

What Belongs to You: A Novel Study Guide

What Belongs to You: A Novel by Garth Greenwell

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Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: Greenwell, Garth. *What Belongs to You* A Novel. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016.

This novel contains three very different vignettes, which are labeled as parts. Each of the three vignettes come together in a way that allows readers to deeply explore the inner thoughts of an unnamed narrator, who narrates the entire story from a first-person limited point of view. This chronological story begins with Part I: Mitko, which was originally published as a novella in June 2011. Part I: Mitko contains four, untitled chapters that work together chronologically to tell the story of how an American teacher living in Sofia, Bulgaria becomes obsessed with a young Bulgarian hustler living on the streets. This unnamed narrator is a gay man who desires physical comfort but fears actual intimacy. The reader is introduced to the narrator in the public bathroom at the National Palace of Culture in Sofia. Mitko, a 23-year-old hustler offers the narrator sex in exchange for money. The narrator resists at first; he is hesitant to pay for sex in a public bathroom. However, he agrees to pay Mitko money in order to give Mitko a blowjob. This begins the narrator's attraction and interest in the young man. Mitko is described as having a tight, athletic body and an impressively clean body. In fact, the first time the narrator goes to give him a blowjob, Mitko stops him so that he can wash his penis in a nearby sink. Part I: Mitko examines how this convoluted relationship affects both men, causing each of them to re-examine their decisions and lifestyles.

The narrator struggles with confusion when it comes to Mitko. He knows that their only connection is the transactions he pays for, yet he feels drawn to Mitko on many levels. He is attracted to Mitko's body on the surface, but he is also deeply attracted to Mitko as a victim that needs saving. The narrator becomes interested in how Mitko became a prostitute and he wonders how many other men Mitko spends his time with. Mitko, on the other hand, is also confused by the friendliness and open relationship he has with the narrator. Mitko is treated well, fed, paid, and provided with a warm bed on many occasions; this makes the narrator a person whom Mitko grows to think of as a friend. Both Mitko and the narrator are not sure of the genuine connection each feels for one another and they each know that their business relationship is doomed to end at some point. Part I: Mitko concludes with the narrator visiting Mitko in his hometown of Varna. The narrator books a hotel room for the two of them to enjoy. However, the narrator becomes annoyed that Mitko seems to disregard the business deal of this trip, which is for Mitko to provide sexual pleasure in exchange for staying in the hotel room. Mitko becomes confused at the brazen annoyance displayed by the narrator and he becomes angry. A verbal fight ensues, which then escalates to Mitko striking the narrator in the face. This concludes their relationship, business or otherwise, and leaves both men quite alone in their own worlds.

But Greenwell extends his novella by adding two more parts: Part II: A Grave and Part III: Pox. Readers are still with the unnamed narrator in Sofia. He has just learned that his father is on his deathbed and is requesting him to come home and see him before he dies. This causes the narrator to wander around the city of Sofia while his own mind



spins in circles about his painful childhood. In Part II: A Grave, readers are enlightened about the narrator's childhood and his timid hatred towards his father. The narrator used to be as close to his father as he could get. His dad was frequently away on business, but they were close when he was home. One day, the narrator was showering with his father. He saw his dad's wet, naked body and he became erect. Without thinking, he reached out to hold his father, but his dad thrust him away when he felt his son's erection. The narrator notes that this is when his dad started hating him. Shortly after, the narrator met a great friend named only as K. The two of them became close and the narrator was elated to have a person he could share things with. The two boys spent the night together. K. invited the narrator to explore his body, asking the narrator to relax and touch him. In the morning, K. left abruptly and ended their friendship with no explanation but by trapping the narrator in a room where he watched K. get a blowjob from his new girlfriend. This led to more suspicion by the narrator's father, and his dad finally disowned him by calling him a faggot and saying that he was not his son. All of these tragic feelings overwhelm the narrator and leave him wandering the streets of Bulgaria and avoiding a plane ride to see his father.

Mitko is not present in the narrator's flashbacks in Part II: A Grave. However, the young hustler reappears, ragged and emaciated, in Part III: Pox. It is obvious that Mitko's health has gone down since the narrator last saw him in Varna. Mitko visits the narrator to explain to him that he has been diagnosed with Syphilis and that the narrator is most likely infected as well. This results in the narrator losing any sexual interest in Mitko. He is then forced to visit two public health clinics in order to be tested, diagnosed, and treated. He is also forced to explain to his new boyfriend, R., that he needs to be tested and treated as well. The narrator begins to resent Mitko for the drama and hardship he has brought into his life. He resents Mitko for the fear he feels when there is a knock at his door, for the Syphilis he has given his boyfriend, and for the help Mitko never allows the narrator to give. By the end of the story, Mitko is on his own deathbed. He visits the narrator, delirious and frighteningly thin. He talks of God and of the life he wishes he had chosen to live. The narrator notices that he does not feel charitable toward Mitko. He does not want to help Mitko by watching him die. He gives Mitko money and sends him out into the world alone and cold and wandering the streets before his eventual collapse. Mitko exits the apartment finally realizing that the narrator was never really a reliable friend after all, and the two men depart with one continuing his life and the other knowing his will end abruptly.



Part I: Mitko, Chapters 1 - 2

Summary

What Belongs to You: A Novel is related from the first-person point of view of an unnamed narrator.

The narrator meets Mitko in mid-October in a remote and rarely used bathroom at the National Palace of Culture in Sofia, Bulgaria. The narrator is a poet and teacher who works at the American College in Sofia. He has learned a small amount of Bulgarian, which he plans to use for the short time he will live in Bulgaria. The narrator has gone in search of sexual pleasure, but, when he finds the men lingering in the public bathroom, he doubts whether or not he truly wants this service. He hesitates so much that the 23-year-old boy he is talking to, Mitko, actually decides to leave the bathroom. This prompts the narrator to quickly change his mind and agree to a transaction. As Mitko returns, he drops his pants, and reveals a tight, muscular body that the narrator instantly wants. Mitko goes to the sink and washes his penis before bringing it to the narrator's mouth. The narrator gives Mitko a blowjob in a stall, and Mitko leaves promptly after he orgasms, leaving the narrator alone on his knees on the wet floor of the stall.

The narrator continues to see Mitko. He begins to develop feelings for the prostitute and often wonders how a nice person like Mitko could ever become a hustler on the streets of Sofia. He grows tired of hookups with Mitko in public places, so he invites Mitko to spend the night with him at his apartment. Mitko is eager to accept the offer, and the narrator escorts Mitko back to his home. While there, Mitko comments that the narrator must be very rich because of the nice neighborhood and the nice furnishings. The narrator points out that his workplace has provided everything and that he is not rich in any way. Mitko purchases alcohol and proceeds to drink several glasses, continuing to turn down sex with the narrator. Eventually the two men have sex, after several requests made by the narrator. When they are finished, Mitko quickly leaves the bed and uses the narrator's laptop to get online. He Skypes with several gay men across Bulgaria. They talk of many things, including when Mitko would visit them for sex. The narrator grows bored of listening to Mitko speak Bulgarian and he starts to feel jealous of the other men Mitko pleasures when the narrator is not with him. The narrator joins Mitko at the computer. Mitko shows the narrator one of his online profiles. There, the narrator sees Mitko posing for intimate pictures with a boy named Julien. Mitko describes Julien as being his first boyfriend, his first love, back in Varna. He says that Julien has moved to France to be a teacher. The narrator notes how different Mitko's life would be if Julien had not left him. He comments that living as a gay man in Bulgaria is much different than living as a gay man in America, which becomes a running theme throughout the novel.

After this first night at the narrator's house, Mitko continues to visit the narrator at random, unannounced times. He asks the narrator for small sums of money in order for him to buy cigarettes, bus tickets, and cell phone credit. This annoys the narrator, who



feels like Mitko is taking advantage of him, and it is this mixed feeling of annoyance and uncertainty that causes the narrator to tell Mitko that he does not want to see him anymore. Mitko exits and the narrator feels relieved that he does not have to balance his encounters with Mitko any longer.

Analysis

Author Garth Greenwell graciously announces that the center of this story, the questionable encounters between a Bulgarian hustler and an American poet living abroad, will be a tale of tragedy. The first line readers are introduced to states: "That my first encounter with Mitko B. ended up in a betrayal, even a minor one, should have given me greater warning at the time, which should in turn have made my desire for less, if not done away with completely" (3). Here we are quickly introduced to a relationship wherein one party knows that the other is unhealthy. However, this line also indicates that, despite an acknowledgement of danger, the narrator does not end things with Mitko. This also changes how readers interpret Mitko upon meeting him. The narrator describes Mitko as being gentle in spite of his surroundings. But readers know better. The reader has read the first line of the story and has preconceived notions of what type of person Mitko is. He knows that Mitko is capable of "betrayal" (3) and is aware that people like that should not be trusted. This introduction to Mitko results in readers judging him with cynicism before learning anything about him.

This idea of Mitko being judged, either fairly or inaccurately, is a running theme throughout Part I: Mitko. But there are two very different stories happening in Part I, and it is quite easy to ignore the rich story that is happening between the lines. At the forefront of this novel is an unnamed narrator. He struggles with several things, including his urges to be with Mitko. This is the easy story; this is the obvious story. But the second story, which is happening concurrently to the narrator's, is Mitko's experience of fading away. He feels he is an extremely tragic character. He believes himself to be morally and ethically better than the other hustlers in Sofia. He also feels trapped by his life choices. The reader gets the sense that Mitko was not destined for a life of prostitution. Instead, he sees a happy and centered side to Mitko after he has sex with the narrator at his home. Mitko hops on the computer and eventually views old photographs of him and his first love, Julien. In these photos, Mitko is portrayed as young and vibrant and healthy. However, now he is in the process of withering away.

