only turns a shade of grey, however, so the king decides to leave him to die of starvation, but is saved by Kankpé. He is taken to a village, where he and Kankpé become blood brothers, who must live and die together. At the time, Francisco is not aware of how dangerous this pact will become to him.

Chapter Four Analysis

This chapter's depiction of Francisco's rise and fall under the king of Dahomey shows Francisco's bravery, shrewdness, and the ruthlessness he employs to succeed. He wisely accepts Taparica's counsel to bargain hard with the Yovogan. Francisco's willingness to do physical labor and his honest dealings in business set him apart from other white men in the region, and give him an advantage in trade. His fearlessness before the king saves his life, as later does his ability to befriend the king's half-brother, Kankpé. All these decisions and skills are essential to Francisco's survival in his cut-throat business, although he believes he is on a mission from God. At the same time, he succumbs to the superstitions of the West Africans, through which he integrates himself into the community, even as he maintains distance by virtue of being white. His whiteness is what saves him, because the Dahomeans will not behead him, reasoning that whiteness is their color for death and all white people therefore are already half-dead. The chapter sets numerous motifs against one another: whiteness and blackness, Catholicism and fetishism, the slave-trader and the king, the colonist and the colonized. In each case, the author's message seems to be that Africa changes and overcomes all influences. The mystery and power of Africa herself seem more dominant than all human attempts to subdue or even to understand her. In that sense, one set of rules or customs is neither better nor worse than another. The African slave trade, which the author appears to equate with the darkest of human drives, will conquer all. This bleak intimation does not bode well for Francisco's future.

Chpater Five, pages 111-133

Chpater Five, pages 111-133 Summary

After Francisco's escape from prison and his blood-brother pact with Kankpé, he goes to a slave port town west of Ouidah called Anecho. He considers going back to Brazil by merchant ship, but realizes he would be a pauper and he wants revenge on the king, so he writes to Joaquim Cutinho requesting muskets for Kankpé's rebellion against the king. A few days later, the king's ministers tell him that the Dead Kings have deposed him, and he allows himself to be imprisoned, for what turns out to be forty years. Taparica arrives in Anecho and convinces a reluctant Francisco he has nothing to fear from returning to Ouidah under Kankpé's rule. When he arrives, he is made a Dahomean chief. In the prison yard, he sees the former king and Kankpé says, "The hyena howls, the elephant goes by." After that, Dahomeans call Francisco the Elephant. Within a year, he becomes the king's viceroy, Dom Francisco, and he changes Dahomey into the most efficient military machine in West Africa. He oversees the installation of streets, drains, and trees in Ouidah, and forbids the lash on his plantation, which earns him the adoration of his workers. He makes huge profits from the slave trade, and each year he goes to war with the "King's Leopard Wives," the Dahomean women soldiers, who file their teeth and are much fiercer than the men. He does this for years, leading countless atrocities, until one day he watches from a hiding place as the Amazons pounce on small boys and garrote them. After that, he never goes to war again. Kankpé, however, becomes a more frightful warrior than any of his ancestors. He amasses a huge collection of the skulls of his enemies, which surround even his throne and bed-chamber.

Gradually, the king and Francisco stop communicating with each other. Francisco's seraglio grows, with Jijibou as its mistress, and in 1835, he builds a mansion called Simbodja or "big house" in the Fon language of Dahomey. He furnishes it with imported finery from Europe, and even gets Joaquim Cutinho to send him the Last Supper shrine from the chapel at Tapuitapera. He imports clothes, rings, and watches for himself, but wears none of them, preferring a simple planter's suit of calico. His children are taught to read in the padre's schoolroom and his eldest son, Isidoro, is sent to Brazil to finish his studies with the Cutinho boys, but he behaves wildly in the bars and brothels and Joaquim throws him out of the house. Joaquim uses this as an excuse to break up the partnership with Francisco. Joaquim now owns numerous businesses, has become a baron, and wants to distance himself from the unsavory slave trade. He appoints a Portuguese agent in Bahia to deal with Francisco, and the agent rescues Isidoro from the gutter, sending him to France. In Dahomey, the king becomes increasingly difficult to trade with, and has no use for gold, preferring the local currency of cowrie shells. Isidoro comes back from France with the airs of a dandy and the notion of starting a palm oil factory. His father helps him, but the French will not do business with the infamous slave trader. The British try to set up a cotton trade, and the king promises to stop trading in slaves, but he never signs an agreement. The king goes to war but his enemies, trained

by missionaries, inflict a terrible defeat on Dahomey, for which the king blames Dom Francisco, saying he let the English into the country.

