War and Turpentine Study Guide

War and Turpentine by Stefan Hertmans

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

The following version of the book was used to create this guide: Hertmans, Stefan. War and Turpentine. New York: Pantheon Books, 2016.

More than thirty years after the death of his grandfather Urbain Martien, the narrator finally decides to read the notebooks of personal notes left to him by his grandfather. He is prompted to do so on the one hundredth anniversary of World War I, a war in which his grandfather had served and was an important part of his life. The narrator has strong memories of his grandfather as a stoic figure through his childhood, remembering him as a quiet man who worked diligently on his art and conveyed his love for painting to his grandson. Years after his death, Urbain Martien, a native of Ghent, remains a strong fixture in the mind of his grandson, who has grown to become a writer and is continuously puzzled by the life that his grandfather lived over the years, including the fragments of stories he heard about his grandfather's childhood and his involvement in the Great War.

Going into the diaries, the narrator relates the childhood of his grandfather, born to Celine Andries, the educated daughter of a middle-class family, who married his father, Franciscus Martien, a painter of chapels, against the wishes of her family. They lived a difficult life, with Celine adjusting to her new surroundings easily for the sake of her husband and family. Urbain grew up witnessing his father and mother working hard, with his father painting in the chapels and inspiring his son while his mother worked prudently to help the family survive. Despite the deep bond within the family, financial circumstances and his father's failing health forced Urbain to begin working early, as an apprentice to a tailor, eventually making his way to work in an iron foundry. While his spirits slowly broke due to the back-breaking labor, his father was attacked by socialists, instilling a deep distrust for the movement and its followers. The death of a neighboring woman forced the family to adopt a few more children, one of whom was a lifelong inspiration to Urbain for his chance to become educated.

When Franciscus received the opportunity to paint a church in Liverpool, Urbain became the man of the house, serving as a financial and emotional support to his mother. A visit to a gelatin factory affected him deeply, instilling a sense of profound distress at the sight of the slaughtered animals. Continuing his work at the iron foundry, Urbain began to take art lessons, wanting to emulate his father. He was frustrated, unable to master basic techniques being taught to him. Eventually his father returned from Liverpool, sicker than before. While his mother cared for him vigorously, his asthma worsened and he eventually passed away. While his mother entered a long period of shock, Urbain took responsibility for the house. Henri de Pauw, an alcoholic neighbor, proposed marriage to Celine, arguing that she needed the financial support, to which she reluctantly agreed. Urbain was incensed and had an uneasy relationship with his stepfather despite the amiable connection he had with his step-siblings.

After training for four years at a military school and leaving, Urbain was conscripted for service in August of 1914, the beginning of World War I. Along with other Flemish

soldiers from Ghent, he was sent out into the Belgian countryside to confront the oncoming Germans. While moving from place to place with low rations and poor morale, the Flemish soldiers were subject to discrimination by the French officers. Finding temporary reprieve in the small village of Schiplaken, the group of soldiers were attacked by heavy artillery and German snipers, losing a large number of soldiers before moving on to Yser in October, where after a long period of frustrating stalemate, Urbain was injured and sent to Liverpool to recuperate. While there, he momentarily discovered the church his father was assigned to paint, recognizing his own face in the mural. Urbain returned to the front lines, only to seriously injure his leg again. He was visited by the Queen as he recuperated and decided to take a trip to see Raymond, his stepbrother, in Swansea. The ferry was taken in by a storm which he barely survived, only to be further depressed by the bleak weather of Swansea. Returning to the front lines, he again faced the death of his comrades during long stretches of stasis, eventually leading up to the end of the war.

Despite the jubilant spirit of the country, Urbain returned home broken, though his spirits were lifted when he met Maria Emelia Ghys, the daughter of a neighboring merchant. They fell in love but Maria's life was taken by the Spanish flu, after which Urbain married her sister Gabrielle. Their relationship was a tense one, as she reminded him of her sister physically, and she perceived this and was distant as a result. The narrator combs through paintings of Urbain, trying to find a trace of Maria and realizing that her reflection is present in Urbain's rendition of the Rokeby Venus. Despite the tension of their marriage, Gabrielle and Urbain were emotionally attached, at least over the loss of Maria from their lives. In the last decades of his life, Urbain focused on painting, and the narrator recognizes the dedication to the craft that was emphasized over emotional effect. After a visit to Yser, the narrator looks at his grandfather's self-portraits and the emotional distance there is in them. Having completed the reading and transcription of the notebooks, the narrator reflects on the life of his grandfather as a dutiful soldier who also desired intensely to be an artist, and how he balanced the two while remaining strictly religious. He imagines him once again as a soldier at the gates of heaven, requesting permission to enter the world he has been waiting to do so for so long.

I (Pages 1-43)

Summary

With an image of his grandfather's peculiar bow-tie, the narrator relates one of his earliest memories of his grandfather during a visit on the beach. He recalls the particular way in which the man sat on the sand in his navy-blue suit, a white shirt, cuff-links, and a fedora, all worn despite the heat. His grandfather took off his cuff links meticulously, along with removing the jacket. As he played with the sand, the narrator saw his grandfather's impressive stature and eventually gazed on when he began to put his clothes on, the jacket, and cuff links, as the weather got colder. He noticed the way his grandfather walked, like a soldier, hurrying along in an attempt to catch a train as he left the beach. The next memory is witnessing his grandfather crying as he looked at a painting of a nude woman, with the child version of the narrator feeling as if he had intruded on the older man and slowly walking out. He later returns to his grandfather's room and takes a closer look at the painting, as it comprises of a nude woman staring into a reflection of herself, in a mirror held up for her by a cherub. This imagery both sets a tone for the beginning of the novel and also establishes the motif of art which will reappear throughout the book.

The narrator talks about his grandfather's presence in his childhood, with stories of World War I playing a huge part in the stories that were told. His grandfather gave him fencing lessons while also painting vigorously after his early retirement as a disabled veteran. From his window, he had a view of trees and pastures, working from his studio, which was also his bedroom. His grandfather had entrusted him with his notebooks, describing a life that crossed two centuries and also two worlds, an earlier world before World War I and a world after. With the hundredth anniversary of the War nearing, the narrator finally feels the pressure to open the notebooks, having not wanted to do so before in an attempt to preserve the memories of his grandfather that he had from his childhood. He is also prompted when his uncle and father find the tombstone of his great-grandmother, his grandfather's mother. While copying his grandfather's notebooks, he finds trouble in remaining faithful to the texts, as some of the instances conflict with his desire to preserve his own memories. Reading the memoirs, he wonders about his own relationship with his grandfather, and the lack of conflict that occurred between the two generations, while also musing on the various parts that contextualize his own interactions with his grandfather over the years.

Walking through the streets of Ghent, the place of his childhood, the narrator reflects on the different places in town and his grandfather's childhood through them. While walking past a former livestock market, he is reminded of the slaughter of Yser he read in the memoirs, and his grandfather's comments on Rembrandt's painting of a slaughtered ox and its ability to evoke the human senses. The narrator begins to give background on Urbain, his grandfather's life. Urbain's mother, Celine Andries, the daughter of merchants, was an educated girl who met Franciscus Martien, a poor church painter, and married him against her family's wishes. She was a proud woman who took her

new, hard life in stride, always wearing black and wearing clogs like her poor family. Urbain was loved by all as a child, fascinated by flying aircrafts and gripped by religious fervor.

In 2012, the narrator is in London with his fifteen-year-old son, trying to impart a love of art through the haze of his son's smartphone. Walking through the National Gallery, they see the Rokeby Venus by Velazquez, which he recognizes as one of the paintings his grandfather copied. Watching it, he remembers a story that his grandfather only saw his wife naked once. He thinks about his grandfather's love for painting, inspired by his father's profession as a church painter, as he spent afternoons in his childhood watching his father paint. The narrator remembers the zeal and discipline that his grandfather demonstrated while giving him fencing lessons.

Growing up poor, Urbain's family depended on assistance from the Church, as young men from the Church would come by to offer assistance; during one visit, Urbain obtained a free ration card but was unable to purchase bread. Urbain missed school a lot as a child, as he assisted his family in any way he could and also spent time with his father. Eventually he found a job at 13 working for his uncle, a blacksmith, an employment during which he witnessed his cousin fall face-first into a furnace. After that, he worked in an iron foundry. As the physical job took a toll on him mentally and physically, his mother noticed the change in him.

Analysis

The opening passages of the novel highlight the issue of memory, a key theme in War and Turpentine. A picture of the narrator’s grandfather's bow-tie is inserted into the text, which is longer than a bow-tie would normally be. The highlight of the memory is the image of his grandfather, rather than his own experience, which initiates the framing mechanism of the novel as every image, every story, every anecdote, revolves around Urbain Martien, the grandfather of the narrator. The memory of the beach is used to establish the basic characteristics of Urbain as a solemn man, particular in his dress and demeanor, and someone who had a military background, as the narrator remembers the way Urbain walked in a military style that seemed ingrained in his personality. The scenic setting at the beach also points to his grandfather's love for painting, as nature was one of the elements that Urbain was particularly fond of painting. The next memory is juxtaposed to the first one, as the narrator sees his grandfather crying while facing a portrait of a nude woman, which is later revealed to be the Rokeby Venus by Velazquez.

The early formation of Urbain's character is done primarily through the child narrator viewing his grandfather, and his general presence in that portion of his life. It seems Urbain had the most influence on his grandson during the impressionable age of childhood, creating memories that seem to have held strongest over the years. Despite his constant presence, the narrator only knows so much about his grandfather, hearing wisps of information here and there regarding his service in World War I. It seems at

times that Urbain was deliberately withdrawn, evidenced in the hidden tombstone of his mother and his stoic demeanor with his grandson.

Despite being entrusted with his grandfather's notebooks, the narrator has had a difficult time opening and reading them for any purpose at all, realizing that in doing so, he would be jeopardizing his own memories of his grandfather—memories that he has seen through his own eyes and senses, memories that he can still vividly recall and are an important part of his childhood and who he is as a person. Memory then becomes intertwined with identity, as the loss of his childhood memories would put a strain on the narrator's identity as a child. The threat is also that the diary will change the Urbain Martien that narrator knew as a child.