Throughout the course of Part I, the narrator notices that Mitko transforms from a tidy man with his ". . . first sign of fastidiousness that would never cease to surprise me, given his poverty and the tenuous circumstances in which he lived" (8) into a skinnier, less clean version of himself. When asked about his current living situation, Mitko responds by saying "fate" (36). Later that evening he says that he wants to live a normal life (37), indicating that he himself is aware that this life is neither satisfying nor healthy for him in the long run. Mitko too struggles with his relationship with the narrator. He struggles with the amount of trust and dependence he can place on the narrator's shoulders and is unsure of how helpful this American man might actually be to him. Readers can infer that Mitko has lived a tough life and that his recent transformation into



the job he works in the novel is something he never planned on. When dissected purely for the transaction of lust, one might assume that a prostitute's job is to at least fake sexual interest. The narrator is very well aware of the fact that, "There was nothing in his manner of seduction, no show of desire at all" and he feels Mitko is offering only "a transaction" (7). In fact, Mitko does not appear to ever try very hard at faking his sexual experiences with the narrator. Their first meeting concludes with the narrator giving Mitko a blowjob, an act that, immediately upon finishing, Mitko simply walks away from. He does not pretend anything with the narrator nor does he offer any form of affection. Yet, despite knowing this, the narrator continues to lust after him and seek him out. In fact, it is almost as if Mitko's indifference toward him is what causes the narrator to focus solely on this particular hustler to provide him pleasure and comfort.

The narrator's repetitive and kind transactions seem to confuse Mitko quite a lot, which ultimately leads to Mitko's personal misunderstanding that the two men are friends. However, while Mitko claims that he sees the narrator as a true and real friend, readers are led to question the sincerity of this claim. Readers must consider the facts of Mitko's background and current livelihood while comparing it to his actions and words. After all, the narrator points out that hustlers like Mitko will often steal things from their clients. They are not to be trusted with personal property or with personal information. So far, Mitko seems rather trustworthy with the narrator, which defends his claim of friendship. But readers must keep the evidence against Mitko in mind as well—namely, the opening page of the novel wherein the narrator mentions Mitko and betrayal from the start (3). The confusing conclusion about Mitko's character is purposeful on Greenwell's part, leaving readers just as discombobulated as the narrator.

When the narrator is hooked on Mitko and calls on him several times within a month is when the narrator begins to pity Mitko. He senses what Mitko knows: this is not a life he was meant to lead. This then activates the part of the narrator that fantasizes about being a savior. "I thought of his drinking and the risks of his trade," the narrator comments, "and for an instant I wanted desperately to save him though from what exactly and how I wasn't sure. I knew it was a ridiculous desire, that it imagines a relationship I didn't want; and I also knew Mitko had never expressed any desire of his own to be saved" (40). This acknowledgement does not change the narrator's feeling of need to save Mitko. He begins to view his time with Mitko as charitable and helpful; he believes that he is helping Mitko by providing a sort of short-term employment. However, the narrator himself points out that Mitko never directly asks to be saved. While he shows signs of discontentment, Mitko does not seem unhappy enough to take serious steps at quitting his life of hustling and prostitution. After all, if other clients treat him similarly to how the narrator treats him, Mitko gets money for sex along with warm beds to sleep in, free drinks and food, and access to the Internet on various devices. It is quite possible that Mitko does not want to be saved from the life the narrator assumes he needs saving from.

This fascination with how society treats Mitko is another obsession for the narrator. He is an openly gay man who knows that the country of Bulgaria does not always accept gay people. While the narrator is never apologetic for his own sexuality, he is enticed by how gay people function in Bulgaria. He is introduced to this underground society when



Mitko uses his computer to chat online. Here, Mitko talks to other gay men who seem to be both figuratively and literally hiding in the shadows. He notices that, “As I listened to these men . . . I was struck by the strangeness of the community they had formed, at once so limited and so lively” (24). These distant figures are connected solely based on the gender they are attracted to. They come together in the dark recesses of the internet to relate to one another or to set up shady rendezvous in order to stay safe. This is a part of society the narrator has not known. This is yet another foreign land to him. And so these two men continue colliding into one another: one looking for his only true and reliable friend and the other searching for deep, intimate love and acceptance.

Discussion Question 1

Why does the narrator go to the public bathroom at the National Palace of Culture? Why does he go in search of a prostitute?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Mitko choose to show his dating profile to the narrator after they have sex? What is his purpose for showing the narrator pictures of Julien?

Discussion Question 3

How would you describe the emotional character of the narrator at this point? What hints do we get about who he is at his core?

Vocabulary

coterminous, ubiquitous, stotinki, deferential, predation, vagaries, pidgin, beneficence, fastidiousness, guile, salve



Part I: Mitko, Chapters 3 - 4

Summary

The break between the narrator and Mitko continues for three months until the narrator misses being around his young male associate. He is lonely at home one evening and sees Mitko online on Skype. He decides to call him and see how he is doing. The narrator learns that Mitko has been in the hospital for close to a month. He has severe liver damage and he has left the hospital to recover in his hometown of Varna. Desperate to be with him, the narrator offers to travel to Varna and book a hotel room for the two of them. Mitko quickly accepts this offer.

The narrator takes a long and scenic bus ride to Varna, where he notices the beautiful landscape against the harsh, Soviet architecture. He arrives in Varna. It is a very chilly and rainy evening, but Mitko is waiting for him at the bus depot. He does not have a proper jacket and the narrator finds Mitko shivering alone in a corner. The two men go to their hotel room. It is a large space on the ground floor of a hotel where Mitko seems to know the owner. The narrator tries to have sex with Mitko but he resists for quite a long time. Eventually, the narrator tires of the game and, for the first time, he becomes the aggressor, demanding that Mitko have sex with him.

The next morning, the narrator wakes up early and feels the strong urge to see the ocean. He leaves the hotel room to go for a walk along the seaside, and he finds much comfort in the solitude of the abandoned seaside attractions on a cold winter morning. He explores the various statues of Bulgarian heroes and he admires the open beaches that lay beneath him. When he returns to the room, Mitko is awake. The narrator wants to have sex with Mitko, but he tells the narrator that he has already masturbated twice that morning and is tired. The narrator becomes enraged with this information. He reminds Mitko that he is there to give pleasure to him. He states that their relationship is only based on sex and transactions for sexual pleasure. After hearing this, Mitko becomes angry and hurt. He exclaims that his relationship with the narrator is about more than just sex for him. The narrator notes that Mitko's face changes into something cold and dangerous and frightening. He wonders which side of Mitko is the true side: the gentle side that gives him pleasure or this antagonistic young boy.

Mitko reminds the narrator that he could have hurt him by now. He says that he could have stolen things from the narrator and damaged his reputation if he wanted, but he is a nice person who does not steal from people. Mitko gets so angry that he strikes the narrator on the face, causing him to fall back on the bed. Shortly after, Mitko mounts the narrator and gives him an aggressively passionate kiss and leaves the room without saying a word. The narrator now feels like his room is a prison, trapping him there for any of Mitko's friends to come and hurt him or steal from him. He approaches the hotel manager and asks to move rooms. He then tells the manager that Mitko is not welcome at the hotel or in his room. With this information, the manager supports his decision and reminds him that people have to be careful around men like Mitko.



Analysis

The narrator seems to be strongly aware of his own shortcomings. He is very much in touch with his flaws yet does anything but fix them, instead relishing in the traits that cause him pain or failure. This seems to be rooted in his childhood because the narrator calls back a memory from his younger years when his reaction to conflict was stillness (54). There is indeed a fairly obvious stillness in the interactions between Mitko and narrator, a constant attachment that the narrator keeps tied. This connection turns into a hobby of curiosity for the narrator, who is also a poet. It seems as though he is studying Mitko in order to collect tragic material for a piece later. This also leads to the narrator studying every move Mitko makes, resting on the idea of Mitko's true face. He watches the inner-workings of Mitko through his face, and he wonders which face is true. On one hand, he sees a direct and innocent young man who is helpless in the tough life he has been forced into. On the other hand the narrator gets a glimpse of Mitko's harsh and threatening countenance. At his home, while enjoying post-coital company, the narrator watches Mitko as he uses his computer. He finds himself, ". . . looking repeatedly at the screen and then at Mitko, wondering which face was the truer face, and how it had been lost or gained" (18). Readers get a similar comment after their fight in Varna, when the narrator sees a new face on Mitko and is not sure which one is truer. "[Mitko] paused, he looked at me with his new face, which was capable, it seemed to me, of any of those things, and I wondered whether it was a face he had just discovered or one he had hidden all along" (52). He is still struggling to determine just how "good" of a person Mitko is, and whether or not Mitko deserves the life he has. Part of the narrator's curiosity with Mitko is learning how he got to the point of peddling for sex in a public bathroom. Is Mitko truly a misplaced victim in an indifferent society, or is he a lowlife who willingly chose to enter into prostitution and other small tasks for meager cash?

Both men defy their own logic when it comes to their outlook on their relationship. Mitko seems to mistake it for a close and loyal friendship while the narrator mistakenly assumes that they have the possibility of falling in love at some point. The idea of sex for money seems to confuse both of these men in very different ways. The narrator wholeheartedly knows that Mitko ". . . was performing a desire he didn't feel . . ." (9) and yet this does not stop him from continuing a fantasy based on intimate relations that will never manifest. Likewise, Mitko continuously blurts out that he thinks of the narrator as a friend. The two men come to their own clear understanding of just how foolish they have been with one another while staying at Varna. Their fight in the hotel room is very much rooted in the crisis that each man faces in his own mind. "I did all that because we're friends," Mitko claims, ". . . those are things friend do, it isn't just sex for me" (50). He says these things aloud, seemingly believing them to be true as he says them but then quickly realizing his words are false. It is as if Mitko wants to believe it is true—as if he thinks it will eventually become true if he thinks it for long enough. Mitko feels that perhaps he has found a loyal friend with a man who is willing to support him and mind his health and happiness, but yet Mitko knows the narrator does not feel this way. Knowing the truth does not mean Mitko is able to admit the truth to himself. During Mitko's profession of true friendship with the narrator, he then stops, ". . . as if he realized he had gone too far, had leaned too hard on the fiction of our relationship and



felt the false surface give way” (50). Mitko is forced to confront his knowledge that the encounters they have had with one another are business transactions. The way the narrator words “the fiction of our relationship” is a harsh reminder for Mitko (50). Likewise, this is another wake up call for the narrator that their relationship is, in fact, fictional. While Mitko seeks friendship, the narrator is still unsure of what he is seeking. He does not feel true love for Mitko—this he knows—but he wants something more from Mitko than simple business dealings. He wants Mitko to need him. He wants to believe that Mitko prefers doing business with him than with any of his other clients. The narrator misses being allowed in with somebody. He desires entrance to the intimate parts of a person. The fact that Mitko allows the narrator to put him in his mouth and provides the narrator with bodily fluids that taste of him leads the narrator to a place he wants to be: an area of acceptance. He enjoys the feeling of being needed and he likes that Mitko sees him as a constant protector.