Chpater Five, pages 111-133 Analysis

Francisco is understandably nervous about returning to Ouidah after his escape from prison but he lets greed and anger get the better of him. Years of his life are contracted in this chapter, giving the reader a quick view of how Francisco's presentiments about danger are realized over time. His immediate elevation to chiefdom is followed by financial success but also by frequent war, so that the benefits of trading slaves are firmly linked to exploitation and killing. This connection pushes the reader into the recognition that Francisco has made a pact with the Devil: in gaining power and riches, he has sold his soul. He tries to be fair and just, but such intentions are overshadowed by the atrocities of war, which reach such depths that he finally cannot stand to participate. This is the beginning of his downfall, as his relationship with the all-powerful King Kankpé starts to decline from that point. Dom Francisco steeps himself in women and material things. He builds a mansion and educates his sons, but the wild behavior of Isidoro in Brazil is symbolic of the failure of Francisco's parody of civilized living to be of any real benefit to his progeny. When Isidoro returns from Europe with plans to go into the palm oil trade, Francisco is eager to move away from the slave business, but his bad reputation precedes him. The message is that he cannot expect to sin so enormously and be forgiven. Even King Kankpé, his former ally, begins to turn against him, which is an indication that those who deal in evil can trust no one. Without a hint of preaching, Chatwin has begun to show the reader how Dom Francisco's choices will lead to a destruction which, especially in the presence of the book's religious influences, seems like a punishment.

Chapter 5, pages 134-150 and Chapter 6

Chapter 5, pages 134-150 and Chapter 6 Summary

Dom Francisco hears of freed slaves who have returned to Africa from Brazil by merchant ship but have been stoned by villagers near Lagos, so he offers them sanctuary in Ouidah. Soon, their farms proliferate and they transform Ouidah into a Little Brazil, bringing with them the colorful dress and architecture, the food and customs from the country of their repression. The newcomers also bring Ouidah's first doctor, a young mulatto named Marcos Brandão Ferraez. One day, when Ferraez's wife, Dona Luciana, is singing a Brazilian song at home, the familiar tune attracts Francisco to the window. She sees his eyes, which she later swears are those of the Devil. Francisco hires another mulatto named Jacinto das Chagas as his assistant and Jacinto gives his daughter, Venossa das Chagas, to the king as his bride. A month later, Jacinto picks a quarrel with Francisco and then makes friends with the French, setting himself up as a palm oil exporter, with the king's help. Soon, Jacinto begins trading in slaves under cover of the oil business. Francisco is enraged, but not long afterward, his mansion is raided by the king and all its silver and gold removed for taxes. Francisco suddenly seems old, and Taparica is dying. It turns out that Taparica has been poisoned, and Francisco sorrowfully buries him.

Dr. Ferraez reports a case of yellow fever, contracted by a girl from the crew of a merchant ship. Many people die, including ten Da Silvas and the doctor. Francisco brings a deathly sick Dona Luciana to his mansion, where she slowly recovers. They begin living as man and wife who have sworn themselves to chastity. They make efforts to return to Brazil, but Joaquim Cutinho has let Francisco's citizenship lapse. Francisco arranges to ship Luciana to Brazil with his two favorite daughters, Umbelina and Leocadia, but at the last minute, Luciana decides to stay with Francisco. They have a daughter, Eugenia, the White One. Francisco gets a letter from Cutinho that says all of Francisco's investments in Brazil have been wiped out, and Francisco realizes the syndicate has robbed him. He writes asking that Joaquim watch over his daughters, but soon discovers that they have been sold into prostitution. The king strips Francisco of his wealth and privileges, but Francisco cannot be physically harmed, because he is the king's blood brother, which means the king would die if Francisco died. He and Luciana try to sneak in disguise on board a merchant ship bound for Brazil, but they are recognized and turned back by the king's men. Luciana's skin peels and she dies, which Francisco recognizes as poisoning. Francisco becomes an old man, the butt of taunts by village boys, and scorned by his son, who now heads the family. In Chapter 6, Eugenia, or Mama Wéwé, recalls her father's funeral as she herself lies dying. At the non-Christian funeral, the Amazons wail that it was not the leopard or the buffalo that killed Francisco, but Night. Mama Wéwé's mind drifts, and she sees her long-lost British lieutenant. The young Lt.-Col Zossungbo Patrice, who had admonished the Da Silvas to listen to the president's speech during the commemorative dinner for Dom Francisco, can hear from his office the wails of the women who have realized that the ancient Mama Wéwé is finally dying.