The relationship between space and time is introduced as well as the narrator finds himself in the same city that he and his grandfather grew up in. Yet, Ghent is also a different place for both of them, as it has improved over the centuries but the nostalgic memories still remain with the narrator. Despite the modern rendition, the images of the past still filter through time and into the present and the senses are stimulated, heightening the emotional impact. The Ghent of the present is much different from the Ghent of Urbain's poor childhood. While the family was founded on a basis of love that persisted through the marriage of his parents, Urbain had to work early in his life and the details used to describe the labor are intensely vivid. Despite the harshness of life, the family managed to be compassionate with each other, as Urbain admired his father and mother devotedly, with religion playing an important part of their lives.

Imparting the love of art through different generations as a concept is introduced as well, including how it persists through time due to the strength of memory. Two different scenes are juxtaposed with each other: Urbain witnessing his father painting in the church, and the narrator with his son visiting a library. Both generations of children have different perceptions and relationships with art, as Urbain, born poor and without resources, was amazed by the power of his father to create beautiful images that inspired his imagination, whereas the narrator's son has a more distant relationship with art, as he admires it but is not as strongly influenced as Urbain was as a child. Similarly, the narrator was influenced by Urbain as a child as well, witnessing his grandfather crying in response to a mysterious rendition of the Rokeby Venus. While as an adult he is able to recall the memory when seeing the image again in London, the emotional effect does not carry over to his son.

Discussion Question 1

How does memory carry emotion through time for the narrator?

Discussion Question 2

Describe the relationship between Urbain Martien and his grandson, as a child and as an adult.

Discussion Question 3

What is the importance of art to the narrator as it relates to his grandfather?

Vocabulary

siccatives, alabaster, warren, cherub, beatifically, gaiters, tessitura, treadle, catechism

I (Pages 44-91)

Summary

Reacting to a politician's plan to overhaul the infrastructure of the city, the narrator gives some background on Zuidpark, a city park that had been halved during Urbain's lifetime, along with the demolition of Zuidstatie, a beautiful train station where Urbain spent a lot of time as a child. While discussing the Citadelpark, the narrator is reminded of his grandfather taking him to see "The Skaters" by Emile Claus at the museum, a painting that contains children with sleds on ice. He looks at a flat rock on his desk. It was given to him by his grandfather, who painted a folk scene on it and brought it from Rapallo, the Italian beach town where Ezra Pound wrote the majority of his Cantos.

The narrator thinks about lost objects, especially a golden pocket watch that was given to him by his grandfather on his twelfth birthday, but which he immediately broke by accident. The watch belonged to Urbain's great-grandfather, and was at one point pawned for the sake of money but returned as a treasured family heirloom. Thinking about its end, the narrator feels guilt at having destroyed an item that epitomized so much suffering for his grandfather. He reminisces about Sundays with his grandfather, who would take him to the town square, where they would see the band play in the flower market, a band in which Urbain had played in as a child under the great Peter Benoit, whose portrait is included. From the square, grandson and grandfather would go to Veneziana, an old ice-cream parlor that lost its business when it upgraded its furnishings.

Thinking of Peter Benoit, the narrator recalls his grandfather's love for music and his preference for Bizet over Wagner, in line with Nietzsche's preference. Walking through the town square that he visited as a child with his grandfather, the narrator thinks about the young Urbain working for a garment reseller as a child. As he finds the garment reseller's building, he is reminded of an anecdote he heard as a child, where Urbain was escorted out of the job by his mother—an action that added to his admiration for the proud woman. Growing up, Urbain’s sense of humanitarianism inherited from his father clashed with the pride his mother embodied.

At the age of ten, Urbain witnessed his father bloodied at home, having been beaten by a group of socialist goons, an event that created a lifelong disdain for the socialist movement in Urbain. As someone with pride who had slogged through poverty, Urbain found issue with rabble rousers who disrupted the peace of society. The traumatic event was ignited over the years, leading to paranoia in the 1950s when he was admitted into a psychiatric facility. Any time that tensions would flare between the Flemish Dutch and the French speaking population, Urbain would be reminded of the trauma of socialism he suffered as a child.

Despite being physically small for his age, Urbain matured at a rapid rate, especially when his father was commissioned to paint a church in England. The move was

financially necessary, as the neighboring Henri De Pauw's wife passed away and the Urbain's family had taken the children in, including Joris, the scholar who would always be an influence on Urbain. With his father's departure, Urbain became the man of the house and his mother's main support. One day, he visited a gelatin factory with a friend and was horrified by the carcasses of animals he saw, instilling in him a solemnity that never left. Despite his father's opposition, Urbain enrolled in art classes, struggling to learn the basic techniques and becoming frustrated, especially so because his mother had to work harder to pay for his lessons and he could not afford the quality products needed. Eventually his father returned from Liverpool and the family was reunited, including an emotional moment when Franciscus saw Urbain's drawings for the first time as the former became overwhelmed with the emotion of coming back home.

Analysis

Physical spaces play a prominent part in this section of the novel, especially as the means of evoking old memories. The narrator's walks through his childhood scenes allow him to revisit the times he spent with his grandfather. The possibility of change in the city is what incites the narrator to walk out and examine the old places that he did as a child. The concept of change rears its head again, as the narrator was previously afraid of opening his grandfather's notebooks because he feared that doing so would change the nature of his own memories. In response to a politician's plan to change certain parts of the city, the narrator then sets off on a journey to walk through the old places, reliving the memories that he once formed, and also informing his image of his grandfather through his memoirs. Some change is already occurring such as with the ice-cream parlor, Veneziana, which lost its luster as an antique place once it changed its set up. For the narrator, the parlor's failure stems from its decision to move on from its past which made it so unique.

While memories are preserved in place, they are also held in objects, such as with the pocket watch and the painted stone. The pocket watch was a family heirloom that instilled Urbain with great pain once broken by his grandson, as it was something that had persevered through the family's poverty-stricken days. For Urbain, the watch also served as a symbol of maturity, as it was given to him when his father left for Liverpool and he was given the responsibility of taking care of the family. Its loss perhaps then becomes a loss of memory as well, as the past finds itself erased because the memory was so strongly imbued in the object. The stone spurs a more imaginative strand from the narrator as he imagines his grandfather's movements in Rapallo, the Italian town that housed Nietzsche and Ezra Pound in the past, as he picked the stone and how he interacted with his wife.

Urbain's respect for art is further developed in this section, especially through music, as the narrator describes Urbain’s great reverence for Peter Benoit, the composer under whom he had played as a child. The narrator's allusions to Ezra Pound are integral as well, since they point to the difficulty of reconciling the man with his art, something which the narrator is attempting to do with his grandfather. He is trying to understand

who he was as a man through his artistic endeavors while also gaining an image of the man through his memoirs.

Some incidents are mentioned that provide context for the type of man that Urbain became as an adult, particularly the incident of his father's beating and the visit to the gelatin factory. Witnessing his injured fathers instilled a lifelong contempt for socialist movements, which helps the narrator understand why his grandfather disapproved when he became a leftist during his college years. Urbain's response to the socialists also points to his conservative nature, as he found comfort in the church and preferred hard work and pride as opposed to protesting in the streets. The response is also indicative of his pride, which he inherited from his mother. The visit to the gelatin factory points to the traits inherited from his father, since the blood and massacre of animals in the factory overwhelmed his senses to the point that he began to weep and became solemn with the compassion of his father being passed down to him. His senses, which he attempted to preserve for his art, were instead subject to the cruelty of humanity.

Discussion Question 1

What is the relationship between Ezra Pound and Urbain Martien?

Discussion Question 2

How does Urbain respond to adversity as an adolescent, and how does that inform his art?

Discussion Question 3

How does art pass through a single place, such as Rapallo, over time?

Vocabulary

lucre, sanctimonious, oratorio, immemorial, fulminate, ethereal, parquet

I (Pages 92-132)

Summary

After his arrival from Liverpool, Franciscus received another assignment from the church that would take almost two years. While he suffered through the damp and the cold, he looked forward to painting frescoes, an opportunity promised by the church after the completion of the first project. Despite this, he began work early on the frescoes, trying different colors on different boards, testing their viability in different shades of light, and experimenting with pigmentation as he went.

The narrator uses the journals of Urbain firsthand in the text, covering the events leading up to Franciscus's death. After New Years, pneumonia took hold of Franciscus, and his condition worsened despite the attempts of Celine, who, along with Urbain, stayed up long through the night to take care of her husband. As Franciscus struggled to regain normalcy in his breathing, he was admitted to the hospital, where he passed away in the night. Urbain then witnessed his normally stoic mother lose her bearings, as she mentally deteriorated and lost focus of her family. Urbain took charge of the family, finally given his father's golden pocket watch as a token of his new responsibility.

After typing up the pages surrounding Franciscus's death, the narrator thinks about the elder group that would come into his home on New Year's morning, his grandfather Urbain and his siblings with their husbands and wives. He would observe their annual rituals of gossiping and drinking from a distance, and as an adult, wonders about the complexity of their character that Urbain was able to capture in his paintings.

The next section of the narrative focuses on Celine in the aftermath of her husband’s death. Awakening from her period of grieving, Celine realized the trouble she had put her family through. She cleaned up and obtained a job from the church, mending clothes with the help of Louise, the daughter of the widowed Henri De Pauw. Visiting her husband's grave on a regular basis by herself, she began to receive offers of marriage from various suitors, all of which she turned down until Henri De Pauw's. Agreeing to marry him to secure her family financially, she angered Urbain, who was incensed at the decision. Once an adult, Urbain removed the tombstone from his mother's grave, not wanting the world to see Henri's name with Celine's. After attending a Jesuit retreat for a week, Urbain decided to attend military school, where served under French officers who discriminated against him.

After four years, Urbain returned home and began working at the railway and taking art classes again. Returning home from the distant funeral of a relative one day, he came about the site of Daniel Kinet's famous biplane crash four years prior, which he witnessed firsthand. Moving on from the site, he stumbled upon a young, naked woman bathing in a pond, where he was overcome by the image and his body's response, prompting him to run to the church and beg forgiveness for his indiscretion, his piousness overcoming his natural urges.

In 2012, the narrator visits Daniel Kinet's grave and the monument erected at the site of his crash. Other than him, there is only another woman. Afterward, he visits the shrine where his grandfather came to pray after witnessing the nude girl, and sees the statue of the Virgin Mary, a picture of which is included. Driving through traffic, he thinks of the impact the young woman had on his grandfather, and how it affected his art later in life.

Analysis

This section is notable for its multiple shifts of point of view. There is more of an emphasis on Urbain's story being told, with the narrator intervening less with his own observations. The text of Urbain's memoirs is also provided, where he is the primary narrator. This is done especially when covering the death of Franciscus, and the first person narration by Urbain allows for a more immediate analysis of the situation with the emotions fresh. We also get a section devoted to following Celine in the aftermath of her husband's death, as she regained her sense of self and made a decision to stabilize her family by marrying Henri De Pauw. Once this intense emotional period has ended in Urbain's life, the author reverts back to the conventional third person narration.