The problem comes in Varna when the men fight one another. Once Mitko hits the narrator in the face and reveals the harsh survival instinct he has used since arriving in Sofia, the narrator sees Mitko differently, noting that, “All of Mitko’s proposals seemed to me now like snares” (55). This fight in Varna, this crisis in their relationship, is the moment when both men learn that they must approach one another differently if they are to exit from their relationship unscathed. The veil of illusion has been lifted. The narrator has finally admitted that he will be nothing more than a client for Mitko and Mitko has revealed that he is not the kind and timid soul he portrays for business. It is as if each man has shown his cards. The truth is now between them, and the narrator chooses to end things for fear of Mitko losing more control. The confusing part of this fight comes when Mitko smashes his lips into the narrator’s. This is an aggressively passionate kiss, one filled with desire. However, because of the timing for Mitko, readers are left to wonder if Mitko is desperate for a relationship with the narrator or if he is desperate to keep a cash flow going. Just what exactly was Mitko trying to repair in that kiss? What does he think he is losing?

It is evident that the narrator has lost a sense of safety after their fight. Readers are treated to a complex symbol of the hotel room as a representation of the narrator’s sense of security. He once viewed the room as a safe and lovely place to seek refuge. After seeing what Mitko is capable of with only a small prompting, the narrator begins to see the room as a trap, a prison. As the narrator’s opinion of Mitko changes so does his opinion of the hotel room Mitko found. He sees his decisions as leading him to a place where Mitko can harm him at any time. He is trapped in a world where Mitko knows too much. The hustler knows where he works and where he sleeps at night. He knows many things about the narrator that could potentially harm him, leaving readers worried about what might happen in the narrator’s future. The narrator is lucky that he is able to change rooms. This is much simpler than changing his apartment and place of employment. He changes rooms to get away from the potential threat that Mitko and his friends pose, but the narrator is unable to get away from the overall threats Mitko may pose when the narrator returns to Sofia. His apartment will not have a supportive hotel manager or an overnight guard waiting by the window to protect him.



Discussion Question 1

How genuine do you think Mitko is being when he claims that his relationship with the narrator is about more than just sex? What evidence so we have to support what Mitko is saying?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think Mitko becomes so overly defensive and out-of-control angry over the topic of stealing things from the narrator?

Discussion Question 3

Why is the narrator so obsessed with figuring out which face of Mitko's is his true face? Why is he so intent on discovering Mitko's true self?

Vocabulary

irreverence, desultory, sordidness, mawkishness, vestiges, ephemerae, procreant, exorbitant, reticence, ebullience



Part II: A Grave

Summary

The one chapter that comprises Part II: A Grave begins in mid-September of the next school year. The narrator is interrupted during a lesson with news that his father has fallen ill and wants to see him. This jarring news causes the narrator to encounter very vivid flashbacks. He remembers his childhood, the moment he realized that he wanted to be with men, and the very second his father disowned him for being who he is.

To begin, the narrator's half-sister, G., shared some troubling stories about their father and his own tragic childhood. The narrator's grandmother, and mother to the narrator's father, was a woman who had a number of children out of wedlock and with a number of various, unnamed men. As a result of this upbringing, the narrator's father was never close or trusting or affectionate. G. knew that he frequently cheated on her mother, but she found his online portfolio of pornographic images and felt confused as to what to do with her new knowledge. She was young. She knew these were women that her father used to hurt her mother, so she decided to track his keystrokes by downloading software that would allow her access to everything her dad did online. G. was highly resentful of her father and she has lost touch with him since maturing into adulthood.

As he walks through the streets of Sofia trying to decide whether or not he will rush to his father's deathbed, the narrator recalls the time when his father first shunned him. His father was always gone, but he would make their time together worth it when he was at home. He was about nine or ten years old and was showering with his father. As he watched his dad's naked body moving in the shower, the narrator became overwhelmed with lust. He reached around his father's torso to hold him, but his father felt the narrator's erection. He quickly flung his son off of him with a look of disgust and never showed him any affection again. His father's disapproval of the narrator's homosexuality continued when his dad called him a "faggot" (99) and kicked him out of his home after finding a journal with notes about a boy named K., whom the narrator was in love with. Prior to this, K. used to spend time with the narrator. They spent one night in his room together. The two boys touched one another and rubbed their bodies together. Shortly after this, K. rejected the narrator, found a girlfriend, and asked the narrator to come over and act as a chaperone while he and his girlfriend wanted to hook up. This night resulted in the narrator being forced to watch K. get a blowjob from his girlfriend while the narrator watched. To him, it seemed as though K. was telling him things were over between the two of them.

As the chapter closes, the narrator is still in Bulgaria and is trying to decide whether or not he will visit with his father.



Analysis

Part II is solely focused on the narrator's past, how it affects his present, and how much he does not want it to affect his future. News of the narrator's father lying on his deathbed causes the narrator to emotionally spin out of control. He is quickly swallowed up by negative feelings from his childhood, of feelings related to abandonment, betrayal, and disgust. A major theme in this novel is the struggles related to living as a homosexual. These hurdles are boldly placed within this section, beginning with the narrator's terrible experience with his father. The narrator's father is openly disgusted by his own son-- displaying snarls in his direction and withholding affection as a form of both fear and punishment. The shower scene is particularly heart-wrenching to read. This is a picture of father-son acceptance. It is an intimate moment with allusions of affection and trust. A naked father and son showering together in innocent closeness is a love-filled scene that is ripped away from us the moment the narrator wraps his arms around his father. The relationship is obviously over. While the narrator never seems apologetic for finding men attractive, he is deeply saddened by his own father's reaction to him. Decades after this happened to him, the narrator painfully recalls that, "That was the end of care, he thrust me away . . . and when I looked at his face, which was twisted in disgust, it was as if I saw his true face, his authentic face, not the learned face of fatherhood" (72). This is a particularly poignant quote for two reasons. First, the fact that his father changed so drastically in an instant is a stinging memory the narrator has yet to forget. Second, we see yet another time in the narrator's life when he studies a person's true face. This quote is similar to the narrator's interest in seeing Mitko's true face in Part I. We can then conclude that the hurt the narrator still feels over his father's fickle affection is an unsteady feeling the narrator carries today. If his father was able to throw him away so quickly, if he was able to contort his face away from him and never return, then anyone else can do it. This likely possibility of change applies to Mitko as well, and the narrator expects a sudden change in character from the Bulgarian hustler.

The narrator's fear of unstable affection also stems from his brief love affair with K. This boy, this best friend, is capricious with the narrator to say the least. One night, K. invites the narrator to touch his skin, and the next night he invites the narrator over to watch him as he receives a blowjob from a girl. This is the second time in the narrator's life when people he has loved have proven that they are not constant. Their affection is fleeting. With these two deeply hurtful interactions with men at an early age, it is clear as to why the narrator shies away from true relationships as an adult. He knows that he has not gotten over his traumas from childhood. The narrator even notes that his father's ". . . look entered me and settled there and has never left, it rooted beneath memory and became my understanding of myself, my understanding and expectation" (72).

The narrator has the chance to correct his feelings. He holds a paper with a note asking for his arrival to his father's deathbed. However, it becomes obvious that the narrator has no intention of speaking to his father. He cannot face the conversation that might be if he goes to his father's side. Instead, he stays in Bulgaria and allows himself to wander the city while reeling with thoughts of unresolved anger. These deep feelings of



resentment seem to be yet another curiosity for the narrator, something else he can study for future writing material perhaps. The narrator comments that he wants to know if his “. . . grief extended so far” (91) that he could muster up the energy to even grieve for a man who wronged him so deeply. The narrator is very concerned with how “good” of a person he is. He wants to feel as if he is a kind and generous man who is worthy of being loved. He wants to know whether he has the capacity to care for a person who has hurt him in so many different ways. But the reader never gets to learn whether he does or not. The narrator stays in Sofia. He remains in Bulgaria and he holds tightly to his unresolved anger and deep feeling of never being accepted for who he is.

Discussion Question 1

What seems to be the common thread among the narrator’s bloodline?

Discussion Question 2

The narrator claims that he is an angry person when he says, “What would I be without the anger I felt then, I wondered as I stood looking over the water, the anger I still feel, it ebbs or surges but is always there; whatever it has kept me from, without it I would have lost myself altogether” (100). What evidence do we have thus far that the narrator is, in fact, an angry person? Which adjective would you use to describe the character’s main identity?

Discussion Question 3

How has the narrator’s relationship with K. affected his relationships with men from that point on?

Vocabulary

detritus, partisan, implicated, plumage, declivity, morass, copse, indignation, admonishment



Part III: Pox, Chapters 1 - 3

Summary

There are six chapters in Part III: Pox. The first chapter begins during February. Mitko appears at the narrator's home almost two years after their fight in Varna. He appears thin and wet, downtrodden from whatever has been happening to him. He tells the narrator that he has been diagnosed with syphilis and that the narrator should get tested. The narrator now has a boyfriend, a Portuguese man named R., and he is worried to think about what his new boyfriend will think about the news.

The narrator tests positive for syphilis at the first clinic but is directed to another clinic for another test and possible treatment. He tells R. about the infection and encourages him to get tested, news that makes R. very nervous and upset. Mitko continues to visit the narrator. They go to a McDonalds late at night to talk. Mitko tells the narrator that it will cost him 100 leva for a shot of penicillin, information that prompts the narrator to offer Mitko money for treatment. The narrator goes to the bathroom. Mitko enters the bathroom to pleasure the narrator while he jerks himself off. He thinks of R., and he reflects on the fact that he feels more pleasure with Mitko than he ever has with R. Only a few days later the narrator learns that he, in fact, does have syphilis but that there are no penicillin shots in all of Bulgaria. This angers the narrator because, while he is upset that he will not have fast treatment, this also confirms that Mitko was lying to him about his reason for wanting money from him.