Chapter 5, pages 134-150 and Chapter 6 Analysis

When Dom Francisco gives sanctuary to the freed slaves who have arrived from Brazil, he makes his final attempt to transform Ouidah into an outpost of his home country. The effort is doomed, of course, just as his household in Ouidah is doomed to be nothing more than a sad imitation of a former life. The symbolic meaning of this failure concerns the need to be true to oneself. In coming to Africa and selling its people into slavery, Francisco has chosen a path that can only lead to a diminution of his own humanity. When Dona Luciana sees him watching her through the window, she actually thinks he is the Devil. Everything begins to fall apart. Jacinto betrays Francisco, steals business from him, and sets the king against him. Taparica, his trustworthy slave, is poisoned. A plague sweeps through the land. After Dona Luciana's husband dies and she takes up with Francisco, her own fate is sealed. Joaquim Cutinho again betrays Francisco by allowing his citizenship papers to lapse, so he and Luciana cannot return to Brazil, and then Joaquim sells Francisco's daughters into prostitution. The king strips Francisco of all his wealth, and after Eugenia's birth, Luciana is poisoned. The reader already knows the sad story of Mama Wéwé's life and now she is dying. Everything Francisco touched has turned bad and even his successors in the family are full of envy, greed, and bitterness. Retribution, whether from the Christian God, the West African deities, from fate or from humans, has been visited upon the slave trader for the blackness of his ways.

Characters

Francisco Manoel da Silva

Francisco Manoel da Silva, also known as Dom Francisco and as the Elephant, is made viceroy of Ouidah by the King of Dahomey. Born to a poor family in rural Brazil, Francisco is just a year old when his father dies in a horseback accident while working on a ranch. Francisco's mother takes up with a restless man who puts the boy in an orphanage at age seven, after the mother dies during a terrible drought. Francisco hates the orphanage and runs away at age thirteen. He wanders for seven years, during which time he reacts to the difficulties of his life by becoming callous and ruthless. He has a knack for befriending powerful people, which serves him well while he becomes rich and powerful as a slave trader in Africa, but the bad company he keeps and his own evil doings eventually lead to his decline, and seem to curse his whole family. Despite this, he is revered for more than a hundred years by his descendants, most of whom never knew him. As the novel's central figure, Francisco is close to an archetype. He is he man who willfully chooses the path of wrongdoing, reaps its rewards, is brought low by what he has done, and then, sadly, is reimagined as a hero by future generations. His dalliances with religion throughout the book demonstrate an awareness that he recognizes his misdeeds and has an urge to repent, yet he continually gives in to the pursuit of riches and self-indulgence at the cost of the freedom and even the lives of others. Whatever good characteristics Francisco might have are buried under the weight of his bad ones. What he does with his life harms everyone around him.

Eugenia da Silva

Eugenia da Silva, also known as Mama Wéwé or the White One, is the only white daughter of Francisco Manoel da Silva. She is about 120 years old when the novel begins and at its ending, when she dies. In between, her life story is told. She is born in 1854 to Francisco and Luciana, the widow of an Ouidah doctor. Eugenia is a sickly child whose parents die when she is very young. She grows into a beautiful young woman, and falls in love with a British soldier who arrives in Ouidah on a merchant ship. He seems to return her affection and promises to send for her from England but he never does. She pines for years, eventually becoming somewhat mentally unbalanced by the strain. Most of her life is spent in quiet retreat from all but a few people. Her beauty disappears. Living largely in her thoughts and memories, she travels nowhere. Later in life, she hardly moves from her bed, eats almost nothing, and for many years is mute by choice. In the book, Eugenia is the ultimate victim, done in not only by the dishonesty of the lieutenant but by the circumstances of the life provided to her by her father, and she makes no effort to help herself. She simply exists, for a very long time. The only value she has to anyone is as proof, by her white skin, that Francisco was white, which is important to his dark-skinned descendants, who wish to think of themselves as a once-powerful, white, slave-trading family.

Joaquim Cutinho

Joaquim Cutinho is the son of a wealthy Brazilian farmer and businessman. When Francisco goes to work for the Cutinho family, Joaquim meets him and the two young men become friends. Joaquim brings Francisco to stay with him at the family plantation home, but then he tells Francisco it is time to leave after Joaquim's father becomes ill. This is an early sign that Joaquim will mistreat Francisco, which he does after they meet again and Joaquim's business syndicate sends Francisco to Dahomey, which they know is ruled by a dangerous king. As the novel proceeds, Joaquim's treatment of Francisco becomes increasingly manipulative and unethical. Eventually, he proves to be an enemy rather than a friend. He steals Francisco's wealth, traps him in Africa by failing to renew his passport, stops replying to his letters, and finally even sells two of Francisco's daughters into prostitution. This treacherous behavior becomes increasingly worse even as Joaquim becomes increasingly more prosperous and respected in Brazil. He displays his cynicism and hypocrisy by cutting himself off from a colleague whose work helped to make Joaquim rich. That work of trading slaves has become socially embarrassing to Joaquim, so he arranges to keep the profits without having any direct connection to the business. Over the course of the novel, he develops from a selfish and untrustworthy young man into a powerful and treacherous leader.