Urbain's relationship with his parents' is further explored, as he bore witnesses to two instances of his parents decline: his father's physical deterioration and eventual death, and his mother's mental instability. Prior to Franciscus' death, Urbain bore witness to his father’s artistry once more, as the former began preparations for a fresco by experimenting with different colors and their perception in different lights. This further develops the intimacy between father and son, as Urbain's respect for his father as an artist increased. But the trial of witnessing his father's death also took a toll on him, as the power of man was transferred to the younger man, who took the responsibility in stride, covering for the void that was temporarily left by his mother's indisposition. This is illustrated in the narrative through the symbolic act of Urbain taking his father's golden pocket watch, which serves almost as a ritual of acceptance that Urbain accepted gladly. Once in possession of it, his demeanor changed completely and he became more solemn and stoic than ever. Despite witnessing his parents out of character, especially his mother, Urbain did not lose his esteem for either of them, continuing to be a loving and supportive son.

Celine is further developed as a character as well by the author, as her normally proud demeanor was cracked with the death of her husband. She lost her senses and verbally struck out at anyone who tried to comfort her. In the absence of her husband, she had to redefine herself not just as a woman, but as a mother, which she did first by finding a job that would supplement Urbain's income. Her pride remained intact, though, as she was able to divert the attentions of most suitors, agreeing to marry Henri only because it would provide the best situation for her children. Despite Urbain's resentment at the decision, she was stoic in her demeanor and how she handled Henri in the marriage, not losing her character despite the vulnerability of her family.

Urbain's love of flying is explored through his admiration for Daniel Kinet, the pilot of a biplane whose crash Urbain witnessed firsthand. This serves as a departure from how is

character is normally drawn, as he did not have much in his life other than work and art. But his venture into military school was what really influenced his character, as he was subjected to French discrimination for the first time in his life as a Dutch speaking citizen. Despite his resentment, he was a good student and learned his instructions with an impeccable character that was admired. But his vulnerability as a man is examined as well, specifically when he came upon a naked woman. His reaction was overwhelming, and after regaining his senses, he rushed to the church to beg forgiveness for his sins, for thinking of falling into temptation. This reaction further adds to the complexity of his character, for at his heart he was chaste and religious, despite the years of back breaking work and tragedy in his life. He possessed the sensibility of perceiving a life needed to be a true artist.

Discussion Question 1

How does Urbain's admiration for Daniel Kinet inform his character?

Discussion Question 2

In the aftermath of his father's death, how does Urbain's relationship with his mother change?

Discussion Question 3

How does Franciscus' death inform Urbain's development as an artist?

Vocabulary

wizened, consecrated, chignon, astrakhan, kitsch, abstemious, surreptitiously

II, 1914-1918 (Part 1, Pages 135-149)

Summary

In Part II, Urbain begins to tell his own story, narrating his service in WWI in the present tense. On August 4th, 1914, a knock on the door calls him up to service, along with other boys in the neighborhood. Urbain reacts immediately, his years of training kicking in. The young men are pushed into an over packed train to Dendermonde, where they are divided into groups of 12. After taking over various houses and barns, the soldiers are static for three days before being provided with supplies and ordered to walk to Liege, where the Germans are attempting to break down various forts around the city. Their feet become covered in blisters after traveling for days on end, before they arrive in a hamlet called Hakendover. There, they fall asleep in a barn hungry and listless, as the rations are left behind and the farmer's wife refuses food and provisions.

After a few days of lying around, Urbain is informed that his mother has arrived to see him. She has traveled over sixty miles, stopping overnight along the way, to bring him food, all the while being treated with disdain by the commander. After she leaves, information arrives that the forts around Liege have fallen. Urbain realizes that he will eventually realize that the unfamiliar sound he hears is the infamous Big Bertha, and that the forts had fallen due to the first ever instances of air raid and the lack of reinforced concrete in the forts. Urbain is treated with more reverence after his mother's visit, and he is given control of a group of men. While at Haelen, they hear news of Germans killing innocent civilians indiscriminately.

On August 18, the group witnesses the air bombing on Tienen from a distance, confronting the hordes of civilians running from the city. Urbain and his men are ordered to report two miles ahead to support the 22nd Regiment, a commute during which five of Urbain's eight men desert him. Once they reach the rear lines of the 22nd, they are overwhelmed on all sides by the aerial bombardment and reduced to taking cover by lying flat on the ground. A French superior officer to whom Urbain is to report to dies, leaving the remaining officers in disarray. Their small attacks over a week are countered by the Germans sending spies and sowing distrust among the Belgians, confusing the Dutch and French speakers by speaking a different language. After being pushed back all the way to Boortmeerbeek, Urbain begins to sketch the desolate landscape around him, trying to capture debris and destruction, honing in on a dead horse. He thinks of his father as he draws, remembering the Sunday afternoons painting in the church. Despite the king ordering troops to retreat from around Antwerp, Urbain and his men remain at Boortmeerbeek, listening to the horror stories of the Germans torturing civilians, especially in Wallonia.

Analysis

There is a profound shift in the point of view for this section of the book. Instead of the narrator providing the primary voice, either through first-hand observation or by relating his grandfather's diary, Urbain becomes the primary narrator himself, telling his experience serving in the Belgian Army during WWI. The narration unfolds in the present tense, which provides for a sense of immediacy, but which also blurs the lines between fiction and biography, as Urbain, now dead, begins to narrate his own story that he recorded in his diaries. His grandson, the narrator from the previous section, steps back and allows Urbain's firsthand account, which is immediate and stark in its portrayal of war in all its forms.

Urbain is not on the front lines of the war against the invading Germans, which allows him to see the aftermath of the atrocities that are being committed, either through witnessing bombardment from a distance or by listening to accounts of violent attacks by Germans against civilians. The distance allows for a more powerful observation of the atrocities that are to come and also a cooler observation of the results of war, especially as he sees civilians running away from Tienen and the horror they bring with them, both verbally and physically. As an artist, Urbain is uniquely positioned to capture the horrors of war, which he does so as he sketches with paper and charcoal a scene of devastation. The image of the horse is particularly indicative of the horror wrought by war, as it shows how human conflict destroys nature, a nature that Urbain has loved for the sake of his art, its beauty providing him with aesthetic and intellectual stimulus but which is now destroyed. Yet, his instinct in the face of war is to record and draw, to retreat back into art as a place of comfort.

In the time of distress, Urbain's parents provide him with comfort as well. His mother's long journey to see him inspires strength not only in him, but also impresses his French officers to the point where they give him his own group of men to command, along with increased responsibility and openness to his thoughts about the events unfolding. He also remembers the Sunday afternoons spent with his father as he painted in church, and while the emotion is overwhelming at the time, the practice of drawing does help him deal with the emotional turmoil of bearing witness to war.

One of the tactics used by the Germans is to send spies who either speak broken French to Dutch soldiers, or broken Dutch to French soldiers—an attempt by them to extract information. The technique highlights the divisions among the French and Dutch forces in the Belgian Army, one that is evident in the disdain shown for Urbain and his friends by the French officers, who repeatedly mispronounce Urbain's name. It is an undoing for the Belgians, a weakness that the enemy repeatedly takes advantage of and one that sows discords among the ranks, whose morale is waning by the minute in light of the German advance.

Discussion Question 1

How do Urbain's parents influence him in war?

Discussion Question 2

How does language play a part on the battlefield?

Discussion Question 3

While Urbain is able to record his own thoughts, how does nature respond to war?

Vocabulary

cockerel, billeted, vestiges, tabernacle, primeval

II,1914-1918 (Part 2, Pages 150-169)

Summary

In this section, Urbain's first-person perspective of events continues in the present tense. With a new team from the 2nd Regiment, Urbain cautiously moves forward, avoiding German snipers while also dealing with the desertion of soldiers. Once in the forest of Schiplaken, Urbain notices the beauty around him, wishing to stop and draw. Reaching their meeting point with other teams, the soldiers fall asleep, Urbain staying up and observing the faces of his men in the light. He is awakened later by a bomb that destroys some of their equipment. Seeing the Germans set a farmhouse on fire beyond the woods, the Belgians begins to dig cover, with Urbain going out for recon and then coming back when seeing German machine guns. After a day and night playing cat and mouse, the Germans leave and Urbain leaves the woods with his men to see the destruction of the farmhouse and the church of the town of Schiplaken.

Moving between villages, Urbain takes in the beautiful summer landscape, which reminds him of seventeenth century Dutch paintings, all the while dealing with women asking about their sons and husbands. Urbain arrives at the Senne River, which the Germans are defending with machine guns from the other side. Any attempts to approach the bridge are overtaken by German bullets. While navigating through dead carcasses of horses, Urbain comes up with a firing pattern to confuse the Germans, who seemingly surrender, only to open fire when the Belgians approach. After dispatching of the German gunner, Urbain is forced into volunteering for a recon mission, where he determines the position of the Germans and provides support to sappers repairing the bridge. He is disgusted with the ungratefulness of his team after the mission.

Leaving the river, the battalion arrives in a deserted village, where they find an abundance of food and space, along with a wine cellar. While relaxing, the Belgians are attacked by planes firing and running Germans attacking the village. Urbain organizes a response and kills the 20 Germans with his team. Having sustained heavy losses, they leave the village the next day, finding food along the way from local nuns. Sensing Germans nearby, they stop and do reconnaissance, coming upon a black horse from the German side that they take in. The following day, while eating breakfast, the battalion is attacked again with the Germans setting up a machine gun in a farmhouse. Urbain, losing multiple men, slowly moves and uses a limited amount of bullets to take out the German soldiers, before running with his group of men to a barn where the rest of the battalion is located. Once there, Urbain finds that the horse from earlier has been slaughtered and learns that his cousin Rene has died in battle as well. In Zaventem, he spends a long time in the church praying before losing control and crying helplessly.

Analysis

Despite the constant threat of death, Urbain continues to find comfort in the beauty of nature, recalling Dutch paintings when walking through a summer landscape. His first instinct is to draw, which persists when his men are falling asleep. He pays details to the intricacies of light on their faces, the soldier in him unable to prevent the rise of the artist. This becomes an inner battle during his time in the war, as Urbain does not stop perceiving things around him artistically. In fact, he is able to find beauty everywhere around him, even in the blood and destruction of battle. There is an unwavering commitment to recognizing beauty, even in the darkness of war.