Analysis

The first half of Part III focuses on the infiltration of syphilis in Mitko's world. While syphilis is a related disease to the life Mitko has chosen for himself, this element of the story is much more than a simple consequence of prostitution. In this story, syphilis itself is a symbol for the harmful consequences in store for people who partake in this seedy lifestyle. Mitko, the narrator, and R. are all connected to the world of prostitution in Sofia, Bulgaria. R. is the least involved, for he is only connected to this world through his new boyfriend. Readers have no evidence that he has ever paid for sex or that he was ever directly involved with people similar to Mitko. R. is connected to this dangerous world because he chooses to date the narrator. R.'s lack of involvement is the exact reason why his bout with syphilis was so innocuous. The seriousness of the infection and the ease with which he recovers is a direct correlation to his level of involvement with prostitution. In contrast, the narrator has willingly entered this world and remained there. Mitko is the most entrenched in a lifestyle where sex is unprotected and paid for. The narrator has a much harder recovery time than R. but a much easier recovery than Mitko. The narrator even notes how upset he is at the thought that he sullied R., saying that if he, ". . . infected [R.], if I had dragged him into the world from which (as I thought of it) he had lifted me out?" (111). The narrator is aware that he has gambled; he is okay



with facing up to his punishment for it, but he cannot accept harming R., who seems to be a person worthy of avoiding this type of sickness.

While the narrator is aware that R. is better than the secretive world of prostitution, he is also in denial about the fact that Mitko is a willing member of this world. From the beginning, the narrator has wanted to believe that Mitko has been forced into this world. He wants to think that Mitko does not belong. He wants to believe that the only reason a good person like Mitko got involved with prostitution is because of temporary bad luck. Mitko himself seems to place this idea in the narrator's mind. He frequently sets himself apart from the other hustlers by saying lines such as, "Lots of people wouldn't come . . . but I'm not like them" (107). He compares himself to "them," meaning the other hustlers and prostitutes. He wants the narrator to know that he is kind and trustworthy and intrinsically good at heart. He mentions how good of a friend he is to the narrator and how much he helps him although he is not required to. This continues the narrator's fantasy that Mitko is a special kind of prostitute--that he is too young and too healthy and too innocent to be involved. However, Mitko's syphilis teaches the narrator a harsh lesson that he is not, in fact, above this lifestyle. Mitko is this lifestyle. He embodies the risky life of engaging in sexual acts with strangers who pay him in public bathrooms. Mitko becomes a symbol for the life that the narrator needs to believe is beneath him. This realization causes the narrator to view Mitko differently. He does not necessarily think of Mitko as "ill," but rather he views Mitko as much too dangerous to get involved with. The narrator no longer thinks relations of any kind with Mitko are worth it, and he desires as little time with Mitko as possible. The narrator begins to resent Mitko for affecting the happiness of his future life with a stable, monogamous boyfriend in R.

Both readers and the narrator get further evidence for Mitko's total consumption into his world when Mitko is finally caught not using the narrator's money to cure himself. When the narrator learns that he has given money to Mitko for a penicillin shot that is unavailable in Bulgaria, readers finally come to the understanding that Mitko is definitely worthy of being part of the underground world of hustling. He does not, in fact, use the money for his cure, choosing instead to spend it on something that will not save his life. Readers begin to question any of the previous money usage that Mitko has borrowed from the narrator in the past. And, although he claims to have acquired penicillin in Bulgaria, readers know this is not true, leaving everyone doubting any sincerity Mitko has tried to portray in the past. This act of selfish spending is what prevents Mitko from recovery and leads to his eventual health collapse.

The narrator may have been projecting the issue of Mitko being an outsider in the world of hustling because he himself feels like an outsider in his own life. He is an American living abroad, residing in a country that is very different from his own. His minimal language skills help him get by, but that does not change the fact that he feels frustrated because he is a foreigner. The narrator is constantly thrust into situations where he does not know the etiquette. There are many times throughout the story when the narrator feels unsure and wavering. In particular, the narrator has a strong negative reaction to the idea of going to a health clinic in Sofia. He feels overwhelmed by the process, feeling a quiet rage with each step. It takes a calm nurse with good English to speak to him in a way that makes him feel better. Even the narrator is unaware of the



turmoil he has been feeling related to being an outsider, which is why he shocks himself with his bitterness towards the doctor at the second clinic he goes to. This feeling of being an outsider is something the narrator wishes upon Mitko. He wants Mitko to be displaced in his world because the narrator feels displaced and this would give the men something in common. This hope of Mitko being an outsider is simply the narrator's distant hope that he will be able to have any relationship or camaraderie with the young hustler. But, sadly, there is little evidence to support the answer the narrator wants, and there is mounting evidence that Mitko is exactly where he belongs and exactly where he wants to be.

Discussion Question 1

What indications has the reader received earlier in the book that the narrator resents the country of Bulgaria and of being in a foreign land? Do you think his frustrations are truly with Bulgaria or with something else?

Discussion Question 2

Why does the narrator's discovery about penicillin shots in Bulgaria enrage him? What are the implications of this discovery?

Discussion Question 3

What is the narrator's view of the world at the end of this section of the novel? Does his opinion of the world change throughout the story or does it remain consistent?

Vocabulary

furtively, mollified, entreaty, miasma, brusquely, baleful, disconcerted, sodden, unperturbed



Part III: Pox, Chapters 4 - 6

Summary

A few months after the narrator clears up his dilemma with syphilis, the narrator's mother visits him in Bulgaria. They are traveling on a train and sharing a car with a child and his grandmother. He is instantly drawn to the boy, but he soon realizes that his attraction is due to the boy's likeness to Mitko. The grandmother is kind and patient with the boy, allowing him to express his discomfort on the long train ride. The adults on the train are all entertained by the behavior of the young boy, which then encourages him to act out even more. As the boy begins to shift from activities to misbehavior, the grandmother scolds him. This causes the boy to react with an over-the-top charm in the form of a fake begging posture. This begging gesture reminds the narrator of Mitko's own innocent-looking begging posture. This makes the narrator connect the boy's future to Mitko's current deplorable situation. He sits on the train with the boy and wonders how long it will be before his dreams are crushed—before the boy turns to a life of hustling and prostitution like Mitko has. The narrator desperately wants to warn the boy but does not feel comfortable saying those things aloud. He feels the need to tell the boy that he should leave Bulgaria in order to have a fighting chance at a happy life.

Several months pass by when, out of nowhere, the narrator is woken by a frantic Mitko sternly knocking on his door. Mitko is extremely unwell and repeats that “they” have told him he is going to die. He enters the narrator's home and searches for food. Mitko is starving. He has no muscle left on his body and he has faded away into his disease. He goes back and forth from broken Bulgarian and broken English, telling the narrator that he understands nothing. He curls up on the narrator's couch, telling him about God and how he hopes that he will see him soon. He feels as though God has never been with him because he is such a weak person. As the narrator sees Mitko in this state, he begins to pity him. He wishes he had done more to help, and he wants to be there to help Mitko now. However, when he reflects on the actual hardships facing him with Mitko, the narrator quickly comes to the conclusion that he must remove Mitko from his life entirely. He does not want to spend time with Mitko in this bitter and abrupt ending to life. He does not want to see Mitko fade away any more than he already has. Instead, the narrator gives him money to travel to his hometown of Varna. Mitko is reluctant to leave but eventually exits onto the streets on Sofia. He approaches a young family who shuns him and the narrator watches as Mitko walks off alone.

Analysis

It is important to remember that the narrator's story is not the only story at the center of this novel. Mitko's story is also incredibly important, and richly described. Since the beginning of his encounters, Mitko seems to blur the lines of business and friendship, assuming that the narrator is a person who truly cares for him in a way that Mitko feels taken care of. He experiences the narrator's return several times and is led to believe



that the narrator is a stable figure in his life. It is possible that, at one point, Mitko even thought he would get out of working the streets as a hustler due to the narrator's help. But as the reader sees Mitko crumble on the pages, he comes to the realization that he is alone, that he has been shunned by the world he lives in only to be departing it soon. Mitko finally learns that the narrator is not a tried and true friend. In the final scene of the novel, Mitko mumbles that, ". . . the people who say they are your friends aren't friends at all" (114). In this relationship, it is Mitko who has been betrayed. It is Mitko who needs help but cannot find it. It is he who will die from his own bad life choices, and he will die alone because he wrongly thought he had a person to depend on.

Oddly enough, it is the narrator who seems to be the wise and level-headed person in the relationship. The narrator feels as if Mitko has taken advantage of him time and time again. He is past the point of wanting to help him. Mitko's ill and disfigured body has taken all lust away from the narrator. In a sense, it is the narrator who winds up betraying Mitko. While there is damning evidence that Mitko lied about using the money for his treatment, this is the only evidence that the reader has of Mitko abusing his connection with the narrator. In fact, after the narrator gives him 100 leva for penicillin injections, Mitko feels compelled to pleasure the narrator. To Mitko, this is a simple transaction. When Mitko is finally and officially rejected by the narrator, his last string of his hope is taken away from him. He was counting on the narrator to help him with food or a bed or with money. Before now the narrator has provided these things for him. However, it is not until Mitko is on his way to death that the narrator fully disconnects from him. From Mitko's point of view, he is no longer useful because the narrator has no desire to have sex with him. Readers started this novel assuming that the ultimate betrayal would be delivered by Mitko, but instead it was the narrator who betrayed him in his time of need.

At this point, Mitko is truly in a time of need. His life has caught up to him, and he has received a fatal punishment. He recedes back to a childlike state, needing the narrator to cuddle and sooth him. He speaks of God and he winces at the thought of his desperation to be with his mother in Varna. This does not change the narrator's cold disposition. He unwillingly allows Mitko on his bed and he rigidly places his hands on his shivering body. The narrator stops to think that, although holding him more, ". . . tightly the space that had opened up between us remained, and I knew I would stay on the other side of it, the side of health, I knew I wouldn't stay with Mitko and face the death he faced . . ." (180). In this case, the narrator is speaking literally. No, he will not stay with Mitko in his time of desperate need. However, this is also a metaphor for the seedy life the narrator will no longer be taking part of. The narrator is now dating R., who seems to be an accepted citizen of the world. The narrator chooses to remove himself from Mitko's life and from Mitko's immoral and dangerous world.

Mitko's exit is one of true tragedy. He is alone in the world. The man he thought to be his only friend has just rejected him. He sees a family and behaves in a way that is culturally expected, yet the family rejects him because they see him for what he has become. The narrator watches him, reflecting that, "He had always been alone . . . gazing at a world in which he had never found a place and that was now almost perfectly indifferent to him; he was incapable of even disturbing it, of making a sound it



could be bothered to hear” (190). Mitko will die soon. He will be forgotten. No one will go looking for him and no one will miss him, and even the narrator doubts whether his money will be used to get him back to Varna. Mitko, a man who used to be happy living in Varna with a man he loved, is now stumbling down the street to his upcoming death.