Taparica the Tambour

Taparica the Tambour is Dom Francisco's right-hand man. A former slave in Portugal who was freed and joined that country's Black Militia, he is the only soldier left at the Portuguese Fort when Francisco first arrives in Ouidah. Taparica proves to be a loyal and useful assistant to Dom Francisco. He gives good advice, is protective of his master, and seems to genuinely like and respect Francisco. Indeed, this is the only relationship in the entire novel in which two people appear to maintain an appreciation of each other. When they are parted, they express mutual delight at their reunion, and when Taparica dies, Francisco is truly sorrowful. Even so, the relationship is flawed by its inequality. Taparica, although technically free, is a servant to Francisco. Rather pointedly, this book has no example of long-lasting friendship between equals.

Jijibou

Jijibou is Francisco's Dahomean wife. When he marries her, he takes a significant step away from the Portuguese manners he has maintained in Ouidah, as he begins to become increasingly Africanized. Jijibou later becomes mistress of Francisco's seraglio and the overseer of his many illegitimate children. She probably grows to hate him, although she wisely keeps her feelings concealed.

Kankpé

Kankpé is the second king of Dahomey during Francisco's years in the country. He becomes an important ally to Francisco, declaring great love for him and making Francisco his blood brother. He appoints Francisco as a Dahomean chief and the viceroy of Ouidah. With Kankpé's help, Francisco becomes rich and powerful, but Kankpé develops into a ruthless warlord, which eventually appalls Francisco and erodes their friendship. In the end, Kankpé strips Francisco of all his wealth and entitlements, refraining from killing him only because the law of blood brothers forbids it.

The King of Dahomey

The King of Dahomey is Kankpé's half-brother. The reigning king when Francisco arrives in Dahomey, he has a reputation as a half-crazed, bloodthirsty ruler. At first, it appears he will kill Francisco, but the two become friends for a while. The king then turns on Francisco and throws him in prison, but then the king abdicates when his ministers tell him that the spirits of the Dead Kings have rejected him. Replaced on the throne by his half-brother, the former king spends the next forty years in prison. This king represents all the wildness, superstition, and danger of life in Dahomey.

Dona Luciana

Dona Luciana is the wife of Ouidah's first doctor. When she first sees Francisco, she mistakes him for the Devil. When her husband dies of yellow fever, a deathly ill Luciana is taken in by Francisco, and after she recovers, they eventually become lovers. Luciana, who is white, bears Francisco his only white child, Eugenia. Shortly after that, Luciana dies of poisoning by enemies of Francisco.

Dr. Marcos Brandâo Ferraez

Dr. Marcos Brandâo Ferraez is the doctor who is married to Dona Luciana. A mulatto from Brazil, he is a welcome and useful addition to Ouidah, but when still a young man, he dies of yellow fever that arrives on a merchant ship.

Jacinto das Chagas

Jacinto das Chagas is one of the former slaves from Brazil who arrive on a ship and are welcomed to Ouidah by Francisco. Jacinto, who is personable and good with numbers, becomes Francisco's assistant, but he soon turns on his employer and sets up a competing business, with the help of the king. Either Jacinto or the king's men poison Eugenia's mother, Luciana, and Francisco's right-hand man, Taparica. Jacinto is a smooth-talking, treacherous liar who is willing to give his daughter in marriage to the king to get business leverage. He is just the sort of person to succeed in Dahomey.

Manuelzinho

Manuelzinho is the half-breed Brazilian Indian who moves in with Francisco's mother after her husband dies in an accident when Francisco is one year old. Manuelzinho, who earns his living by catching snakes and selling their meat, is a born wanderer who never stays more than a week with Francisco and his mother before he leaves on extended trips. When Francisco is seven, his mother dies of drought and Manuelzinho takes the boy to a Catholic orphanage, leaving him there. When Francisco is thirteen, a dying Manuelzinho gives his horse and tack to the boy, which is all Francisco needs to immediately begin his own years of wandering.

Lieutenant-Colonel Zossoungbo Patrice

Lieutenant-Colonel Zossoungbo Patrice is a young officer in the Dahomean army who chastises the Da Silva family at the beginning of the book for gathering to commemorate the 117th anniversary of Dom Francisco's death. Patrice represents the revolutionary, Marxist-Leninist philosophy that dominates the Dahomean government in the mid-1970s. He criticizes the Da Silva gathering as a vestige of the fetishistic practices of the country's colonial period, but he allows it to continue after receiving a bribe, on the condition that they listen to the radio broadcast of the president's speech. He reappears at the end of the book, hearing the cries of the women in the Da Silva ancestral home when they realize that Mama Wéwé is dying.

Father Menezes Brito

Father Menezes Brito is the guardian of young Francisco, when he is brought to the Church's orphanage in Brazil after the death of his mother. Father Brito is conceited, petty, mean man.