As the battalion moves forward through Belgium, Urbain and his men are attacked, unceasingly, on all sides by the Germans. Either by aerial bombardment or by faking surrender, the Germans use every trick in the book to surprise and overwhelm the Belgians. Urbain feels overwhelmed at times, yet also manages to maintain his cool. His training as a soldier kicks in, and he is afforded more responsibility as the French officers recognize his leadership and intelligence on the battlefield, disregarding momentarily Urbain's Dutch ethnicity. While the divide between the French and Dutch is apparent at times, even in war, in the heat of battle, both sides are unified in their pursuit of survival. The French officer who recognizes Urbain from military school affords him more responsibility, allowing him to go on more recon missions, and the soldiers respect him as well. Despite his hesitance, Urbain volunteers for dangerous missions as well when other soldiers refuse to do so. He is able to turn off the artist and transform into the perfect soldier at any time, whenever his survival necessitates it.

Praying in the church, Urbain finally loses his stoic demeanor and begins to cry. The church is a place of comfort in more than one way, as it not only serves as a bastion of artistic integrity, but it also provides Urbain an escape from the moral quandaries of the battlefield. It is a place where he can let his guard down and vent his emotions in light of all the death he has seen. Another symbol that continues on from the last section is that of a horse. The battalion is confronted by a black horse from the German side, which they manage to take in. But in war, even a beautiful animal is subject to the qualms of man, and the horse is eventually slaughtered. The men cannot start a fire so the meat hangs bloody, just like the horses Urbain encountered near the Senne River. The horse symbolizes the indiscriminate nature of war, not just among men, but amongst animals as well, as the German horse is subject to the same fate as the other horses.

Discussion Question 1

How does Urbain react to the death of comrades around him?

Discussion Question 2

What provides comfort to the men in battle?

Discussion Question 3

What differences does Urbain highlight between the tactics of the Belgian and German?

Vocabulary

sappers, quagmire, sticklebacks, sty, bedlam

II, 1914-1918 (Part 3-Battle of the Yser, October 1914 & Part 4, Pages 170-195)

Summary

Urbain's first-hand narrative continues in this section. During October, the group marches all through Flanders, their morale low and their feet injured from the constant walking. Once at Ichtegem, the men protest but are forced to move again, making their way to Yser, where they are forced to dig ditches to protect from any Germans that might arrive along the snakelike body of the river. Upon arrival, they are attacked by German shells and sustain heavy damages. A raft of munitions arrives down the river, followed by a large group of various animals swimming down the river, seemingly escaping from the death, which no one kills for food. Low on food, the men are forced to stay in the muddy trenches, unable to cover up a pile of feces. A week later, the group witnesses a young boy crying on the opposite bank, which turns out to be a decoy sent by the Germans., They fire on a Belgian who tries to save the boy. Urbain realizes the amorality of the enemy, which throws the Belgians in chaos.

Sent to the bends, Urbain and his men dig trenches and sleep in them, where Urbain is overcome by lust as he thinks of the young woman he encountered before the war. His lust fills him with shame and he ejaculates unwillingly. Waking a few hours later, he is aroused by calls to arms, as the Germans have invaded the trenches. In the frenzy, Urbain and two other men are ordered to run straight and mark places of cover and a jumping point for a charge into enemy lines. While charging, Urbain loses sight of any direction through the haze of combat, eventually succumbing to a gunshot to the groin and passing out. When he wakes, he lies in agony before crawling through dead bodies and mud, eventually being saved by Red Cross volunteers, who take him to recover. He finds that, after not receiving any signal, his battalion charged the enemy and was mowed down by the Germans. His bullet is removed and he begins to cry when seeing the nurses taking care of the men. He is put on a ship to Liverpool to recover there along with other wounded men.

Braving the cold weather, Urbain recuperates in Liverpool with the help of a nurse named Maude, whose help he is ashamed of asking for in moving around. Eventually, he is able to move about on his own, a time during which he searches for the church his father worked in unsuccessfully. One day, he walks into a chapel and is overcome by a shock of recognition. He recognizes his father's hand in the frescoes and paintings, and his face in that of a shepherd boy's. He thinks how his father drew the face, whether drawing through memory or having taken sketches. Urbain tries to retrace his steps the next day but is unable to find the place again. In London, he meets his stepbrother, Joris, whose wife had died in the bombardment, and from whom he receives news about his family's safety. Returning to the front, he is met with Kimpe, his old comrade, who fills him in about a new strain of tear gas being used. Other than filling sandbags and intermittent shooting, there is nothing to do but deal with rats in the trenches and

boredom. The unhygienic proximity to urine and feces becomes normal, during which Urbain wonders about the youth of the soldiers, finding comfort in prayer and his father's pocket watch.

Urbain thinks about the futility of their entrenchment and the disgusting conditions of their habitat and their bodies racked with disease. Some men sing to keep their spirits up. Urbain' spirits are up, as camaraderie has blossomed in the gloom of the trenches, with Urbain working hard to maintain discipline, especially when some of the men attempt to sexually molest a young farm girl selling fruit. One of the soldiers is a former cook who manages to cook decent meals for them. Wanting to write his observations down, Urbain finds comfort in drawing instead. He shoots a couple of partridges for food but has to store them away for the meat to soften. While at the forward post, Urbain and his men are involved in a brief skirmish. When he returns, he realizes the partridges are rotten. A newspaper notes that the Belgian front is quiet, even though it is May of 1915.

Analysis

The horrors of war are further explored in this section of the novel, with the explicit portrait of life in trenches around the Yser highlighting the lack of hygiene that becomes a danger in itself. The soldiers cannot leave, as they will be shot down by the Germans. Instead, they are forced to lie side by side with a pile of feces that they cannot cover up. The swarm of animals swimming through the river serves to symbolize nature's rejection of war. The combat has become so horrific that even the animals are deliberately escaping. The surreal element of the scene is compounded by the inability of the men to kill an animal for food, even though they are desperately in need of fresh food. The rejection of morality during wartime is examined as well, especially through the young boy sent by the Germans. Standing on the opposite banks of the river, his cries elicit compassion in the Belgians, who still hesitate to engage, as they are wary that it might be trick. Their suspicions are confirmed when one of the Belgians who approaches the child is shot. Urbain and the other men are horrified by the abandonment of morality. The morals of the men are decaying as their bodies decay as well in the trenches.

Urbain's pride as a man is examined through his injury. As he is shot in the groin and left to die, he displays remarkable resiliency, dragging himself through the haze of mud and dead bodies to a Red Cross ambulance. Yet, as he lays injured in a hospital, the sight of nurses helping men breaks his strength, as he begins to cry uncontrollably and is filled with shame at his own tears. While recuperating in Liverpool, his dependence on Maude, his nurse, fills him with shame as well, as she helps him to walk around and with his catheter. The injury is an emasculating experience for someone as strong and prideful as Urbain, who prides himself on his resilience and strength as a soldier.

While in Liverpool, Urbain searches for the church where his father had painted years ago, but is unable to find it, at least initially. However, he stumbles into a chapel and recognizes his father's painting, especially his own face in that of a shepherd boy's. He is overwhelmed at the recognition, and wonders about how his father could have possibly painted the face. The question of memory comes into play here, as Urbain

considers if his father remembered his face well enough to paint the face, or he took sketches. It seems Franciscus's love for his son was so strong that he drew him on a job away from home. His father's paintings initiate a string of his old memories, sitting in the church with his father on Sunday afternoons as the latter painted, inspiring awe in his son. Art becomes a conduit of love and memory over time in this case, as Franciscus was able to preserve his love for his family—and particularly his son—in a mural he painted away from home, a strand of love that Urbain is able to pick up when visits the church himself.

Back in the trenches after his recovery, horrors take a backseat and futility becomes the focus. The recovery period rejuvenates Urbain and his spirits are higher, which can partially be attributed to the lack of activity on the front, as actual battles are scarce so the men have more time to spend with each other. In the boredom that ensues, Urbain notices that the men are finding ways to combat the lack of activity. Life somehow manages to find itself in momentary lulls, as the men joke around and find small hobbies to occupy themselves. Despite the imminent threat, Urbain finds time to draw and comfort himself. The absurdity of war begins to rear its head, since despite being dangerously close to the enemy, the soldier are not engaging, something that weighs heavily on their minds and increases tension among the ranks, occasionally resulting in men deliberately initiating a skirmish just for the sake of some sort of activity. In the midst of all this, small treasures such as food find ways to inject their routine with vitality, especially the incident with the partridges, which Urbain is looking forward to eating but must be stored away for the meat to soften. When he returns to the birds, the meat is rotten. Amongst the hell of combat, Urbain looks forward to a decent morsel of food and is disappointed when he is met by nature's resistance.

Discussion Question 1

How does art serve as a conduit for love across time?

Discussion Question 2

In the midst of combat, how do the Belgian forces find ways to live life?

Discussion Question 3

How does Urbain the artist battle with Urbain the soldier while at Yser and Liverpool?

Vocabulary

dikes, sodden, taciturn, embarkation, lapwings, salvo, extortionate, wigwam

II, 1914-1918 (Part 5, Pages 196-222)

Summary

Urbain talks about the absurdity that accompanies their stay on the front, as one of the soldiers dresses in a pink tutu for the sake of entertainment but is then shot by the Germans. The man is eventually shot by one of his own to put him out of his misery. Urbain writes letters for the other soldiers and draws programs for small shows they put on, for which he is teased by his comrades. Due to the inactivity, Urbain notices the fatalism entering the demeanor of the soldiers, including him. He is tasked, along with eight men, to stealthily build a forward post with barbed wire, which, after a few close calls, comes to completion in three weeks. At the end, he is shot again and taken away, the date being August 18, 1915.

While lying in the hospital, Urbain is commended for his bravery, with a possible Medal of Honor on the horizon. Along with the rest of the wounded, Urbain is given a band performance in their honor, after which he is personally visited by the Queen. The meeting is overwhelming to him. After three weeks, he is transported along with other men to a converted casino in Dinard, Northern France, where Urbain is subject to crude physical therapy for his paralyzed leg. It takes him more than a month to get on his feet, after which he receives news that he will be made a Knight in the Order of the Crown, and is invited to Swansea by his stepbrother Raymond. After traveling through Saint-Malo, Urbain boards a ferry to Southampton. During the commute, he is faced with storm that threatens to destroy the boat. After that, he makes his way to London, and then to Swansea through Bristol with the cold, grey weather draining his spirits. When the dreary trip ends, he returns to the front, where, after witnessing the death of a one-armed soldier, he is shot and injured again in June 1916 while on a recon mission.