It is the narrator who seems fine in his solitary state. When the novel opens, the narrator is seeking affection, pleasure, connection, or acceptance. He does not know what he is looking for, but he knows that he wants to feel better somehow. The narrator questions whether Mitko will be able to provide this service. Once he determines that Mitko will not be able to, he moves on from him. This proves that the narrator never even came close to feeling love for Mitko. His desire to save Mitko is truly rooted in a selfish wonderment, a question of just how generous the narrator truly is. In a way, the narrator uses Mitko as his own personal social experiment. The narrator discovers that his assumed generosity toward giving Mitko charity money is not truly generous. He becomes aware that each time he has given Mitko money is a time when Mitko provides pleasure for him somehow. This should excite the narrator. This should re-establish the lines of a business relationship between the two men. Instead, it angers the narrator, who now feels like a lowlife for subconsciously expecting something in return for his money. “He hadn’t allowed me to be generous,” the narrator reflects, “I had wanted to give without taking . . . I wondered now if I had liked his humiliation, if that was the pleasure I took in my generosity . . .” (151). Part III is consistent with this doubt of true charity. The narrator wonders how much charity he wants to give and if it is coming from a selfless place.

Readers see the narrator experience a desperate attempt to grasp at the idea of his own generosity while riding the train with his mother. This young boy in the car with them seems to be a pleasant surprise, but the narrator cannot stop projecting his concern for Mitko onto this boy. He places a dark and presumptuous label on the boy’s grim future, and assumes that it is his place, his responsibility to provide helpful and life-saving advice to the family. He comments that watching the boy brings on, “. . . the lost promise of the bright boy before me” (169). The narrator wants to tell the boy everything he wishes that he could have told young Mitko. He imagines that this boy will take the same road as Mitko and wind up hurting himself as Mitko has done. This is yet another connection to the narrator’s confusion related to Mitko’s character. He wants to think that Mitko was once like this boy. He wants to imagine that Mitko was once a vibrant and intelligent young boy. The narrator needs this fallen image of Mitko because it makes him feel better about giving him money for sex. Yes, he is paying for sex, but he is giving money to a good person who could use the cash. This somehow makes the narrator feel less soiled by these transactions. And he needs this. The narrator needs to feel unsullied. His father made him feel as if being gay was a terribly dirty thing. K. promptly rejected the narrator. Both males quickly yanked away any closeness they had with the narrator, which has led the narrator to a life where he wonders how good of a person he is. He needs to feel morally superior. He needs to feel generous. He needs to feel loved and yet consistently questions his capacity to love others. However, when Mitko comes to him asking for all of these things, the narrator proves that he is ultimately, at the very core of himself, unable to be the things he wants to badly to be.



Discussion Question 1

What does the narrator's unwillingness to spend time with Mitko in his poor state of health reveal about the narrator's character?

Discussion Question 2

The narrator feels that Mitko is beyond help and remedy. Do you find this to be true? What could the narrator do to help Mitko at this point in his life?

Discussion Question 3

Mitko has spent the entire novel claiming that he considers the narrator to be a true friend, but he mentions that his friends are not true at all in Part III. In what ways has the narrator abandoned Mitko throughout the novel? In what ways is the narrator a bad friend to Mitko?

Vocabulary

officious, irremediable, suppliant, allay, rancor, festooned, bereft, rampart, middling, constrained, bemusement, incredulous



Characters

The Narrator

Although he is a focal point of the novel, readers never learn this character's name. It is established that he is a middle-aged American school teacher who lives and works at the American College in Sofia, Bulgaria. He learned he was gay when he was a young child. He spent time with a friend named K., a boy who shared many of his same interests. Just before befriending K., he got an erection while watching his father's nude body in the shower. His father shunned him for his homosexuality, leaving him with the feeling of abandonment.

The narrator meets Mitko in the bathroom at the National Palace of Culture in Sofia. He pays to give Mitko a blowjob, but he is also drawn to Mitko in a way that makes him want to continue seeing him. He pays for frequent encounters with Mitko, inviting him to his home in Sofia and even to his hotel room in Varna. He continues to end things with Mitko, knowing that he is not good for him; but the narrator cannot completely leave the young prostitute who appears to need so much help. The narrator admits that he does not have many friends and that he has become quite a hermit in his adult life. Mitko helps give him exciting activities to look forward to.

As Mitko's health fades, the narrator struggles to cut him off or to help him, and it is this feeling of required helpfulness that leaves the narrator extremely confused. At the end of the novel, the narrator has been living in Bulgaria for three years. His lack of Bulgarian still frustrates him, as does his inability to help Mitko both to thrive and survive. He ends things with Mitko when he hands him money so that he can go to Varna and die among his family members in his hometown.

Mitko

Mitko is a 23-year-old young man from Varna, Bulgaria, a city on the Black Sea coast. He used to be happy living in Varna. He had a boyfriend named Julien and spent time with him often. After Julien moved to France, Mitko moved to Sofia. He could not find work and ended up working as a male prostitute, usually starting at a bathroom in the National Palace of Culture.

Mitko starts off thin but fit when he is introduced in the novel. However, his lifestyle leaves him with syphilis, no money, homeless, and starving. Over the course of this novel, Mitko loses a lot of weight and strength. He does not receive treatment for his syphilis and visits the narrator to inform him that he will die soon. His last wish is to go back to Varna and be with his mother when he dies.



The Narrator's Father

The narrator's father is a well-educated man who came from a family of farmers in Kentucky. His mother had several children with several different men, making his childhood filled with temporary father figures and numerous violent fights. He resents the farm he grew up on and does not like taking his children there. He works in law and lives with his family in the city.

The narrator's father divorces his first wife and quickly remarries but cheats on his second wife, which results in another divorce. He is not emotionally available to his son, and, after he finds out the narrator is gay, he calls him a "faggot" and disowns him. He learns of his son's sexual preference when the narrator attempts to hug him while they are naked in the shower. He feels the narrator's erection and shoves him off of his naked body with a snarl. In Part II: Grave, he writes to the narrator and asks him to attend his deathbed. The narrator never shows up for his father.

K.

The narrator met K through a mutual friend who thought the two of them would get along because they like the same authors. The two boys get along very well and become best friends. They enjoy a night out around Halloween and spend their night destroying political lawn posters in the neighborhood. The boys return to the narrator's bedroom at his father's house. They touch one another in the dark and explore each other's bodies. However, K. pulls away from the narrator. He quickly finds a girlfriend but complains that his mom does not allow him to be alone with his girlfriend. He asks the narrator to come over and help chaperone to keep his mother away. However, K. receives a blowjob from his girlfriend while the narrator watches. This seems to be something that K. wanted all along. He drifts away from the narrator shortly thereafter and he never actually appears in the novel in any other way besides a flashback.

G.

Although unnamed, G. is an important family member to the narrator. She is the narrator's half-sister. She is more than a decade younger than he is, which is a major factor in why they are not very close. G. visits the narrator in Bulgaria and reveals that their father cheated on G.'s mother several times. G. discovered their father's porn collection, which was made up of digital photos he had taken. She installs tracker software that allows her to follow every move their father makes online. She has since lost touch with him.

The Boy on the Train

The narrator encounters this boy on a train while traveling with his mother. The boy is with his grandmother. He has no books or games to keep him busy, so he continues to



get into trouble in the ways he tries to entertain himself. There is something the narrator is drawn to in this boy. He is unsure of what makes him so curious until the narrator sees the boy make a flirtatious pleading posture in an effort to calm his grandma. This act makes the narrator realize that the boy reminds him of Mitko. The boy reminds him of who Mitko used to be, and he laments about the fact that this boy will probably end up living like Mitko one day.

R.

The reader never learns "R.'s" full name, but it is revealed how important he is to the narrator. He is a recent college graduate who lives with his parents in Lisbon, Portugal. The narrator met him in Bulgaria and they have been long-distance dating ever since. The narrator gives him syphilis, which causes R. to become extremely stressed. After he receives quick treatment, he encourages the narrator to ignore Mitko and to cut him out of his life.

Julien

Julien is Mitko's first love. The two of them were with one another in Varna, but Mitko claims he has left Bulgaria to teach in France.

Nurse at the Clinic

The nurse at the public clinic is a kind woman who treats the narrator with care. He notes that she is the only person in the clinic who does not appear to be distracted or tired or stressed. She is described as being blond and stout, with a baggy uniform on and a thick face. However, she proves to be a person who makes the narrator feel comfortable during his stressful ordeal of getting tested for syphilis.

Doctor at the Clinic

The doctor is a woman who is dressed very well in, according to the narrator, a sign of her education and social class. She is abrupt and unemotional. The narrator feels as if she is simply speaking rehearsed, pre-approved lines from the ministry when she doles out her diagnosis and warnings. She confirms the narrator's syphilis but tells him that his only treatment option is pills. It is her very indifference that makes the narrator angry enough to realize his inner resentment toward Bulgarian culture and its people.

Hotel Manager in Varna

The hotel manager in Varna is a man who seems to be friends with Mitko, but, after the narrator removes Mitko from his room, the manager reveals himself to be wary of men in Mitko's profession. He is understanding when the narrator asks that Mitko not be

permitted to re-enter the hotel property, and he reminds the narrator that those people are shameful and that he must be careful around them.



Symbols and Symbolism

The Fly on the Bus

Perhaps Greenwell's most delicate symbol, the displaced fly on the city bus symbolizes Mitko and the various people the narrator wants to help but never does. Much like the fly, Mitko is helpless, living in a place where no one knows how he arrived. He needs assistance; Mitko needs help and guidance. The narrator stares at the fly, tracking its every move, but he does not know how he can truly help the fly. He ensures that the man on the bus does not harm it, and he ensures Mitko remains as healthy as he can keep him. In the end, the fly disappears without the narrator being able to monitor its safety anymore. This is also a moment of foreshadowing, allowing readers to expect that Mitko will also slip out of view of the narrator with only a hope that he will be okay.