The Yovogan

The Yovogan is the Dahomean Minister for the Slave Trade. A tiny octogenarian who dresses in pink finery, he is a useful liaison between Francisco and the King of Dahomey, but the Yovogan dies of poisoning and is replaced by another Yovogan who refuses to admit that a slave trade exists. In the book, the first Yovogan represents the fragility of the relationship between Francisco and the unpredictable king.

Isidoro da Silva

Isidoro da Silva is the first-born son of Francisco and his Dahomean wife, Jijibou. He is eventually sent to Brazil to live at the plantation with the Cutinho family, but he becomes so out-of-control with drinking and whoring that Joaquim Cutinho casts him out. Isidoro goes up in France, then returns to Dahomey as a dandified fellow with aspirations to

start a palm oil business. Francisco finds Isidoro to be useless, but after Francisco's fortunes decline, Isidoro becomes head of the family.

Jerónimo

Jerónimo is a freeman who is a priest to the slaves on the Cutinho plantation. An androgynous bachelor from Dahomey, he tells Francisco stories of the strange rites and sights of Africa, which is how the name "Dahomey" first takes root in Francisco's imagination.

Mr. Townsend

Mr. Townsend is the British trading agent who arrives in Dahomey on the same merchant ship that carries the young lieutenant with whom Eugenia falls in love. Mr. Townsend later must tell Eugenia that the lieutenant has married in England.

Colonel Octavio Cutinho

Colonel Octavio Cutinho is Joaquim Cutinho's father. When Francisco first works for the Cutinho family, the colonel is the head of the household. He later dies of stroke and Joaquim takes over his role.

Cesário da Silva

Cesário da Silva is one of Dom Francisco's youngest sons, whom Eugenia takes under her wing, transferring her love for her absent British lieutenant to the boy. Cesário dies of cholera brought by a merchant ship.

Umbelina and Leocadia da Silva

Umbelina and Leocadia da Silva are Francisco's two favorite daughters. Beautiful girls, they are raised in his house by Dona Luciana. Francisco sends them to Brazil under the care of Joaquim Cutinho but he sells them into prostitution.

Objects/Places

Dahomey

Dahomey is a West African country that lies between Nigeria and Togo on the Gulf of Guinea. Now called the People's Republic of Benin, it is a kingdom when the events of this book take place, and is the principal source of slave manpower for Brazilian mines and plantations during the first half of the 1800s.

Ouidah

Ouidah, now a largely forgotten village in Benin, was the main port when the slave trade flourished.

The Portuguese Fort

The Portuguese Fort at Ouidah is where Francisco is stationed when he arrives in Dahomey. This garrison is the conduit for the slave trade, but it has been sacked and its soldiers taken captive by the King of Dahomey when Francisco arrives in 1812.

Abomey

Abomey is a town slightly inland from Ouidah where the King of Dahomey has his palace. Francisco goes there occasionally and is thrown in prison on one occasion.

Anecho

Anecho is a slave port in Dahomey west of Ouidah, where Francisco goes after he gets out of prison in Abomey. He considers taking a merchant ship back to Brazil from there but decides to return to Ouidah.

Tapuitapera

Tapuitapera is the name of a sandstone hill in Brazil upon which the Cutinhos beautiful sugar plantation home sits. It is three miles from the ocean.

Bahia

Bahia is a state in Brazil, the capital of which is Salvador. Francisco goes there after he is told to leave the Cutinhos plantation house. He lives in poverty and danger in

Salvador, but when he later lives in Ouidah, he spends years fantasizing about returning to Bahia with wealth and prestige and building a mansion there.

Simbodji

Simbodji means "big house" in the Fon language of Dahomey. It is the mansion that Francisco builds in Ouidah after the Portuguese Fort becomes too small for the family that is burgeoning from the children born to the women in Francisco's seraglio. After Francisco's death, the Simbodji gradually falls into disrepair.

The Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception

The Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Ouidah is where the religious part of the commemoration of the 117th anniversary of Dom Francisco's death takes place at the beginning of the novel. It is in a terrible state of neglect.

Santa Maria Da Boavista

Santa Maria Da Boavista is the name of the village in rural Brazil where Francisco is taken to live under the care of a Catholic priest after Francisco's mother dies. He is ill-treated by the village children and the priest. He hates the place.

Sertâo

Sertâo is the scrubby cattle country in the northeastern part of Brazil where Francisco was born in poverty.

The Portable Oratory

The Portable Oratory or shrine, depicts the Last Supper, and is coveted by Francisco when he first sees it in the chapel on the Cutinhos' plantation. Later, he writes to Joaquim Cutinho from Ouidah, requesting that the nuns make a replica of the oratory for him, but Joaquim sends the original. It is inherited by Francisco's daughter, Eugenia, who keeps it for decades, until the spiders eat through its frame and figures, and it falls apart. As such, it is a symbol of the decay of the Da Silvas' Christian faith in Dahomey.