Urbain is sent to a mansion in Windermere, England to recuperate, where he develops an intimacy with Mrs. Lamb, the lady of the house, who shows him kindness. After he returns to the front, he is subject to possible disciplinary action due to using ammunition not issued by his superiors during his last mission, and he faces discrimination and humiliation at the hands of a French officer. Threatened with a transfer, it is revealed that his medals are a forgery. A senior officer promises the delivery of the real medals and allows him to stay with his unit. During the winter of 1917-1918, more and more soldiers die from cold, despair, and diseases borne out of the trenches. While the stalemate continues, they hear of mustard gas and rumors of German desertion and surrender. He returns briefly home in the autumn and sees his family changed, his mother having lost her physical pride, but still mentally formidable. Urbain notices the people's behaviors changing as the war nears its end, with some people becoming outspoken patriots despite having profited from the war, while stories are floating of a German impregnating a starving woman and a farmer's daughter hiding a German in her farmhouse. Urbain notices the daughter of a merchant across the street, whom he sees from his window. She looks like his mother and he is stricken by her beauty. They

make eye contact and a connection develops from a distance. Smitten, Urbain glosses over the final weeks of the war, overcome by his desire to see the young woman again.

Analysis

With the war winding down, Urbain's narration of the front begins to differ from earlier, as the lack of activity in the trenches prevents any details of action that were prevalent early in the war. Instead, the focus is on the static nature of the war and the psychological toll it takes on the soldiers, as they become weary but also accustomed to the nature of their existence at the time, making do by playing games, or entertaining each other with comical outfits. They even arrange little performances for each other behind the front lines, their only way to provide some levity in the otherwise dreary routine. Despite these attempts, the realities of war are always at hand, as the soldier dressed in a tutu is shot first by the Germans, and then by his fellow soldiers to put him out of his misery. Faced with a lack of action, the soldiers become fatalistic and either lose their lives through sickness, as they reside in the muddy trenches for long stretches of time, or they deliberately initiate skirmishes with the Germans for the simple sake of escaping the damning silence and inactivity that becomes part of their routine.

Despite being weary of the war, Urbain's pride is fueled when he is visited by the Queen while he recuperates in a hospital. Prior to that, when he is informed by a nurse that he is to be made a Knight in the Order of the Crown his reaction speaks for itself, as he is not excited at the prospect. Yet, when the Queen visits him personally, he is overcome with emotion and unable to articulate his thoughts as she stands over his head to commend him for his bravery in sustaining injuries during combat. Despite the dreariness of war taking a toll on him, Urbain is once more filled with pride at being a soldier.

Even after leaving the front to recuperate elsewhere, the crushing grey of the war follows Urbain, especially in the form of nature. While traveling from Saint-Malo to Southampton, the ferry is overtaken by a storm that threatens to capsize the vehicle. Urbain and the other men have to endure a night of a near-death experience, one that batters their already weakened spirits. While the Germans may be far away in the trenches, the fatality of war follows Urbain as he tries to leave the country as well. Once in the United Kingdom, he is accosted by the grey cold of the weather, which further demoralizes him. In times of war, there is no reprieve for a solider such as Urbain, even if he is far away from the front lines.

While there is a lull in combat, the old divisions between the Dutch and French rear their heads again. When Urbain returns to combat after his third injury, he is treated humiliatingly by a French superior, who takes opportunity to embarrass and insult him. Threatened with a transfer, Urbain is saved by another French superior officer, who reveals that the medals that Urbain has received are a forgery, which points to the perversity of ethnic divisions, even in times of war. His status as a war hero is not enough to protect him from the rampant contempt possessed by the French officers towards the Dutch soldiers.

Discussion Question 1

How does the static aspect of war translate to behavioral changes in soldiers?

Discussion Question 2

In what ways does the end of the war change the behavior of civilians?

Discussion Question 3

Where does Urbain channel his energies as the war comes to an end?

Vocabulary

bodice, bestial, bilious, opalescent, visages, convalescence

III (Pages 225-255)

Summary

Sitting at his desk in 1976, Urbain tries to write down his thoughts about Maria Emelia, his lost love, but the heat prevents him doing so and he has run out of paper. After the war, the victory was celebrated gloriously, but the death of Christian morals was felt in the aftermath of the horrors, and the soldiers returned home traumatized and disillusioned. The enchantment of Old Europe had fallen away and people were forced to face the depravity of the war. Celine has moved houses after marrying Henri, and from the view of the window, Urbain sees Maria Emelia for the first time. He approaches the house and is embraced as a son. Maria meets Celine soon and the two women who look so much like each other with their black hair and proud eyes appraise and accept each other. Urban and Emelia become inseparable, as Urbain is smitten with her. The future is looking up for him, as he has found a job at the railways workshop. However, the Spanish flu of 1919 claims Maria's life. Urbain is devastated, but like a good soldier, he accepts the recommendation to Gabrielle Ghys, Maria's older sister. When their daughter is born, Urbain insists on naming her after Maria. The marriage between the two is peaceful but lacking any passion, as it is rumored that the two only made love twice, with Gabrielle insisting he stop after she became pregnant.

The narrator interjects again in the story, attempting to understand the emotional complexity of the marriage between Urbain and Gabrielle. How could have Gabrielle dealt with the fact that she could never live up to her dead sister's image, the woman after whom her daughter is named, the narrator questions. Could she have felt humiliated, and thus have resisted physical relations? Urbain had to deal with the image of his Maria in his mother as well. His only escape from the four women—his dead love, his wife, his mother, and his daughter—was in painting, where he enjoyed paintings of women of different backgrounds and in different settings. Born in 1922, their daughter was a frail child but was a source of energy in the house they had on the banks of the Scheldt River. In 1936, at the age of forty-five, Urbain medically retired from his job, receiving a pension that barely covered their expenses. He was given bonuses for his combat experiences, but because he was not promoted on merit to lieutenant as Wallonians had been, he received less and was indignant at the injustice. He found comfort in the Flemish independence movement, embracing his Dutch origins over the years.

The narrator finds it strange that there is no mention of Urbain's mother's death in the memoirs, as he finds an old picture of Urbain, Celine, and Gabrielle sitting on a grassy hill, with Celine and Gabrielle smiling at the camera while Urbain looks off in the distance. Looking at the image, the narrator realizes his grandfather's clothes match the ones he had become intimate with in his childhood, and he remembers his childhood excursions to the beach. Facing the scarcity of food in WWII was not difficult for him, as he had been used to poverty growing up. During the 1960s, Urbain realized that he was color-blind, confusing his red and greens, as it was pointed out by his friend Adolf

Baeyens when he painted a green sea a reddish-brown color. After that, his paintings became stylistically looser and he relied more on charcoal than before. He gave a lot of paintings away and never charged for them.

The narrator recalls going to the World Expo in 1958 in Brussels, where he remembers the colors black and white in the structures and in the clothes of the people. In the present day, he visits Schiplaken, exploring the area first on Google Maps and then in person and noticing the differences between the two experiences. He includes a picture of the monument, a long wall with black letters and a sculpture by Bernard Callie of a mother bent over a dying soldier. He meaninglessly writes names down of fallen soldiers, just to keep his hands warm, and visits other places of battle during the war, realizing that he is unable to connect to the emotional current of the place. He recalls Fridays during the summer when the family would go to Bruges to visit the Basilica of the Holy Blood, where people congregated to kiss a bloodied cloth from the Holy Land, rumored to have the blood of Christ. The narrator remembers stopping for sundaes afterward in the heat, and memory of blood and ice cream is intertwined. He comes to realize that his grandfather is the Pure Fool, a completely innocent person subservient to humanity. Years after Urbain's death, the narrator found a copy of Bruges-la-Morte, a novel by Hughes Viane that follows a man who finds a double of his lost love, only to realize that she is just a caricature. The narrator draws parallels between the protagonist of the novel and Urbain's life, the double being Gabrielle in this case. He wonders if Urbain had been a widower his entire life, mourning the loss of his love while living with her image in Gabrielle, as he also has a reproduction of the Rokeby Venus in the book along with small black hairs, which he surmises belonged to Maria. Instead of grieving openly, he spent his live painting nature, avoiding his pain.

Analysis

Urbain's relationship with Maria Emelia is the first time he is shown to be emotionally vivacious, other than his Sunday afternoons with his father. Around her, he opens up emotionally and is excited for the bright future ahead of him. His love for her allows him to move on from the horrors of the war he has just left behind, at least momentarily. This transformation begins at the end of the previous section, as the final events of the war are summarized in favor of Urbain's growing fascination with the neighboring girl who has black hair and stands tall like his mother.

For the first time in his life, Urbain, who has never had relations with a woman, and has been too weak to interact with them emotionally, such as with the nurse Maude, is now confronted with an opportunity to initiate a romantic relationship and how he does so is telling. Instead of fretting about the house and indulging in fantasies, he simply walks to her house and introduces himself to the family, coming back with her within two hours. While the artist in Urbain may have recognized her beauty, he is impressed more by her resemblance to his mother, physically and also in the aura they project. He is gripped by a determination and does not waste time, making his way to her home and presumably asking her hand in marriage. It is an efficient manner of going about a romance, one that recalls his military training, and one that pays him immediate dividends.

While it may be easy to read into his attraction to Maria as Oedipal in nature, as she resembles his mother strongly, the reality of it is simply that he admires his mother deeply and has incredible respect for her as a woman, as a mother, and as a strong individual who loves the people around her immensely and who taught him how to live with pride and dignity, even in the face of catastrophe. Seeing Maria's physical similarity evokes all of the aforementioned emotions he associates with his mother, and he is driven to her immediately. Gabrielle does not possess the same look in her eyes as Maria, and as such, does not induce the same emotion in Urbain as her sister.

