The Motorcycle Diaries

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ERNESTO CHE GUEVARA

Born into a middle class Argentine family, Ernesto "Che" Guevara became one of the most important revolutionary figures of the twentieth century. As a young student, he traveled around South America (a trip this book details), observing the rampant poverty and class oppression suffered by most of its people. Subsequently, Ernesto traveled to Guatemala and became involved in social reform there, only to see his efforts thwarted by a United States-supported coup that replaced a liberal president with a much more conservative one. Because of these experiences, Guevara became a radical Communist and devoted his life to fighting capitalism and imperialism. In the 1950s, he participated in the Cuban Revolution that installed Fidel Castro in power. Later, he attempted similar revolutions in the Congo and Bolivia. In 1967, CIA-assisted Bolivian armed forces captured Guevara and killed him.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Guevara came of age in the period immediately following World War II. Two superpowers emerged from this war: the United States, a capitalist democracy, and the Soviet Union, a Communist country. Diametrically opposed to each other ideologically, the two powers remained for decades in a state of political tension we now call the Cold War. They competed by compiling formidable nuclear arsenals and attempting to foster their rival ideologies abroad by whatever means possible. For the US, this meant using the army and covert forces to install and support pro-capitalist leaders sympathetic to American business interests in Latin American countries, even if they were dictators or if the people supported a more liberal government. Guevara observed and came to loathe this policy of intervention; he eventually participated in the Cold War by promoting revolutionary Communism throughout Latin America. Guevara's most significant political action was his involvement in the Cuban Revolution, which successfully defeated a capitalist regime and established a lasting Communist one. Fidel Castro, with whom Guevara organized the revolution, remained in power (becoming a dictator himself) for several decades, and Cuba remains a Communist nation today. Guevara was part of the Cuban government during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, during which the Russian government constructed nuclear missiles in Cuba in response to a failed US invasion. This event is generally known as the highest point of Cold War nuclear tension.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Guevara was highly influenced by *The Communist Manifesto* and *Das Kapital*, two nineteenth-century texts in which the political philosopher Karl Marx articulated the necessity to fight against capitalism and class-based societies, replacing them with political structures based on the equal sharing of wages. Later in his career, Che wrote a number of influential books on his political philosophy and personal experiences. Among the most famous are *Guerilla Warfare: a Manual*, which he distributed to revolutionary movements all over Latin America, and *The Bolivian Diary*, a personal record of his last campaign. He was killed less than 24 hours after his last entry. *The Motorcycle Diaries* has much in common with other travel narratives. *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, by Robert Pirsig, is another philosophically-driven chronicle of a road trip by motorcycle, and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, another road trip narrative, also asserts the importance of long periods of travel and solitude in forming the personal character of an unconventional protagonist. Additionally, as one of the most famous political memoirs ever published, *The Motorcycle Diaries* has done much to define and influence this genre as a whole. Guevara ties his politics to concrete personal experiences during this youth, and many subsequent authors have also used this tactic for explaining the origins of a political consciousness; for example, in *Dreams of My Father*, Barack Obama writes about how his youth and young adult life shaped his ideology as a politician.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Motorcycle Diaries: Notes on a Latin American Journey
- **When Written:** Guevara ostensibly wrote his memoir as a series of impromptu diary entries during his 1952 expedition. However, at least some editing occurred between 1952 and the memoir's eventual publication in 1993. Some scholars have suggested that Guevara embellished the original narrative later on, or that his daughter or the Cuban government made alterations during editing.
- **Where Written:** South America
- **When Published:** 1993
- **Literary Period:** modern/Cold War
- **Genre:** memoir
- **Setting:** South America
- **Climax:** While the Motorcycle Diaries is not a traditionally-structured book that follows a strict plot structure, one important point both of climax and resolution comes when Ernesto meets a stranger in Venezuela with whom he

discusses the inevitability of proletarian revolution. Stylistically, the unusually heightened language in this chapter shows that the memoir is at its dramatic apex. Ideologically, this chapter gives the reader a sense of resolution by showing the solidification of Ernesto's commitment to radical Communism.

- **Antagonist:** class oppression/capitalism
- **Point of View:** first-person

EXTRA CREDIT

Brand Recognition. An iconic photo of Che Guevara's face has been cited as "the most famous photograph in the world."

Canonization. In Bolivia, where Guevara spent the last part of his life and was killed, he has been informally canonized by local communities, who sometimes call him "San Ernesto." They have preserved the building where his body was kept as a shrine.