Themes

The Wages of Sin

This is not a religious novel and yet religious practices play a prominent role in it. Many of its characters are influenced by religion, although few, if any, follow its tenets in ways that reflect proudly on their humanity. It appears that the author's intent is to suggest that those who choose to do evil will pay, even if only in the degradation of their own decency. His theme is not overtly religious, however, because he gives no indication that a deity is exacting punishment on anyone. Indeed, it might be argued that a major problem with the world Chatwin creates in this novel is its lack of the moral center that some would argue is provided by religion and God. In this book, retribution seems to be a built-in result of a person's choice to be bad. Punishment is as inescapable as a force of nature. It might take the form of stripping an individual of wealth, prestige, or life itself, but it might not. There is no sense of divine justice in this novel. If the wages of sin are death, that death might merely be one of the spirit, of what is best in a person. To Chatwin, this loss must be as damaging as the loss of life itself. The unrelenting evil in this book highlights the truth that without goodness, life becomes pointless.

The Colonial Influence

Much has been written about the lack of knowledge and consideration of cultures that occupiers bring to the places they colonize. This book is an extreme version of that lack. The colonial powers of Brazil, embodied in Francisco Manoel da Silva, who arrives in Dahomey as an honorary army lieutenant, are there to exploit the natives in one of the most vicious ways imaginable. They intend to conquer, buy, and sell people as slaves. Typically of such subjugators, Francisco comes to regard himself as on a mission from God to provide his home country with the manpower it needs for its mines and plantations. He uses this rationalization to avoid a sense of guilt over his activities. Meanwhile, he imports material goods to imitate the life of splendor of the Brazilian wealthy as if this will help to "civilize" Dahomey, but he also sets up a seraglio to exploit the local girls and engages in wars to obtain more slaves to sell. The oppressed Dahomeans seem to accept their lot, serving him without complaint and even revering him because he chooses not to use the lash on his property. Francisco's own African wife oversees his many illegitimate children from women in the harem. This scenario, in which repressed people develop a kind of admiration for their masters, is a well-known psychological adaptation that enables some people to survive such degradation. Chatwin depicts this hypocrisy on the part of both the oppressed and the oppressor to develop the theme that the intermingling of cultures can only be beneficial if it occurs on a footing of mutual respect and willingness to learn. The great defect of nineteenth century colonialism was its failure to understand that less technologically developed people are as spiritually and culturally valuable as any other human beings.

The Heart of Darkness

A blurb on this book's back cover equates it to Joseph Conrad's famous novel, The Heart of Darkness. This is a fair comparison, because a key theme of The Viceroy of Ouidah concerns the very substance of the heart of darkness. Rather than the darkness of night per se, the book deals with spiritual darkness and the lack of enlightenment that results from ignorance. Chatwin asks why such conditions seem to promote the rise of evil behavior. His answer, given through the events in the novel, is that civilization consists of rules and guidelines that help individuals to stave off their darker impulses, which include greed, lust, and violence. The rules of society, as promulgated by both religion and government, are there to hold back the chaos lurking in the human heart. If these rules break down, and new "laws" pertain that favor the powerful over the disempowered, chaos is bound to win. The goodness in people, Chatwin suggests, is not a dominant trait. It will not prevail without nurturing and in the wrong environment, it will die. Dahomey, on the so-called Dark Continent, is place in the nineteenth century where a half-crazed king controls the people and wreaks havoc in the land for what he sees as his personal glory. Such lawlessness dressed up as kingly right provides perfect conditions for Francisco da Silva to turn utterly bad. All he has to do is become friends with the despot by providing him with weapons to continue on his bloodthirsty path. Dahomey is the heart of darkness, both spiritually and in terms of the inability of religion or law to protect it from chaos. Here, Francisco descends into his personal hell.

Style

Point of View

The novel is told in the third person by the author as narrator. The entire story is in past tense and the author roams freely in the minds of his characters, describing what they think. Despite this omniscience, Chatwin does not go deeply into the emotional lives of his characters. Often, he describes their reactions to situations in terms that are tactile or otherwise sensuous, or action-oriented. He tells what they do and think but rarely attempts to describe what they feel, other than such sensuous feelings as being hot or thirsty. The reader is left to imagine the emotional lives of the characters through what they do, or with the help of simple adjectival descriptors. For example, a character might cry or wail, or Chatwin might even describe a character as sorrowful or enraged. Such descriptions make it easy for the reader to understand the basic emotional state of a character, but any deeper comprehension of the conflicts or turmoil in that character's mind must be imagined by the reader based upon what Chatwin has revealed of the character's situation. If a character is a slave devoted to his master or a young woman abandoned by her lover, then the reader must use imagination to go beyond the basic descriptor of that character's joy or sorrow to conjure the full emotional range of the individual's experience. For a novel, this is a drawback of using a detached and third-person point of view. Chatwin had originally intended the book to be nonfiction, as he explains in a first-person preface, but circumstances prevented him from gathering enough research material to complete the task, so he filled in the blanks with fiction. His failure to go deeply into the emotional lives of his characters might be related to this change from the original plan of a reportorial-style biography to a historical novel. In any case, his focus on externals such as descriptions of place, dress, rituals, food, and artifacts gives the novel a richness that goes a long way toward making up for the emotional thinness of its characters.