The marriage between Urbain and Gabrielle is described as profound but idyllic, a relationship that is rooted in a strong bond rather than intense passion. It is almost as if there is an unspoken agreement between husband and wife that the feeling of Maria in their life can never be evoked again, and they must live their lives in the shadow of her young, tragic death. Yet, Gabrielle has to confront her existence as a replacement her entire marriage, as her marriage was born out of necessity rather than romance after the death of Maria. Urbain names their daughter after Gabrielle’s sister, the young child possessing the vivacity that the older Maria once had. At all corners, Gabrielle has to deal with the shadow of her dead sister, and it is no wonder that she physically restrains herself from Urbain, who on occasion sees a resemblance between her and Maria. It is not just Gabrielle who is still haunted by the dead Maria, as Urbain still thinks longingly of her, but does so passively without any outward demonstration of it. Naming his daughter Maria is the biggest indication of his love for Maria. His worn copy of the novel Bruges-la-Morte is a symbol of a hidden obsession with the dead Maria, as the novel's plot consists of a man confronted with a double of his dead love, one that is false and unable to provide the same love as the lost one. The fictional plot mirrors in essence Urbain's life, as Gabrielle is unable to provide him the same passion and love that Maria did. In the book, there are also a few black hairs, which presumably belong to the dead Maria. Urbain is unable to let go of the past, and in a sense, he is only holding onto the idea of what Maria could have been, as their romance was never fully able to blossom into what it could have been.

The narrator anointing Urbain as the Pure Fool is interesting, as it highlights the moral simplicity of his character that persists throughout his life. Despite being thrown into labor as a child, he is able to retain his moral innocence, as evidenced by his horror when witnessing the massacre at the gelatin factory, and the appreciation for artistic beauty imbued in him by his father. Even after going through a horrific war, he comes home and is a good human being, treating his wife with dignity despite the shadow of her sister's death over their marriage. He remains deeply religious throughout his life. No matter the tragedies, Urbain retains his sense of humanity, which can be also be attributed to his love for art, as he the practice of sketching and drawing nature instills in him a discipline and an appreciation for humanity and nature that persists through his entire life.

Discussion Question 1

How does Urbain escape the pain of Maria Emelia's death?

Discussion Question 2

While the narrator provides his own reading of Urbain and Gabrielle, what are further complications within their relationship?

Discussion Question 3

What could be the reason behind Urbain not mentioning his mother's death in his memoirs?

Vocabulary

scrimp, credulity, cavalcade, chiaroscuro, recessive, crocuses, laconically

III (Pages 256-286)

Summary

Urbain never painted a war scene, and the only image from the war is his photograph. In the 1960s, Urbain veered away from his small projects and began to copy grander pieces, such as the painting by Anthony Van Dyck of St. Martin cutting his cloak in two and giving half of it to a beggar. The painting is inserted in the text and depicts St. Martin sitting on a white horse, using a sword to cut the cloak as it falls on the two muscular beggars underneath. The narrator recalls the process in which Urbain went about the project, creating and modifying a canvas in his room, while also creating a grid to expedite the process. The copy came out flawless, even with Urbain's colors a little brighter. Among other works, Urbain's best copy is "The Man with the Golden Helmet," which was initially thought to be done by Rembrandt but eventually it was discovered not to be. Urbain made several copies for his friends. The narrator recalls seeing a copy by his grandfather of De Hondecoeter's "Poultry Yard with a White Peacock" in a restaurant, remembering that the painting inspired him to write a book. He remembers a St. Nicholas day in the late 1950s receiving a wooden airplane made by his grandfather, putting a code, DK 100710, on it that the narrator later realizes refers to Daniel Kinet's death. Having read Urbain's memoirs, the narrator begins to make connections, realizing the first cigarette he smoked was a gift to Urbain from Mrs. Lamb, along with the scarf his younger sister used to wear.

Suddenly, the narrator is overcome by a memory from a spring childhood where while Urbain was telling him what it means to be a soldier. The child version of the narrator asked if his grandfather could do a handstand and the older man obliged. After years of avoiding doing so, the narrator eventually began to visit war cemeteries from WWI, attempting to touch the emotional current of his grandfather during the war. While at the Citadel of Dinant a few years ago with his son, the narrator felt an emotional connection to his grandfather through the reconstructed trenches of the war museum. Acknowledging that he is nearing the end of the story, the narrator talks about the last pictures, bringing up a portrait of Gabrielle first. It is a simple portrait of the woman, where she wears a black mantilla and looks at the viewer with a sense of tranquility, the painting evoking the love Urbain had for his wife. Recalling the love Urbain showed her in her last year after a stroke, the narrator recognizes the portrait of her as the greatest painting ever done by his grandfather, one that was cathartic. While digging through his grandfather's things, the narrator finds a picture of Urbain's parents and a photo of Maria Emelia standing next to Gabrielle, a photo that is printed by itself numerous times. Finding a copy of the Rokeby Venus in the attic, the narrator realizes that the face reflected in the mirror is not the original but Maria Emelia, an image that stayed in the attic most likely because of Gabrielle's indignation.

In May of 2012, Urbain decides to visit the Tervaete Loop on the Yser River, where Urbain endured during the war. While there, he realizes the difficulty of war, as everything is so open. He finds a small memorial dedicated to the lives lost. He realizes

the mute, quaint landscape he hears now must have been a terror for the soldiers who waited for imminent death. For a while he walks along the river, attempting to trace Urbain's steps that were outlined in the memoirs, while noticing the suitability of the landscape for a painting. While in his final years, Urbain was affected heavily by the Entr'acte No. 3 of the ballet music from Schubert's "Rosamunde." In his last years, stiff joints made it difficult for Urbain to continue painting, but he did so regardless. The doctor would often be called for his shortness of breath and they would talk about different issues in art. During this time, he also attempted to do a self-portrait, but failed do one convincingly, as he was unable to bring life into his image, though a second version was less disciplined but more true. Despite his failure at the self-portrait, Urbain was remarkable at copies, especially "The Man with a Golden Helmet," where he succeeded in taking the soldier out and inserting art, even though he failed to do so in his self-portraits. The narrator imagines the contradiction of being a soldier and artist, war and turpentine, heavily on Urbain's mind as he went to bed for the last time, going through his daily routine but not waking in the morning. The final image is of Urbain in heaven, waiting admission as a soldier, correcting his name before he walks through the gates.

Analysis

Urbain's true nature as an artist is explored at the end of the novel, as the emphasis is less on original reproductions and more on his ability to create incredibly authentic copies. Despite the love of art imbued in him by his father, who served as a primary inspiration throughout his life, he can never acquire the artistic originality that his father was known for, even if he was just a poor church painter. While he is able to create small, simple pieces, the majority of his skill shines in his reproductions of other paintings. The only time he creates something original that is emotionally and aesthetically complex is when he paints a portrait of Gabrielle, one that is life affirming in its dedication to portraying the vitality of her life. Despite the complexity of their marriage, he does not hesitate to do justice to her as a wife and paints a portrait that shows her beauty as a woman despite her age. He is not able to extend the same courtesy to himself, as his self-portraits are mechanical and lack the emotional and aesthetic complexity of Gabrielle's portrait, and even the copies he becomes so renowned for. His only original production is his portrait of wife of decades, the only woman he loved truly, as the romance with Maria ended too soon to have been considered love and instead is just a passion that hides beneath the surface.

The narrator becomes more explicit in the journeys that he records in the book, as he is deliberately attempting to forge a connection with his grandfather through the places the latter had been too as well. While earlier it may seem as if he is just visiting different places around the city out of curiosity, or to see how a place has changed since his childhood, now he makes it clear that he is following Urbain's path, especially as a soldier, by visiting places such as the banks of Yser, where Urbain was injured twice during the war and where he displayed marvelous courage. Having read the memoirs of Urbain, he is attempting to access the emotions of Urbain as the soldier and artist, the man who loved Maria Emelia and who loved his mother and father dearly—not Urbain

as the stoic and distant grandfather. With the memoirs in his mind, he is able to successfully visualize Urbain and his movements, along with the other soldiers, during their time at Yser as soldiers. Yet, he remains always out of reach of the emotional current that he is attempting to pick on, as it seems as if he is attempting to recreate the emotional spectrum that Urbain was experiencing during the war at the specific time and place. He notices that the landscape is ripe for painting, which points to his emotional growth over the course of his adventure with Urbain, as he is able to see nature as art as well as his grandfather did during the war. But Urbain did so in a state of extreme chaos, while he is doing so years later in a relative calm. While the memoirs have provided a deeper insight into his grandfather, Urbain's emotions are always out of reach, only their essence passing by the grandson, the narrator.

While art provides an emotional portrait on the surface, there is also significant material lurking under the surface. This is significant in a number of pieces attributed to Urbain, including the Rokeby Venus in which the reflection of the woman is different from the original, and is instead that of Maria Emelia. Urbain's passion for his taboo, as he is married to her sister whom he does truly love, but the passion of the unknown he could have had with Maria is always haunting him and he preserves her in the mirror of the Rokeby Venus that is hidden in the attic. There are layers and layers to how deep Urbain hides his true feelings, which shows up in his self-portraits. His art fails him whenever he attempts to draw himself, as he seems to have lost touch with his own emotional core over the years since he has been suppressing it for so long. But the failure of his self-portraits also points to the eternal conflict of life, the battle between war and turpentine, between being an artist and a soldier. Whenever he sees himself in the mirror, he is only able to see a soldier. His art fails him at a time of self-discovery. Yet, during the war, art served its purpose in sustaining him and keeping him alive. Despite the struggle, Urbain is able to embody and carry the contradictory elements of his life, dying comfortably and having loved and been loved.

Discussion Question 1

How does the battle between war and turpentine manifest in Urbain's last years?

Discussion Question 2

How does Urbain hide his love for Maria Emelia through his art?

Discussion Question 3

What can be made of the narrator's attempt to connect with his grandfather by visiting Yser?

Vocabulary

rapier, tympanum, lapwings, verdant, protuberances, andantino, diatribes, coiffure

Characters

Urbain Martien

Born and raised in Ghent, East Flanders, Urbain Martien is part of a poor family that struggles to make ends meet but is generally happy. Urbain develops a fascination for art early in his life through his father, and is generally described as a well-mannered son. However, due to the family's financially dire situation, he is forced into working at a young age, and he changes drastically as a result, the physically demanding work changing him physically and mentally.

As a son, Urbain is devoted to his parents, loving and admiring both immensely, his father for artistic endeavors and his mother for her proud personality. In the absence of his father, he becomes the man of the house and assumes the responsibility without complaint, becoming the primary breadwinner. He eventually enrolls in military school, and is noted for his discipline and adeptness as a soldier. His qualities that impress his superiors in military school work well for him in the battlefield, where he displays tremendous bravery but is hampered by the discrimination shown to him by his French superiors.

Throughout his life, Urbain shows a profound respect for the women in his life, from his mother to Gabrielle, his wife of many years. He is always in awe and admiration of the women around them, his life revolving around their existences. His mother teaches him pride and she becomes, to him, the epitome of a woman. The qualities she possesses are what he finds in Maria Emelia and what attract him to her in the first place. While he loses her, he still able to live a satisfying life with Gabrielle, her sister.