The Public Bathroom at the National Palace of Culture

This dirty public bathroom, where men wait around to hustle anyone for any service that will pay small sums of money, symbolizes the gritty, fast-paced world Mitko has thrust himself into. The reader is introduced to Mitko in this bathroom. The opening scene is gritty and candid, with intermittent reminders of people watching their every move and other men trying to move in on a sale. At first, Mitko is set far apart from the gritty tile floor sticky with urine. He is described as being fit and immaculately clean. However, as time goes on, Mitko begins to take on the persona of this bathroom. He smells of urine and his appearance becomes more and more disheveled. It is as if Mitko changes in a way that makes him seem like he is an accessory in the grime and stains of the bathroom we first meet him in.

Syphilis

The unfortunate syphilis outbreak among Mitko, the narrator, and R. symbolizes the dangerous life of being a hustler in Sofia. Mitko has engulfed himself in this tough life. He has jumped into a risky lifestyle where he is forced to network in the shadows and briefly connect with people to give them what they want in the moment. He infects himself by coercing with this life. As the narrator briefly enters this life, so too does his body become briefly infected with the disease. R. becomes infected and is cured of this lifestyle "disease" within a day. However, Mitko's exit from this life is much more difficult, as is his treatment for the syphilis. He has been overtaken by the illness of hustling. It is in his blood, and it will eventually kill him.

The Sea and its Barriers

Readers know the narrator uses long walks as a way to re-center himself when he is upset, but the sea in particular symbolizes the narrator's potential happiness. He arrives



to Varna and craves the ocean. He yearns to be near it and is uncomfortable until he sets his eyes on it. When the narrator finally gets to the sea it is blocked off. This is a metaphor, symbolizing the narrator's inability to access his own happiness. He sees the water, he knows what will make him happy and he knows what is good for him, yet he cannot bring himself to hurdle over the barrier and access his own happiness. The path near the sea is winding, with a seemingly endless option to continue. The many pathways to the ocean, to the narrator's happiness seem, to him, to be impenetrable.

The Hotel in Varna

This hotel symbolizes the penned up position that the narrator finds himself in with Mitko. He recognizes that he has angered Mitko and, for the first time, he understands the danger involved with ending things badly with a hustler such as Mitko. The narrator feels as if the hotel room is a prison. He quickly identifies that he has allowed Mitko into too much of his personal space, which might mean danger or hurt for him. The longer the narrator spends in the hotel room, the more his feeling of being backed into a corner increases.

The Horse at the Monastery

The image of a sluggish and malnourished horse symbolizes Mitko and his unwillingness to leave the depressing life he falls powerless to. This horse is found standing in a clearing near a seemingly abandoned monastery in Sofia. The narrator sees this horse—this majestic beast with "protruding ribs" (101)—and he wonders why it does not run off. It is not well taken care of and, furthermore, it is not tied down to anything. There is no logical reason why the horse should not walk (or run) off. This is also the case with Mitko. The narrator sees how Mitko's life starves him—both emotionally and physically—yet he does nothing to leave this life of squalor and hustling. There is no compelling reason why the horse should stay nor does Mitko have any true reason to succumb to the life he is currently being harmed by. The narrator sees these things and yet, much like Mitko, the horse recognizes that there is, ". . . something however meager to be had there where it stood" (102).

Buildings from the Communist Era

The forgotten buildings, standing strong in their brutal architecture, symbolize the deep issues Bulgaria is working hard to overcome. It was only recently when the country ceased being under communist rule. However, there is still a harshness to the surroundings, the culture, and the life of the people living here. Mitko is often shown hovering in front of a computer screen in order to connect with men who are seeking men. This country is still trying to repair and re-grow; it desires to thrive but cannot accept all people yet. The narrator sees the sharp and unforgiving lines of the buildings and connects it with the sharp reality Bulgarians seem to face each day.



R.

The unnamed R. is the narrator's boyfriend from Portugal but he also symbolizes the rational inner thoughts of the narrator. R. seems to be the part of the narrator that has been squelched down. The narrator knows that the logical pieces of advice given by R. make sense. He knows he should do the things R. suggests. This is the narrator's own logic peeking in to provide the advice for decisions he already knows would be wise to make. R. suggests that the narrator completely remove himself from Mitko's life, that the narrator should stop giving Mitko money. In a way, it is as if R. was never in the narrator's life, but that his advice was the narrator guiding himself.

The Family Exiting their Car

The final scene of the novel provides readers with a symbol for Bulgarian society in the form of a family that shuns Mitko away. The family is minding their own business, they are simply living their lives, but Mitko walks up and is eager to engage. In quick judgment, the family shuns Mitko firmly yet indirectly. Mitko has also been shunned by society. He has needed the kindness of strangers and the acceptance of people around him, but the world has provided him with nothing by a downward journey to his lonely, painful, and tragically young death. Society shows Mitko no kindness.

Walt Whitman

The author recalls Walt Whitman at a time when he is contemplating his own homosexual lifestyle, placing the poet's memory in a situation where he symbolizes unapologetic gay men and women. Whitman is a famous poet, both for his talent for writing and for his erotic descriptions. The narrator notes that he used to shy away from those descriptions; the very sexual nature of them used to make him feel uncomfortable. However, the more time he spends with Mitko, the more he embraces his own attraction to men. He notices the intimate connection to nature he feels, and he begins to connect with Whitman's sexually fueled poems.

Settings

The Narrator's Apartment

The narrator's school pays for a very nice apartment in a good part of Sofia. His apartment is furnished and Mitko considers it to be very swanky. The narrator admits that he is quite the hermit, often choosing to be on his own in lieu of spending time with the few friends he has. He invites Mitko to his apartment early on in their dealings with one another. Shortly after visiting his home, Mitko frequently shows up at the apartment unannounced to ask for small sums of money.

Varna, Bulgaria

Varna is Mitko's hometown. It is located on the Black Sea coast and is considered to be a nice place to visit in the summers. Mitko moves back to Varna briefly after a lengthy stay at the hospital. The narrator requests to come visit him there, so Mitko arranges a hotel room for the two of them. The narrator enjoys a long walk along the seaside in the morning, and, when he comes back, he learns that Mitko used his alone time in the room to masturbate. This angers the narrator to the point where he demands that Mitko leave. Mitko hits the narrator, leaving him feel as if Mitko and the other hustlers might endanger him in their home territory.

Sofia, Bulgaria

Both the narrator and Mitko live in Sofia, which is a city described as being busy, loud, and indifferent to human comfort. The narrator moves here to work, but he also finds Mitko in the underbelly of this city that is dotted with communist era structures. It is also in Sofia where the narrator is forced to visit two different clinics in order to be diagnosed with syphilis and to get a treatment, an experience that proves to be overwhelmingly stressful for the narrator.

The Bathroom at the National Palace of Culture

Although located in a museum, the bathroom in this museum is a public one and hosts several men who are looking to perform any kind of work that can earn them money. It is described as being far back from the public eye, in a corner where not many people bother walking. It is here where the narrator first meets Mitko. He strikes a deal with him so that he can give Mitko a blowjob on the dirty floor. As Mitko walks away, the narrator is left kneeling on the floor with his knees soaked in urine. The narrator realizes then that he wants to see Mitko but that he wants to meet him in a different place.

The McDonalds in Sofia

The narrator takes Mitko to eat dinner in a nearby 24-hour McDonalds after Mitko shares that he has been diagnosed with syphilis. The narrator gives him money for his treatments and leaves the table to use the bathroom. However, Mitko follows him in and pleases him while the narrator jerks himself off. It through is this event, this exchange for cash and services, that the narrator realizes that Mitko still considers him to be simply another paying customer who Mitko must keep pleased.



Themes and Motifs

The Frustration of Feeling Helpless

The feeling of helplessness is subtly woven into the storyline in such a masterful way that readers don't even recognize how this deep-seeded frustration is actually controlling most of what the narrator chooses to do. The narrator is a foreigner with minimal Bulgarian language skills. This allows him some level of comfort, but it also leads him to depending on Mitko for comfort and friendship. The narrator sought acceptance from his father, who rejected him. He then looked for acceptance from K., who also rejected him. The narrator no longer feels like he has control over the relationships in his life. He no longer feels like he can help himself, which is why he goes out looking for a person who can make him feel helped. The narrator knows that Mitko is simply performing services, but this does not change the fact that he enjoys the fact that he knows Mitko is helping him. He feels that Mitko helps him sexually and he believes that the young Bulgarian also helps him socialize.

The narrator begins to feel helpless again when he comes to the realization that he cannot help Mitko. Early on in Part III: Pox, the narrator learns of Mitko's syphilis. It is at this moment when the narrator sees Mitko as being infected by his lifestyle. Before, Mitko seemed impermeable. He was fastidiously clean and well-kept. He presented himself well and appeared healthy. However, the longer the narrator takes to intervene, and the longer Mitko is left in his life of prostitution, the more Mitko becomes infected. Once the narrator realizes that Mitko's case is a lost cause he begins to feel helpless in the relationship. Readers see the narrator shy away from providing Mitko with generosity and acceptance once the narrator realizes that Mitko is helpless and will succumb to his disease and lifestyle.

The narrator is also angry at Bulgaria for rendering him helpless as well. He is a foreigner, an outsider, who speaks only a small amount of the common language. When he learns that he must get tested for syphilis, the narrator seems most stressed out by the idea of the upcoming language barrier he will have to face. "I walked past this clinic every day, and I knew . . . that someone there would speak English. This was important, as I realized I lacked the vocabulary to request the tests I needed or explain the circumstances of my case" (117-18). He then continues this flurry of frustrated thoughts by commenting that he, ". . . imagined how my helplessness in the language would compound the helplessness of illness" (117-118). The narrator cannot add on any more feelings of helplessness. He has balanced his life in Sofia and any disruption will bring to light just how truly helpless he is. Readers see this helplessness brought to light when the narrator bitterly comments to a doctor that his syphilis is a, ". . . souvenir of your beautiful country" (150). He even comments that he was not aware at how angry he was at Bulgaria or for how long he has felt so bitter. It is the years of feeling like a slightly lost outsider that have caused him this annoyance. Now his syphilis is bringing it to light.



The narrator also feels helpless as he watches the helplessness Mitko feels against his own syphilis. At the end of the novel, in Part III: Pox, Mitko visits the narrator. He is emaciated and on his way to death. Mitko feels helpless in this situation and he speaks of God and his desire to be with his family. As a result, the narrator feels helpless. He knows that he is unable to help Mitko—to truly help him. He knows he cannot allow Mitko to stay and die at his place. He does not know how to help and he does not want to try. Instead, he gives Mitko money and sends him off into the world alone. The narrator exits the novel in a position that often shows helplessness. He describes himself as sitting on his sofa with his head in his hands (191). This posture is usually displayed by a person who is exhausted, powerless, and unhappy about a result; the narrator feels all of these things related to Mitko's future. He felt helpless in his methods to save Mitko and he is now helpless to save his life, offering him only some parting money in the hopes that Mitko will use it to see his family before he dies.