PLOT SUMMARY

In January 1952, Ernesto Guevara is a medical student in Buenos Aires, Argentina. His friend and fellow medical student, Alberto Granado, suggests that the two of them take a motorcycle trip through South America together, with the ultimate aim of seeing the San Pablo Leper Colony in Peru, in which Alberto is professionally interested. The men repair Alberto's old **motorcycle**, which they affectionately and mockingly name "La Poderosa" ("The Powerful"), say goodbye to their families, and set off from Buenos Aires.

The men travel for some days and stop in Miramar, Argentina, to visit Ernesto's girlfriend, Chichina, and her family. Although he and Alberto are setting out on a youthful adventure, Ernesto finds it hard to tear himself away from the comfort and excitement of his romance. He stays for eight days and gives Chichina a dog named "Comeback," showing his intention to return to her side (although he never does).

After leaving Chichina and her family, the men cross into Chile, although they have to stop almost every few days because of La Poderosa's many mechanical failings and accidents. Their frequent stops in rural towns lead them to meet people from all walks of life, from the mechanics who fix the motorcycle to local doctors who take an interest in them and feed and shelter them. They even tell local newspapers that they are leprosy experts (although they're really medical students); consequently, local communities respect and help them, making for an easy journey.

In the north of Chile, they visit the Chuquicamata copper mine, a huge source of wealth for Chile (although not for its working class), which is run by U.S. mining companies. Guevara notes how dangerous the work is and asks his guide how many people died since the mine's creation. This experience leads Ernesto to observe the rampant injustice that miners face and the devastation that capitalist industry controlled by foreign companies can inflict on local communities. While camping, Ernesto meets a mining couple who are homeless, having been blacklisted from the mines for their Communist beliefs (which were illegal at the time). Ernesto feels deeply sympathetic to the couple, and he comes to believe that Communism isn't a dangerous ideology, but rather a natural response to class-based oppression and poor living conditions.

In Peru, La Poderosa finally breaks down for good. Because they now have to hitchhike or work for their passage between cities, the two men spend more time with the working class, especially indigenous farmers and laborers. Ernesto observes that the "Indians" face additional oppression because of their race, even from Europeans who are barely better off economically. Observing the traditional rituals of indigenous peoples, Ernesto is impressed with the strength and resilience of pre-Columbian cultures in the face of centuries of oppression.

Ernesto visits Cuzco and Lima, two cities that are important centers of European power and culture but that also contain the remains of the Inca civilizations that were there before. Ernesto visits ruins of fortresses and castles and is deeply moved by their power and sophistication. By examining these cities' layers of ancient, colonial, and modern architecture and infrastructure, he demonstrates the European attempt to suppress indigenous culture by erasing evidence that it existed. Ernesto finds it inspiring that indigenous cultural sites and practices have survived these repeated attempts at obliteration, and he views this survival as evidence that the indigenous proletariat can and will rise up to reclaim the political and economic power that is rightfully theirs.

In Lima, Ernesto meets Hugo Pesce, a doctor in charge of the national leprosy program. Pesce helps direct Ernesto's exploration of the city and he eventually sends Ernesto and Alberto to the San Pablo Leper Colony deep in the Amazon. Ernesto observes the appalling living conditions at the colony, but he is inspired by the work of the doctors and the hopeful attitudes of the patients. Although he is studying to be a doctor and he came to observe the treatment of leprosy as a disease, he writes about the lepers in terms of their political oppression, showing that his thoughts are shifting away from medicine and towards political activism.

After this, the young men travel north to Colombia. In Bogota, they observe conditions under a particularly repressive right-wing regime. Ernesto says that the constant presence of police in civilian life erodes personal dignity, and he predicts (correctly) that these conditions will help foment revolution.

In Caracas, Venezuela, Ernesto and Alberto finally separate. Although the trip has changed and inspired both of them, it changes them differently: Alberto begins to seriously consider a career as a leprologist, while Ernesto abandons the medical

profession and begins to develop a Communist ideology.

After Alberto leaves, Ernesto travels by himself through rural villages in Venezuela. Here, he meets an enigmatic European stranger who has fled his own country because of his revolutionary actions (although Ernesto doesn't specify what these are) and now travels around South America, waiting for the chance to participate in another movement. The stranger tells Ernesto that when revolution comes, it will be huge and "impersonal," and that the creation of a new, proletarian society will require the sacrifice of many lives.