Art plays an important part in his life, from the childhood memories he has with his father in the church, to his reliance on painting in his later years as a means of dealing with the death of his wife and the loss of his young love. Art is what helps him see the beauty despite the chaos of war. He also uses art as a means of suppressing his deepest desires, hiding the face of Maria Emelia away from his wife. Art is also his biggest failure, as he is unable to reach the level of artistic originality as his father, instead becoming adept at copying famous paintings. His most powerful original paintings are a portrait of his wife and the subversive manner in which he paints Maria. Since his desires are hidden under layers of emotions, he is unable to even paint himself, the conflict between soldier and artist making it difficult to define himself as an individual.

Celina Andries

Born in a middle class family, Celina Andries falls in love with the gaunt church painter, Franciscus, and displays a remarkable source of determination in marrying against her family's wishes, something that becomes a constant in her life and is what makes her so

respectable to her son. Despite coming from an affluent background, she is able to adjust to her family's way of life, going as far as swapping her comfortable shoes for clogs.

Her fierce independence becomes clear when she loses her husband. While she loses her mental stability for a while, she is able to recover and find herself on her feet again, working in different capacities to help keep the family afloat. When confronted with various suitors, she is able to deflect them with her pride, only succumbing eventually to a proposal due to the financial needs of her family. Her love for her husband is constant, even in death, and it is presumed that never offered any romantic engagement to her second husband.

Franciscus Martien

A poor church painter, Franciscus is lauded for his beautiful paintings and devotion to his craft. Despite his skills, he is beset by physical ailments, something that constricts his ability to feed his family. Yet, he is loving to the people around him as he has a close relationship with his wife that persists despite his early death from illness. He also inspires Urbain to appreciate the beauty in art early in his life, as they spend a lot of time together in the church on Sunday afternoons, him painting murals while Urbain observes from beneath. His love for his family, and in particular for Urbain, is preserved in the murals he paints while in Liverpool, drawing his son's face into that of a shepherd's, which Urbain sees when he is recuperating from injury in England.

Narrator

The grandson of Urbain, the unnamed narrator is a writer who has discovered the notebooks and memoirs of his grandfather, Urbain Martien. Before embarking on the journey to understand his grandfather better, he has to confront his own memories of the man from his childhood, separating the image he has then from the image he is about to confront once he delves into the memoirs. His primary means of investigation is to understand his grandfather by tracing his life geographically, hoping to pick up on the emotional state of the man by visiting the different places he had been over the course of his life. He also considers the importance Urbain has had on his own life, instilling a love for art early on. Having discovered the true secret behind Maria Emelia and her preservation in the Rokeby Venus, the narrator finally comes to terms with the life his grandfather lived between two worlds, the world of a soldier and that of an artist.

Gabrielle Ghys

The wife of Urbain Martien for many decades, she was never the first choice and she has to live with that realization throughout her marriage. Gabrielle is the older, plainer sister of Maria Emelia, and Urbain is asked to marry her when Maria passes away, and they both acquiesce out of a sense of duty. Their relationship has none of the vivacity of passion that was present between Urbain's short relationship with Maria, but she

provides him support over the years and they develop a deep bond, one that Urbain remembers fondly in the years after her death. Her physical intimacy with Urbain is minimal, the narrator noticing that the possible reason behind this could be that her resemblance to her sister would arouse feelings of Maria towards her, and the shame of having to live up to her dead sister preventing her from engaging in physical relations on a consistent basis.

Maria Emelia

The daughter of a neighboring merchant, Urbain notices her for the first time when on a visit before the end of the war, recognizing her beauty and similarity to his mother, both in physical appearance and in personality. Their relationship grows quickly but is cut short when Maria falls victim to the Spanish flu. Her presence in death remains stronger than in her life, as she continually casts a shadow over the marriage of Urbain and Gabrielle. When their daughter is born, Urbain insists on naming her after his dead love and Gabrielle's sister. Urbain's passion for her never passes away, and he preserves her by painting her face in the mirror of the Rokeby Venus copy that he has made.

Henri De Pauw

An alcoholic neighbor, Henri first comes to the forefront of Urbain's life when the former's wife passes away and the Martien family has to share some of the burden of taking care of the children. After Franciscus' death, Henri proposes to Celine belligerently until she accepts his offer of providing financial stability to her children. He is noted for being gruff and frustrated, especially as Celine refuses to engage with him emotionally and physically. Urbain has an uneasy relationship with him that develops into a reluctant mutual acceptance.

Joris De Pauw

The son of Henri De Pauw, Joris is also Urbain's stepbrother who is noted for his scholarship that allowed him to achieve a higher education. He is someone that Henri admires deeply for his scholarly route in life, hoping that he could have been on that path as well. His last mention is when Urbain sees him in England, as he just lost his wife.

Son

The son of the narrator, he is a typical teenager in that he is absorbed in technology and hesitates to engage when his father is elucidating art to him. The narrator wonders why the generational gap skips between grandparents and grandchildren, as he was able to acquire his appreciation of art from his grandfather, yet he is unable to convey the same to his own son.

Unnamed Nude Female

While walking through the countryside, Urbain sees a young, nude woman bathing in a pond and the image becomes imprinted in his mind forever. She unabashedly stares back at him until he is overcome by nervousness. She creates a battle between the pious Urbain and the man Urbain, as his religious convictions conflict with his body's responses to her image.

Symbols and Symbolism

Golden Pocket-watch

Urbain's golden pocket-watch is representative of memory passed down through generations, as it was initially given to him by his father and he passed it down to his grandson, the narrator. For Urbain, it is a symbol of strength and responsibility, given to him by his mother after his father's departure, and the memory is damaged when his grandson accidentally breaks the watch years later.

Notebooks

Notebooks are a means of transporting memory through time, as Urbain preserves his life in his diaries, leaving it as a legacy to his grandson. The narrator finds it difficult to initiate the project of reading and transcribing the notebooks, as for him, it is a fear of disassociating from memory and authenticating Urbain's memories separate from his own.

Art

Art is symbolic of love and perseverance, something that can persist through generations no matter what happens in the world surrounding the characters. It is a means by which people bond with each other as well, as Urbain's fondest memories with his father as a child is witnessing him paint in a church.

Rokeby Venus

The Rokeby Venus by Velazquez is a painting that shows its head multiple times over the course of the novel as an object that preserves forbidden love. Urbain preserved his image of the dead Maria Emelia in his rendition of the painting, weeping over it in the future, despite his long marriage to Gabrielle.

Churches

Churches serve as a sanctuary for the poor and art. For Urbain and his father, Franciscus, churches present an opportunity to create and preserve art through the years.

Portraits

Portraits painted by Urbain are his way of preserving the image of the person, and the emotional connection he has with that person. He does a portrait of his wife Gabrielle, his daughter, and his old love, Maria, yet when attempting to complete a painting of himself, he comes off as reserved and distant, unable to reveal himself through his own hands.

The Dutch Language

The Dutch language serves as a symbol for identity throughout the novel, as the principle characters are from Ghent, a city in Flanders. Urbain has to deal with the discrimination of the Flemish people when he is in military, and his name is constantly mispronounced by his French superiors, asserting social barriers even during the war.

War and Turpentine

The title of the novel highlights the lifelong struggle of Urbain Martien, a man who adored art his entire life as a means of expression but also as a means of love. Yet, as a man, he was always forced into action for someone else. As a child, he had to engage in hard labor and as an adult, he was thrust into a war, something that he carried with him his entire life. Urbain's journey over the years was balancing the painter with the soldier, something he struggled with consistently.

Nudity

For Urbain, nudity serves as something that is forbidden, especially as someone who is devoted. There is a rumor that he once saw his wife nude by accident, and he was never able to do so again. His first instance of seeing a young woman naked results in him becoming overwhelmed by his body's response and taking refuge in religion instead.

Flight

The flight of planes forms an important part of Urbain's childhood, for along with his father's painting, the early flying aircrafts in Ghent serve as an escape from the dreary poverty of his life. He witnesses the flight of Daniel Kinet, a famed Belgian flyer, and also witnesses his death from a crash. Urbain is emotionally affected by Kinet's death, which in a way signals the death of his escape as well.

Settings

Ghent

The capital city of East Flanders, the city of Ghent is the birthplace of the narrator and his grandfather, Urbain Martien. It is the setting of Urbain's childhood, his life as the child of a poor family, and where he meets the love of his life, Maria Emelia Ghys. As a city in Flanders, Dutch is the primary language and the conflict between Dutch speakers and the French bourgeoisie is a key part of Urbain's life.

Liverpool

Urbain comes here to recuperate after his first injury in battle, and while wandering here, he finds the church where his father, Franciscus, was commissioned to paint. He sees an image of himself in the Biblical paintings and his love for painting and art is evoked, along with memories of his father.

Yser

The site of an elongated battle between the Belgians and Germans, the river is key to stemming the onslaught of the invaders. Urbain suffers his most serious injuries here, but also suffers emotionally during the long stalemates that he has to endure through in cold, wet trenches.

Schiplaken

This is the location where Urbain receives his first experience of war, as the Germans use artillery to attack the Belgians as they rest in a small village.

Chapel of Our Lady of the Seven Sorrows

The Chapel of Our Lady of the Seven Sorrows is Franciscus's first place of employment during Urbain's childhood. Urbain's memories of witnessing his father painting influence him heavily, inspiring in him not only his lifelong love for art, but also his love for his father. The Church also provides sanctuary to the family in terms of financial support.

Themes and Motifs

Art as a Conduit of Emotion

Throughout the novel, art is used as device that holds and transmits memory over time, either as something that sparks an old memory, or as an image that helps one person help understand the experiences and emotions of another. The various paintings that held importance for Urbain are used by his grandson, the narrator, to help understand the man, hoping that the images can spark the same emotions in him that they did for his grandfather. Eventually he is able to uncover the hidden meaning behind Urbain's version of the Rokeby Venus, as the older man had preserved the love for his lost Maria in the mirror of the painting, a forbidden act that he kept secret from everyone around him, especially his wife.

Art also serves as a means of intimacy in the manner in which it brings together Urbain and his father. Their foremost intimate moment is when Urbain would sit quietly while his father would paint in the church on Sunday afternoons. The time spent together not only brings the two together, but also inspires a lifelong passion in Urbain for his father and art. He develops an innate understanding for the aesthetic importance of art, as he is able to recognize beauty, and the comfort that comes from it, when he is stuck on the battlefield.