The Convoluted Nature of Generosity

Both Mitko and the narrator question their understanding the concept of generosity, despite their desire to help and be helped. The narrator in particular is highly concerned with how generous of a person he is. At first, he views his encounters with Mitko as being passably acceptable because it is a kind of courtesy, a form of help for a young man who has lost his way. In part I: Mitko, the narrator soothes himself by convincing himself that Mitko is a nice person who does not belong in such a risky, dirty, and dangerous life. He wants to believe that each payment he gives Mitko goes to his eventual escape from a life of hustling. When he invites Mitko to spend the night at his home, he feels okay about it because he is providing Mitko with a warm and comfortable place to sleep. As their relationship progresses, the narrator begins to realize that Mitko is not working to escape from his life. He learns that Mitko does not do nice things for either himself or for the narrator. This understanding causes the narrator to lose all generosity with Mitko, and it results in the narrator no longer feeling charitable.

The narrator also comes to understand that each of his interactions with Mitko has been a transaction involving both sex and money. He internally applauds himself for being kind enough to pay for Mitko's syphilis treatments, but then reflects on the sexual pleasure Mitko facilitated in the bathroom shortly after receiving the money. He notes that Mitko, “. . . hadn't allowed me to be generous, that had been the point of what he had done. I had wanted to give without taking, but it must have been humiliating for him, not to have anything to bargain with, and I wondered now if I had liked his humiliation, if that was the pleasure I took in my generosity . . .” (151). The narrator understands that, despite his fantasies otherwise, his relationship with Mitko has been purely business. Mitko spoke of friendship; he often claimed that he thought of the narrator as a true friend, yet Mitko treats the narrator like a job he must do to earn a living. This causes the narrator to wonder if his warm feelings related to feeling generous were actually warm feelings brought on by a darker and more sinister motive stemming from his subconscious. He then questions his entire being. He wonders about his motives in each and every close relationship he has known, and he questions whether he is truly a



benevolent and caring person after all. He often describes his interactions with others in need as being "obligations" (187) and he compares giving things to people as transactions, saying, ". . . so that now we owe nothing, anything we give is too much, and now our debt is beyond counting" (187). Even while discussing generosity, the author phrases his thoughts on the subject as being part of a payment system. Where one person gives, the other owes.

Mitko is also confused by the nature of generosity. He frequently describes himself as being different from the other hustlers—more caring and conscientious. He thinks of the narrator as a true friend because he has been starved for generosity for quite some time. When the narrator shows a shred of care, Mitko takes it and yearns for more. He does not know his boundaries because he does not understand charity or kindness. Mitko has been living alone in a world where he must fend for himself. The narrator's generous actions confuse him and he winds up becoming more dependent on the narrator than he realizes.

Life as a Homosexual Man

In this novel, Greenwell portrays two types of homosexual men: those who are out and unapologetic and those who hide in the ignored corners of society. It should come as no surprise that a novel centered around a homosexual relationship between a man and his small-time male prostitute will also touch upon the role society plays on homosexuals. Here the author presents two very different connections between society and being gay: American and Bulgarian. The narrator comes from the United States. He has been cognizant of his sexual attraction to men from a very young age. Although his father disappointed him by disowning him for being gay, the narrator never once makes any apologies about being a homosexual man. He states that he is out and that no one would be surprised to learn that he is gay. Even as Mitko is dying he provides veiled threats to the narrator for being gay, but the narrator quickly reminds Mitko, "I am an open person, I don't have those secrets, everyone knows what I am . . ." (186). This is the case throughout this novel. The narrator never fears any retaliation for being gay. He came out years ago and lived in a society where, although it might not always be accepted by fathers or best friends, he is able to be gainfully employed and safe living as a known gay man.

Readers are brought upon a surprising journey of exasperation with the narrator as he visits clinics for his syphilis. He laments the fact that homosexuality is often connected to STDs, saying, "Disease was the only story anyone ever told about men like me where I was from, and it flattened my life to a morality where I could be either chaste or condemned" (122). The narrator understands that gay people are often stereotyped as promiscuous, an assumption he rejects and tries hard to avoid.

There is a difference between how the narrator portrays his sexual attractions and how Mitko handles his male sexual encounters in Bulgaria. Mitko seems to sneak around. He makes quiet calls online to various people and he organizes liaisons with men who will pay him money. The narrator notes that these men are talking in dark and quiet



rooms as a way to avoid their families learning about them (24). Most of these men are part of a secret community where they lean on one another for support, friendship, or pleasure but are rarely able to meet one another "in the flesh" (24).

But this form of virtual comradeship can also come at a price when people like Mitko use this information as a weapon. Readers can see that Mitko uses the narrator's own sexual preference as a form of potential threat. When he does this, the narrator thinks, "It was a threat in a different world, in his world perhaps but not in mine" (186). In Bulgaria, being a homosexual is not often common knowledge one shares with many people in their lives. When a hustler wants to hurt or punish someone they simply tell people that the person had sex with a person of the same sex. In Bulgaria, according to this novel, this information could sink a person's career, family, and social life. These two societies come together when the narrator learns he is impervious to reputational damage thanks to his confidence as an openly gay man in Sofia and elsewhere.

The Various and Complicated Forms of Love

Readers are unlikely to argue that these two men experience anything close to true love, but the narrator's own struggle with being a gay man has caused him to confuse every loving relationship he experiences, forcing him to retreat away from genuine affection. Starting chronologically in the narrator's life, his own father taught him about the fickle nature of love. The love between a father and a son is often considered to be sacred and everlasting. While the narrator assumed this was the case, his father proved to him that love is a fleeting thing; it is here one minute and gone the very next. This early betrayal is something that haunts the narrator his entire life, leaving him skeptical of any true closeness and doubting how long anything could last. This long-standing feeling of doubt is what causes the narrator to seek out sexual company with Mitko. He does not go in search of love. In fact, the narrator doesn't actually go out in search for sex. He needs acceptance. The narrator needs someone to accept him as a gay man. He needs a person who will touch him and not reject him later. However, the only way the narrator knows how to find this kind of acceptance is by paying for the attention. When he finally gets attention from Mitko, he allows himself to be swept away by the fantasy that this person might truly care. His own father rejected him and disallowed any affection between the two of them. His childhood friend, K. rejected him in a cruel and graphic manner. The narrator even comments that several friends in his past have rejected him because he is too needy. Now that the narrator has Mitko, he fantasizes that Mitko really likes him and that this like could potentially blossom into a love he has never felt. Of course the narrator knows this is foolish, which is why he continues to remind himself that Mitko's interactions are purely based on money for sex, but that does not mean there is not a sliver of hope that Mitko might one day fall in love with the narrator. He comments that he knows, ". . . there could never be any shared ground between [Mitko and me], we would never find a way to be decent to each other. I had to end it, I knew, I had to give up the pleasure of him, not just the obvious pleasure, but the pleasure of being kind . . ." (151-52). Despite knowing the damage that his relationship with Mitko is causing both men, the narrator is unable to end things. It is not until Mitko is no longer of use to him sexually that the author finally rejects Mitko. He shows him no



love in his time of need, proving to both Mitko and to the narrator that their relationship truly was based on transactions. As the narrator watches Mitko walk away from his apartment at the end of the novel, he comments that he loved Mitko in some sense, although he remained alien to him (190).

There is another form of complicated love illustrated between K. and the narrator. It is obvious that the narrator has never fully moved on from K., but that is also because of the hurtful and confusing way in which K. rejected him. From K.'s perspective, he also loved the narrator. He loved spending time with him and he enjoyed talking to the narrator. He seemed to want the narrator to touch him that night in the waterbed. He invited the narrator into his personal space, giving permission for the narrator to bring his hands up between K.'s shirt and his skin. He was not sure how to show his affection and love for the narrator. However, he woke up the next day afraid of the feeling he had and fearing the actions that he allowed the night before. He did not know how to handle these feelings so he chose to display sex in front of the narrator. The blowjob K. received in front of the narrator is seen as an act of breaking up. It is hurtful in a way that K. knew would destroy the narrator. However, the reader can also understand that K. cared for the narrator; he just did not know how to handle his feelings.

No One is Special

A beautiful message sent by Greenwell through his numerous forms of anonymity is that the events in this story are not unique to one set of men but probable for a myriad of men around the world. First and foremost, the unnamed narrator is a clear indication that readers should not focus on the narrator as a person but on the narrator as a symbol for gay men with heartbreaking pasts. This novel is not about this particular narrator. It is about men, particularly gay men, who feel a desperate need for approval and acceptance—gay men who are so desperate for a nonjudgmental touch that they are willing to make risky decisions to get what they want to feel. This narrator is not special in the same way that Mitko is not special. Mitko is a common young person who has allowed his life decisions to lead him on a path where he hustles and struggles to make enough money to survive. He is not unique in being a hustler who includes pleasuring men in the services he offers. Mitko is not unique in his constant requests for small sums of money or in his desire to be "friends." Above all, their relationship is not unique. The author wants to communicate that these types of relationships happen across the globe, to men who don't know what they are getting into. They happen to nice men who go searching for one thing but wind up getting themselves into something entirely different.

Most of the supporting characters are unnamed as well. In this novel readers meet K., G., and R. These characters are described as being important people to the narrator yet none of them are provided with a name. This continues the idea of both anonymity and generalization all at the same time. By calling these people by simple initials, readers focus on the actions and thoughts of the characters more so than their physical descriptions or names. This allows readers to focus on the heart of Greenwell's story: how the various human relationships one encounters can shape a person for life.

Another strange touch of anonymity in this novel is that each of the chapters within the three parts is unlabeled. It is common for novels to have smaller chapters within larger parts of the story, but these chapters are usually named or numbered. Greenwell's novel does neither, leaving readers alone to zip through the stories. Even the chapters are anonymous in this book.