This prediction inspires Ernesto. At this point, he becomes completely committed not only to Communist ideology, but also to revolution by violence. He says that humankind is divided into "two antagonistic halves," the oppressor and the oppressed, and he affirms that when it comes time for these groups to battle, "I will be with the people." Ernesto envisions himself "consumed with fury," fighting and killing on behalf of the proletariat. Ernesto's final paragraphs offer the prospect of a society with more justice and equality, but he warns that this new world must be purchased through violence and sacrifice.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Ernesto Guevara – Ernesto Guevara is both the memoir's author and its protagonist. The book is a collection of his edited notes from a motorcycle trip that he and his friend Alberto took across South America when they were medical students in their 20s. Ernesto begins the narrative as an aspiring doctor who is adventurous and somewhat thoughtless, chiefly motivated by excitement and novelty. Over the course of his travels, he and Alberto experience the difficulties of the road, encounter impoverished people, learn about indigenous culture, and see the injustice of foreign companies profiting off of the suffering of laborers. As Ernesto recounts these experiences, his observations become less personal and more political, which reflects the transformation of his goals, values, and personality. Instead of following through on his plan to help others through the medical profession, Ernesto's experiences radicalize him and set him on a path to becoming a political revolutionary who seeks to create change across a whole society, rather than just for individuals. Since the narrative is structured as a series of informal diary entries, the reader is most often immersed within the consciousness of Ernesto as a younger man: an energetic and naïve traveler who has embarked on a journey whose importance he can't yet quite grasp. However, occasionally the older narrator Ernesto steps back from the action to reflect on its meaning or to point out how a certain incident was important to his later life. From his narration, it's clear that Ernesto has become a man for whom ideology and revolution are more important than everything else, including individuality.

Alberto Granado – Alberto is Ernesto's friend and comrade in adventure. A fellow medical student, he shares Ernesto's upper-middle class background, and both men aspire to become doctors at the beginning of the trip. Alberto is older than Ernesto and sometimes seems to be the more dominant personality, orchestrating the tricks and pranks that sometimes garner them assistance and sometimes get them in trouble. However, Ernesto eventually emerges as the more ideologically motivated and politically serious character, for whom the experiences of the journey are much more transformative. As Ernesto shifts towards politics and radicalism, Alberto's original aspirations—to work towards social reform as a doctor—remain unchanged. Thus, Alberto emerges as a foil to Ernesto; Alberto's somewhat static character highlights the extent to which his friend transforms.

Chichina – Chichina is Ernesto's girlfriend at the outset of the narrative, although by the end they have parted ways. Like Ernesto, she comes from an upper-middle class family. Unlike Ernesto, she is fully committed to a bourgeois lifestyle. Reluctant to see Ernesto leave on such a long, uncharted trip, she wants him to return to Argentina, finish his studies, and begin a conventional life with her. For Ernesto, Chichina represents the comfort and appeal of this conventional life; he finds it hard to tear himself away when he visits her, and he describes her as having an almost narcotic allure. However, Chichina also shows the tendency of bourgeois life to leave Ernesto unfulfilled. Ernesto never quite takes her seriously and finds it easy to make fun of her with Alberto. When she eventually breaks up with him via letter, he discovers he actually feels nothing for her. Ultimately, Chichina is important to the narrative because she helps Ernesto clarify the direction he doesn't want his life to take.

Older Doctors – These are friends of Alberto, whom he and Ernesto visit before crossing into Chile. One has a wife who is deeply suspicious of their aimless wandering and worries they'll tempt her husband away from his stable, middle-class career. The other is devoted to the Radical party, which makes him ridiculous in Ernesto's eyes since he considers this political party defunct. The lives of these older men seem stale and unappealing, and this gives Ernesto pause about his plans to become a doctor.

Old Woman with Asthma – Ernesto meets this woman in a tavern and attempts to treat her asthma, but he can't do much for her. Because she can't afford to buy medicine or obtain regular healthcare, her disease has spiraled out of control and prevents her from working. Her inability to contribute wages helps keep her family trapped in poverty, which in turn makes them resent her as a burden. The tragedy of her circumstances helps Ernesto realize how inadequate healthcare for the poor is, and that public health is closely linked to political issues like poverty.

Mine Workers – The mine workers are a husband and wife whom Ernesto and Alberto meet on the way to the Chuquicamata copper mine. Both had lost their jobs in another mine because they were members of the Communist party (which was outlawed and generally hated at the time) even though they were only guilty of protesting low wages and atrocious working conditions. Ernesto characterizes this couple as both heroic and deeply relatable, desiring only their basic rights and being willing to fight for them. They show Ernesto that Communism isn't an ideology to be hated and feared, but rather the sensible choice for the oppressed and underserved proletariat.