Despite the focus on painting as the primary art form that held importance in Urbain's life, there is also the matter of his memoirs, which are artistic in their own sense, as they preserve a lifetime of experiences and emotions in their pages, done so in a manner that is able to truthfully explain a life to a grandson who is reading the pages decades later. The memoirs are artistic as they reveal the truth of Urbain's life, as a boy growing up in provincial Belgium, to a soldier on the battlefield, to a husband who has lost the love of his life. The accounts of Urbain's life evoke in the memoir feelings of love and nostalgia, and finally reverence and respect for a man who dedicated his entire life to serving the higher purposes of humanity and art.

The Power of Female Figures

From his mother to his wife Gabrielle, women play an important part in Urbain's life, as acknowledges the beauty they possess but is also cognizant of their positive qualities, offering them the respect they deserve. The most important female figure in his early life is his mother, Celine, who, despite coming from a well-to-do family, falls in love with a poor painter and adjusts well to the hard life that she receives in her marriage. Urbain is always aware of her pride and strength, the manner in which she deals with the world despite being a woman, and he draws comfort and strength from it.

Both Ghys sisters play an important role in Urbain's life as well. Maria Emelia is the woman he falls head over heels for, seeing her for the first time from his window. From

there, their romance blossoms with the approval of both families until tragedy strikes and Maria dies as a result of the Spanish flu. In the aftermath of her death, Urbain is devastated, and despite years gone by, still manages to preserve his memory of her by keeping some of her black hairs in his book and by painting her face in the mirror of the Rokeby Venus. She holds a power over him, in death, that does not weaken over the years.

Gabrielle, despite living in the shadow of her more charismatic sister, manages to be a good wife to Urbain, and their relationship, if not passionate, is loving. Despite the devastation of Urbain, she manages to provide a strong support for him with her proud personality, a trait that Urbain recognizes and admires, remembering her with love in his memoirs.

The Church as a Social and Artistic Sanctuary

By offering itself as a space, the church serves as a place where artists can display their prowess, while also working to help the poor, both roles having an importance in Urbain's life. Franciscus is a talented artist who is able to flex his artistic prowess in the church, the physical space not only allowing him to paint but also to practice and affirm his religion in the manner that is most genuine to him. He paints murals and does good work that is praised by all, even if it is not most astute work, financially. But more importantly, the church serves as a place where he is able to pass on the importance and beauty of art to his son, Urbain, all of which is done with simplicity. There is no explicit conversation, but the simple act of observation by Urbain, who is able to witness the beauty of his father's work through the religious images he draws. Later, as an adult, Urbain visits Liverpool and finds the murals that his father had painted in a church, enabling the young man to once again be closer to his father through his work.

Over the years of his childhood, Urbain and his family also receive different forms of assistance from the church, primarily through the employment they provide Franciscus and Celine, but also through the volunteers they send over time to assist the family, with free rations of food provided. Even though the assistance is meager, it does allow Franciscus to continue his passion for art and helps keep the family afloat.

Flemish Discrimination

Through the life of Urbain and his experiences in the military, the reader is able to see the discriminatory manner in which Dutch speaking citizens are treated with by the French speaking upper class. The issue fist rears its head when Urbain enrolls in military school, where he is treated with disdain by his French superiors, who deliberately mispronounce his name and are indignant when he attempts to correct them. The treatment continues when Urbain goes off to fight in WWI, where the Flemish soldiers are routinely subject to inferior treatment as a result of their cultural background, and where Urbain is dealt the loss of a medal of valor because of his Flemish background, having been given a false medal instead.

The issue continues even after Urbain leaves the army, as his pension is markedly lower than what it should be due to being Flemish. He is not promoted on merit, as he was promised, even though soldiers in the same position as him from the French-speaking of Wallonia are, and their pension reflects the promotion. Urbain harbors resentment over the years towards the people who discriminated against him because of his Dutch background, even becoming a supporter of the Flemish movement over the years.

The only time Dutch and French differences are set aside are in the heat of the battle, as the French officers recognize the military intelligence and discipline of Urbain, entrusting him with important missions and recognizing his valor during battle as well. In the face of the German attack, both sides are able to put away their differences, albeit momentarily.

War as Growth

Despite its horror, war serves as an opportunity for growing, morally and spiritually, both on the individual and national level. Throughout the war, Urbain and his fellow soldiers are exposed to the horrors that occur on the battlefield, including the desertion of morals by the Germans repeatedly. When they return home, the soldiers are defeated and no longer are filled with the old-fashioned values the Old Europe embodied, instead becoming more skeptical and hardened as a result, as moral change that is reflected in the national character.

Yet, there is also a positive growth that comes with the war, as Urbain is more aware of beauty than before. Forced to witness atrocities, he is still able to find beauty in landscape, and in the people around him. His artistic sensibilities grow during the war, and he becomes a better painter and a better person as a result.

Styles

Point of View

The primary narrator is the grandson of Urbain Martien, who discovers his grandfather's memoirs and undertakes a journey to better understand the man. He talks in the present, reflecting on his childhood and providing background information on Urbain, and what he remembers about him as a grandfather figure early in his life. On occasion, there is more direct interaction with Urbain's story, where a younger Urbain becomes the primary character, his events being narrated through a third-person point of view, which allows for a broader understanding of the social and political conditions of the time. This provides immediacy to the events that the narrator has read in Urbain's memoir, which he only uses briefly as a primary tool of narrative voice, inserting directly a portion of the memoir.

In the second part of the novel, however, Urbain becomes the primary narrator, telling his own story of events unfolding during his service as a soldier in WWI. The switch in narrators provides a more harrowing reading of the atrocities of the war, and as a result, the reader is able to acquire a better understanding of not just Urbain's psychology as an individual, but also the effects war can have on men. In the third section, there is a balance between the narrator, the grandson, discussing firsthand what he has learned about his grandfather while also offering passages where Urbain is the primary character.

Language and Meaning

Translated into English from Dutch, the novel follows the narrator, who is an author, throughout the text, and the language he uses is that of someone who has a critical awareness of art and the different issues surrounding it. As a writer narrating the story, there is tranquility and depth of understanding to his prose that helps the reader better understand the issues concerning the complexity of Urbain's character.

Despite being translated into English, the novel stills uses original Dutch and French phrases, especially when trying to highlight the cultural differences between that two, such as the animosity that becomes clear during the war. Urbain's struggles with his French superior officers, and their interactions, are recorded in French, offering an insight into the power dynamics at play.

Structure

The novel is divided into three general parts, the first and third narrated primarily by the grandson of Urbain Martien from the present day, while the middle section has Urbain narrating his story directly. The middle second is also further divided into five parts, each examining a different portion of Urbain's experience in WWI. The first section lays a

foundation for Urbain as a character and the various issues of art and memory that are to be explored, and the third and final section serves as a conclusion, with the narrator wrapping up his discoveries about Urbain and solidifying the statements he is trying to make in relation to art and war.

Quotes

Stories were meant to be forgotten, since after all, they always come back again, even the strangest stories of art and artists.
-- Narrator (I (Pages 1-43))

Importance: The ideas of stories traversing time is presented here, as events of Urbain's life are forgotten until they come to the forefront again when the narrator reads his memoirs.

The world he grew up in before 1900 was full of smells that now have largely disappeared."
-- Narrator (I (Pages 1-43))

Importance: The world Urbain grew up in no longer exists, as buildings and the environment have changes drastically. This makes it difficult for the narrator to glean some sense of Urbain from those places.

Younger generations do not even feel the loss; normality is a by-product of forgetting."
-- Narrator (I (Pages 44-91))

Importance: The narrator highlights how the passage of time can erode memory, creating a sense of tranquility regardless of harrowing the past was.

Their chronology was as simple as it was efficient, with just one point of reference: 'that was before the Great War' or 'that was years after the Great War.
-- Narrator (I (Pages 92-132))

Importance: The importance of WWI is highlighted here, as the event is of such magnitude that it divides the lives of people in two.

Has he not, in fact, been visited by the wily devil?
-- Urbain (I (Pages 92-132))

Importance: Urbain's reaction to witnessing the nude woman is intense, as he is unable to understand why he is feeling lust, the feelings conflict with the piousness that is ingrained in him.

It's mainly because the officers were impressed by my statuesque, self-confident mother.
-- Urbain (II, 1914-1918 (Part 1, Pages 135-149))

Importance: Celine's ability to make an impression upon men is evident here, as she bewilders Urbain's superiors, who respond with giving him more responsibility.

Between the villages, the countryside was stunning."
-- Urbain (II, 1914-1918 (Part 2, 150-169))

Importance: Despite the war surrounding them, Urbain is still able to notice the beauty of nature, the eye of the artist pushing to the surface.

So we looked on as those sharp-nosed messengers from a doomed world, fleeing an unimaginable Armageddon, came on land, shook the water out of their pelts, and rushed past our trenches without a glance, fleeing blindly like lemmings.
-- Urbain (II (Part 3- Battle of the Yser, October 1914 & Part 4, Pages 170-195))

Importance: The true horrors of the war become apparent when Urbain and the soldiers witness a horde of animals swimming down the river, away from the German intruders. This points to nature's response to man's war, as even animals must escape man's cruelty.

A soldier must obey orders, I said to her, and almost before I knew it I'd saluted.
-- Urbain (II (Part 3-Battle of the Yser, October 1914 & Part 4, Pages 170-195))

Importance: Being a soldier has become ingrained in Urbain's personality, and he reacts as such when asked if he is healthy enough to return to battle.

Time rolls on into bland duration, duration loses direction, direction gives way to stasis and boredom, boredom makes us sluggish and apathetic, the days creep through our fingers.
-- Urbain (II, 1914-1918 (Part 5, Pages 196-222))

Importance: The change in time becomes apparent on the front when the soldiers are left with nothing to do, and for long stretches must sit there and wait for the inevitable death that awaits them.

Something about the lost ethos of the old-time soldier is almost unthinkable to us today, in our world of terrorist attacks and virtual violence.
-- Narrator (III (Pages 225-255))

Importance: The destruction of the values of Old Europe were evident in WWI, but before that, war was conducted with a certain amount of class and respect, something that is unimaginable today.

What must it be like, spending your whole life with your true love's sister?
-- Narrator (III (Pages 256-286))

Importance: After Maria's death, Urbain marries Gabrielle, her sister, and he is confronted by their physical similarities everyday, along with the same last name and the existence of their blood relation. Maria is never far away from Urbain when Gabrielle is around.