Styles

Point of View

This novel delves into the forgotten nooks of a person's brain; it crawls into spaces long forgotten by the narrator, who tells his life story through a first-person limited point of view. The entire novel is told from the perspective of the unnamed narrator, who provides every piece of personal information one would think is possible, except for his name. He is a cynical, antisocial yet lonely man who seeks the comfort of feeling loved and accepted, and he stumbles around Sofia desperately trying to learn how to love himself.

Language and Meaning

This novel features long, lingering sentences filled with dazzling descriptions and vivid imagery. Even the sentence structure is lingering, filled with clauses, commas, and semicolons. For example, the narrator observes Mitko as he leaves his apartment, stating that, "He had always been alone, I thought, gazing at a world in which he had never found a place and that was now almost perfectly indifferent to him; he was incapable of even disturbing it, of making a sound it could be bothered to hear" (190). The narrator has a very distinct style of languid thinking. His sentences are long, complex, and weighted heavily with worry for both himself and the people who surround him.

What is interesting about the narrator's obsession with saving people around him is that the book also contains an extreme lack of importance on characters' identities. The narrator isn't named. Major characters (K., R., and G.) are not named. This is because the story does not lie simply with one person. The story is with the emotions and the ordinariness of the lives of the characters. Many men are gay and deemed unacceptable. Several hustlers use this feeling of shame to their advantage. Many men start out sweet and happy then turn to a life they are ashamed of. Many daughters grow to hate their fathers. The true story is not the names of these individuals but of the actions and feelings of the individuals.

Structure

This novel is comprised of three vignettes: Mitko, A Grave, and Pox. There are smaller chapters within each part, but the chapters are neither named or numbered. This adds to the anonymity of the book, and it increases the fact that all of these stories bleed into one another as one's own life events bleed. Part I: Mitko is an entire story on its own. It chronicles the differences in which the two men cope with this new revelation of a convoluted relationship. In Part II: A Grave, the narrator finds himself physically in the present but emotionally stuck in flashbacks of his childhood. This section brings about a lot of insight into why the narrator is the way he is when he finds out about his father's



death. The final part of this novel, Part III: Pox provides readers with a lengthy consequence for both Mitko and the narrator. The reader is left with an image the author has prepared him for the entire story: Mitko cold and entirely uncared for as he is left alone to regret his decisions.



Quotes

. . . it was nothing like madness for me, in my life lived almost always beneath the pitch of poetry, a life of inhibition and missed chances, perhaps, but also a bearable life that to some extent I had chosen and continued to choose.”

-- Narrator (Part I: Mitko)

Importance: The narrator is a poet. Here we see hints that he views poetry as a safe house, using the words, "under the pitch" as a reference to the shelter that poetry provides him. He separates the safety of his poetry from the control he has over his life, emphasizing that he chooses everything he does. This thinking provides the narrator with a sense of control and helps calm him down when he feels overwhelmed by the often dangerous decisions he makes because he is worried about how a gay man will be received by the world.

. . . so it is that at the very moment we come into full consciousness of ourselves what we experience is leave-taking and a loss we seek the rest of our lives to restore.”

-- Narrator (Part I: Mitko)

Importance: The narrator is deeply damaged by his father's refusal to accept him as a gay son. He has never been able to come to terms with who he truly is because he has never resolved his relationship with his father. The sad part is that this was a happy time in the narrator's life. He did not feel ashamed to explore his father's naked body nor did he shy away from exploring K.'s body when he had the chance. The narrator was able to learn more about himself at the same time that his father rejected him, leaving him feeling alone and rejected for the rest of his life.

How easily we are made to feel, I thought, and with what little foundation, and with no foundation at all.”

-- Narrator (Part I: Mitko)

Importance: Despite the narrator's understanding that Mitko has no true feelings for him, that does not change his longing to fantasize that he is wrong. He is amazed at how quickly he grows addicted to Mitko's indifferent company. The two men have nothing in common and they can barely communicate with each other, but that does not change the strong connection the narrator feels to Mitko.

. . . I lay next to him thinking, as I had had cause to think before, of how helpless desire is outside its little theater of heat, how ridiculous it becomes the moment it isn't welcomed, even if that welcome is contrived.”

-- Narrator (Part I: Mitko)

Importance: We see drastic changes in the narrator each time Mitko appears. The narrator is quite stable and mellow, but Mitko's arrival makes the narrator primal. He loses all composure, leaving both men well aware that it is Mitko who has the power in



the relationship. The narrator loses himself in these moments but quickly finds himself the moment each of them orgasms.

What would I be without the anger I felt then, I wondered as I stood looking over the water, the anger I still feel, it ebbs or surges but is always there; whatever it has kept me from, without it I would have lost myself altogether.”

-- Narrator (Part II: Grave)

Importance: The narrator has several strong a negative feelings surging inside of him. He resents his father and he is still saddened by K.'s abandonment in childhood. He is frustrated that he cannot help Mitko and even more angry that Mitko will not return his strong feelings toward him. On top of everything else, the narrator is angry that he is a foreigner in a foreign land. There are many events in the novel that bring out his mood swings, each inspired by Mitko's open rejection of the narrator as a serious love affair.

I wondered how much this feeling owed to him, to his company or the pleasure he took in the poor meal I had made, and how much it depended on some gratified notion of myself, my willingness to set aside the past and a generosity I knew he would call on before he left, which was real generosity now, I thought, since I would ask nothing in return for it.”

-- Narrator (Part III: Pox)

Importance: The narrator is in dire need of feeling like a redeeming quality of his is generosity. He wants to help Mitko remove himself from a life the narrator disapproves of. He wants to feel generous when he pays Mitko, and he needs to feel like he is actually helping Mitko when he pays for sex. These feelings cause the narrator to continue opening his door for Mitko. He has convinced himself that he is the only person showing Mitko kindness.

That's all care is, I thought, it's just looking at a thing long enough, why should it be a question of scale?”

-- Narrator (Part III: Pox)

Importance: The narrator really struggles with the concept and display of love in this story. He confuses Mitko's pleasure sessions as a sign of love and assumes that their conversations are not related to a transaction but connected to Mitko's genuine care for him. People like R. encourage the narrator to throw Mitko away. They request that the narrator forget about such a small and insignificant person within a fast-paced society, but the narrator cannot forget Mitko. He is unable to ignore a boy who has already been removed from the care of the world.

. . . venereology. . . . By its Latin roots it should have meant the study of love, and I wondered too how often that made it the right word for the people who came here, and whether it was the right word for my own predicament.”

-- Narrator (Part III: Pox)

Importance: The narrator feels as if he caught Syphilis because he chose to have sex



with a prostitute like Mitko. He has allowed himself to enter a dirty part of Bulgarian society and, as a result, he too has been sullied. But the narrator cannot fully believe that every encounter with Mitko is purely business for the hustler. The narrator develops deep and pure feelings of affection for Mitko because he has not had many relationships with men. He is still entirely unsure of where he stands with Mitko and whether or not this hustler could ever feel affection for him. On top of all this, the narrator is also quite self-conscious about his own intimate relationship with a person like Mitko. It comforts him to think that he is in a hospital category with people who experience love, which is a feeling the narrator desperately wants to know himself.

I didn't understand the bitterness with which I had spoken, bitterness not just toward the woman but toward the place, this country I had chosen; I hadn't known I felt it, and I wondered how deep it went."

-- Narrator (Part III: Pox)

Importance: Here it is as if the narrator scares even himself. There has been a deep-seeded frustration with the helplessness the narrator feels in Bulgaria. The curt female doctor at the clinic is the person who prompts this anger in the narrator to come out, making him unsure if it is truly the country of Bulgaria that frustrates him or if he is frustrated by who he has to be in Bulgaria. Bulgaria supplies him with a hustler who, all at once, breaks his heart and stimulates his penis. It is a country that makes the narrator feel that he has to risk having a relationship with a man; a country where few people seem to speak conversational English. This feeling of being forced into a certain position is what the narrator resents most, but his anger is wrongly misplaced in the direction of Bulgaria, where his feelings are hosted.

How difficult it must be to be a parent, to divine the discipline or patience by which to make the good seeds grow while plucking out the bad, though maybe there was no real telling them apart."

-- Narrator (Part III: Pox)

Importance: It is no secret that the narrator is highly resentful of his father's approach to parenting. He feels that his father threw him aside the moment he learned his son is gay. This is a hurtful fact that the narrator has never been able to resolve. He does, however, seem to respect the challenge of parenting here. The narrator admits that it is difficult for parents to determine which traits to keep in their children and which traits should be erased or defeated in order to put forth a healthy and productive member of society. The narrator feels as if his own father considered his sexuality to be a bad seed that needed to be gotten rid of. But the narrator does not feel that his homosexuality is a bad seed nor does he feel that it is something about himself that should have been erased in childhood.

Making poems was a way of loving things, I had always thought, of preserving them, of living moments twice; or more than that, it was a way of living more fully, of bestowing on experience a richer meaning. But that wasn't what it felt like when I looked back at the boy, wanting a last glimpse of him it felt like a loss. Whatever I could make of him would diminish him, and I wondered whether I wasn't really turning my back on things in



making them into poems, whether instead of preserving the world I was taking refuge from it.

-- Narrator (Part III: Pox)

Importance: The narrator is coming to terms with the fact that his poetry may be his coping mechanism for the things that make him feel uneasy. He chooses to romanticize events that might not deserve the flourish. This boy on the train, this young person with his whole life ahead of him, seems utterly tragic to the narrator. He has determined that this boy's future is dull and dark. He desperately wants to commemorate the boy's innocence and gleeful nature, but he also realizes that this is no way to live. The narrator admits to himself that he hides behind his written works as a way to pretend that things in life are not scary or frustrating or challenging; that poetry helps him hide from things not remember things he engages in.

Love isn't just a matter of looking at someone, I think now, but also of looking with them, of facing what they face, and sometimes I wonder whether there's anyone I could stand with and watch what I wouldn't watch with Mitko, whether with my mother, say, or with R.; it's a terrible thing to doubt about oneself but I do doubt it."

-- Narrator (Part III: Pox)

Importance: The narrator openly recognizes that he does not feel the level of love, sympathy, and empathy it takes in order to care for Mitko in his dying days. However, because he has recently discovered that his seemingly generous acts are really selfishly motivated, the author doubts any of his generosity. He is not sure if he loves anyone enough to care for them in the way Mitko needs. The narrator did not rush off to his father's deathbed and he refuses to remain with Mitko. This leaves him feeling doubtful for just how "good" of a loving person he is.