Setting

The novel takes place primarily in the West African port town of Ouidah, in a country called Dahomey at the time of this story, but now known as the People's Republic of Benin. Chatwin does a marvelous job of evoking the mysterious, superstitious, and violent nature of this place. Sacrifices, both animal and human, seem to be occurring all the time. Plagues sweep through the land, usually carried by the crew of European or South American merchant vessels. Strange rituals and weird potions of the West African fetish priests are described in detail, and contrasted to the more familiar but equally mysterious ways of the Catholic Church. A constant state of decay seems to exist in Ouidah's buildings and in the people themselves, as if what exists there of civilization is merely being allowed to survive for a brief time before the wild power of Africa reclaims everything. The people, both natives and immigrants, don't help much to civilize the place. They're forever warring with one another, taking slaves, beheading and poisoning each other. Meanwhile, Francisco the slave-trader imports all manner of finery from

overseas to furnish the mansion he builds in Ouidah, and the details of these furnishings and decorations are described in detail. The result is the sense of a dark and forbidding place that Francisco attempts to beautify, although in vain, because by the novel's end, everything has been destroyed by humans or ravaged by nature.

The other main setting for the story is Brazil, where Francisco was born. His travels around Brazil, particularly in the state of Bahia and its capital of Salvador, are described mostly in terms of Francisco's state of mind. For example, the scrubby landscape of his youth is marked by drought, poverty, and his own hardening view of the world, while the opulence of the Cutinho's sugar plantation near the sea is a reflection of Francisco's hopes for a brighter future. Similarly, his tough, wild life in the city of Salvador equates to his development into the devil-may-care young man who sets sail for Africa. In this novel, settings are usually as degraded as the souls of the people who inhabit them. The opulence of the rich Cutinhos or of Dom Francisco at the peak of his slave-trading success is cheapened by the depravity of the wealthy and their exploitation of others. In this way, Chatwin uses his settings as mute commentary on the compromised souls of his characters.

Language and Meaning

The author clearly has a great love for naming. In this novel, it begins with the names of Francisco da Silva's many descendants, who are identified even though the vast majority of them never again appear in the story. This technique, reminiscent of the list of who begat whom in the Bible's Book of Genesis, creates an effect not only of time passing but of exotica, because the names have mixed African and Brazilian influences. Chatwin's love of naming continues to the designation of countries, states, cities, villages, buildings, and geographical features. He names many different types of flora and fauna, both in West Africa and Brazil. Again, these names lend an immediate sense of strangeness to the story, enriching its atmosphere. He describes the religious rituals and trappings of both Catholicism and West African fetishism with a large vocabulary of specialized terms, extending even to the ingredients used in potions. He also lavishes great care on the specific names of materials and designs used in furniture, clothing, and the decorative arts. Finally, his interest in food and cuisine seems to be largely fulfilled in this book by naming ingredients, which again are often exotic. All these names, which appear on virtually every page, serve to pack the novel with atmosphere. They also help to invest the story with a sense of foreboding and danger, especially because the plot is almost uniformly bleak. In other words, the reader comes to associate these meticulously described places and things with the unyielding sadness of the story. The implication is that certain things and people and places together, otherwise known as circumstances, can give rise to terrible troubles.

Structure

This book is divided into six chapters, with a first-person preface by the author describing how the novel came to be. There are no sections or other demarcations

aside from the chapters, although breaks in time or changes in place are indicated by blank spaces between segments of text. Temporally, the story begins in about 1974. The exact year is not mentioned, but it can be estimated by using other dates that are given in the book. The second chapter also begins in 1974, but then shifts in time back almost 100 years. It tells much of the life story of Eugenia, the last daughter of Dom Francisco, ending with the ancient lady on her deathbed in 1974 again. Chapter Three begins even further back in time, to Dom Francisco's birth in Brazil in 1785. It continues through time to Francisco's departure for Africa in 1812. Chapter Four begins from that point in time and continues chronologically through Francisco's early years in Africa. Chapter Five continues this chronology through the rest of Francisco's life to his death in 1857. Chapter Six returns to 1974, picking up the story with Eugenia dying, as she was in the first chapter and ends there.

Quotes

"Turbaned ladies hobbled towards the cathedral, scuffing the dust with feet too splayed and calloused to admit the wearing of shoes. Their cottons were printed with leaves and lions and portraits of military dictators" (Chapter One, pg. 8.)

"Someone had stolen the ivory Dove of Peace inlaid into the altar table. Though the Virgin still beckoned from her niche, her hands were tied in a tangle of cobwebs" (Chapter One, pg. 10.)

"It was the hour when the fetish priests slaughtered a fowl over Aizan, the Market God, an omphalos of cut stone standing alone in an empty space" (Chapter One, pg. 13.)

"Dom Francisco himself lay sleeping under his bed, in a chamber that overlooked a garden of red earth and plastic flowers where lizards sunned themselves on the flat white marble tombs" (Chapter One, pg. 17.)

"On thundery afternoons, when perpendicular clouds towered high in the sky, she would wander through the palm-groves to the lagoon and watch the black-and-white kingfishers flutter over the dark water" (Chapter Two, pg. 34.)

"The house had a grass roof and walls of packed mud and scantlings and stood in open country in a clump of umbu trees" (Chapter Three, pg. 52.)

"The boy's guardian, Father Menezes Brito, was a fat conceited Portuguese, who had been exiled here for some misdemeanor: his one amusement was to baptize Indian babies with his spittle" (Chapter Three, pg. 56.)

"Faces he forgot, but he remembered the sensations: the taste of the armadillo meat roasted in clay; the shock of aguardiente on the tongue; the pleasures of hot blood spurting over his hands, or of pissing down the leg of his horse" (Chapter Three, pg. 59.)

"The two young friends fought gamecocks and trained a pack of hounds to hunt for capybaras in the forest. Returning, hot from the chase, they would wave up to Joaquim's sisters, who lounged on feather hammocks or fed slips of custard-apple to their pet marmosets" (Chapter Three, pg. 69.)

"All were men with blood on their hands; yet all gazed longingly at the milk-white body of Our Dying Lord, identifying His Agony with their agony and calling on Him to pacify the sea" (Chapter Three, page 76.)

"Puffs of musket smoke preceded the Yovogan, a frail octogenarian who rode to the Fort in a costume of pink satin, propped up by the grooms, sitting sidesaddle on a starved grey nag" (Chapter Four, pg. 84.)

"His dining room was lit with a set of silver candelabra; behind each chair stood a serving-girl, naked to the waist, with a white napkin folded over her arm" (Chapter Four, pg. 90.)

"He was a tall sinewy man with dry red eyes, automatic gestures and the bonhomie of the seasoned slaughterer" (Chapter Four, pg. 99.)

"Kankpé fumbled in a leather bag and took out a skull-cup. He set it in the space between the knee-caps and added the ingredients of the sacrament: ashes, beans, baobab pith, a thunderstone, a bullet taken from a corpse, and the powered head of a horned viper" (Chapter Four, pg. 107.)

"Then, as the dawn silhouetted the roofs like teeth on a sawblade, a whistle would blow, the air fill with raucous cries and, by the end of the morning, the Amazons would be parading before the King, swinging severed heads like dumb-bells" (Chapter Five, pg. 116.)

"One Sunday, as he was preparing the sacrament for Mass, he found a python curled up in his vestments and staved its head in with the butt of his processional cross" (Chapter Five, pg. 128.)

"He opened his mouth to speak, but his lower lip hung slack, and the music whirled, round and round his skull, as he reeled from the room, out into the light and dust and hawks and dark and nothing" (Chapter Five, pg. 150.)

"Fixed to the wall were a pair of handcuffs and a broken guitar. There was also a stuffed civet cat, nailed, in mockery of the Crucifixion, with its hind legs and tail together and its forelegs stretched apart" (Chapter Six, pg. 154.)

Topics for Discussion

What do you think happened to Francisco da Silva as a person? Why did he become a bad man? What caused this change and where did he go wrong?

The Da Silva descendants of Dom Francisco revered him but he bought and sold their brethren. What does this tell you about the nature of colonialism and the way oppressed people may come to regard their oppressors?

Dahomey is portrayed as a weird and frightening country in this book. It seems to destroy people, both natives and immigrants. Assuming that the author, a great traveler, does not hate Africa, what is his symbolic intent in making Dahomey such a terrible place and what connection does this have to the presence of foreigners?

Religion plays an important role in this novel, including both Catholicism and West African fetishism. Compare and contrast the two types of religion in terms of their usefulness to the characters in the book.

How would you characterize the role of nature in the novel? Discuss the symbolic role that the power of the natural world plays in the story and give examples.

For most of the years that Francisco is in Africa, he longs to return to Brazil, yet his life there was hard. What do you think Brazil represents to him that he should dream so ardently of going back?

After Eugenia da Silva learns that the British lieutenant has married in England and will never send for her, she gives up on life. Why do you think that happens? Why does she fail to recover, develop new interests, and fall in love again? In the context of the novel, what does this failure signify?