Museum Curator – The curator of the archeological museum is a mestizo, a rare example of an educated Indian who has made it into the middle class. He influences Ernesto's political views by talking to him about the need to make people respect indigenous cultures and the potential of cultural pride to catalyze political and economic improvement.

Dr. Hugo Pesce – Dr. Pesce is a renowned Peruvian leprologist who takes Ernesto and Alberto under his wing when they visit Lima. He directs a large hospital, whose patients Ernesto and Alberto befriend. He's very gregarious, hosting dinners to introduce them to the city's notable doctors. Dr. Pesce is an example of the kind of doctor Ernesto and Alberto would like to be.

Dr. Bresciani – Dr. Bresciani is the director of the San Pablo Leper Colony. Even though he has almost no money or resources at his command, he presides over a group of patients with remarkably high morale and manages to do his own research on the side. Importantly, Dr. Bresciani encourages the lepers to form their own government within the colony, helping them form a microcosmic society based on equality.

Ernesto's father – Just like his mother, Ernesto's father is known to the reader only through the letters Ernesto writes to him. These letters are affectionate, but a little more serious in tone than the letters to Ernesto's mother, suggesting that Ernesto has a more intellectual relationship with his father than with his mother.

The Stranger – The stranger is a political activist that Ernesto meets in Venezuela. Although Ernesto provides almost no concrete details about him, he hints that he's from Europe and was involved in a Communist movement there. The stranger is waiting for the chance to be involved in a South American revolution, and he believes that the success of revolutionary movements is paramount, meriting the sacrifice of innocent lives. Talking with the stranger solidifies Ernesto's commitment not just to political activism but to violent revolution.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Ernesto's mother – Although the reader doesn't know much about this character, it's clear from Ernesto's affectionate letters that he has a good relationship with her and cares for her deeply.

Schoolteacher – The schoolteacher is an educated Indian whom Ernesto and Alberto meet on a truck ride in Peru. He explains the need to reform the education system so that Indians are taught to be proud, rather than ashamed, of their ancient heritage.

Dr. Hermosa – Dr. Hermosa is a Peruvian leprosy expert who guides Ernesto and Alberto through Cuzco. He directs them to archeological sites, like Machu Picchu, that kindle Ernesto's appreciation of indigenous culture.

Julio Tello – Julio Tello is the curator of the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Lima.

THEMES

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CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS

Over the course of Ernesto "Che" Guevara's youthful motorcycle trip across South America, he learns about the class system that structures South American societies, and he comes to understand the injustice of oppressing the working class (called the "proletariat" in the Marxist terminology that Ernesto uses). Ernesto, an ambitious young man from the middle class who has many opportunities available to him, does not at first understand the importance of class-based analysis of social issues. At the beginning of the memoir, he depicts his experience without a significant focus on class, but seeing firsthand the dire and unjust effects of poverty causes him to shift his analytical frame, recounting his experiences to highlight the plight of the working class and the unjust behavior of the ruling classes. Ernesto's observations lead him to correctly predict that drastic inequality between classes (and, in particular, the oppression of the lower classes) would have revolutionary consequences in South America—consequences which, the reader knows, Ernesto would ultimately help to bring about.

Ernesto's realization that social class affects every aspect of a person's life begins on a personal level. When others treat him and his traveling companion Alberto differently based on arbitrary and shifting signifiers of their social class, Ernesto comes to see that people offer respect, kindness, and help not based on who he is, but based on what class they perceive him to be. Ernesto and Alberto come from middle-class backgrounds, but they're treated like poor people for the first time when their motorcycle breaks. Becoming "bums without

wheels" makes finding people to help them on their journey much harder. For example, during a boat trip, the first-class passengers are unwilling to associate with two young men who they believe to be of small means. By contrast, when Ernesto and Alberto convince people that they are leprosy experts (when the truth is that they're medical students), they are perceived as upper class professionals, so the townspeople are eager to feed and help them.

Ernesto and Alberto recognize, however, that these kindnesses do not extend to people who seem less wealthy. A soldier who was "so kind to [Ernesto and Alberto] just the day before" is cruel when he's in charge of a group of poor and indigenous conscript soldiers, showing clearly that people are more helpful to those of higher class status. In one telling episode, the local police procure mountain horses for the "doctors" by stealing from some passing indigenous people (the lowest group on the class ladder). The rightful owners of the horses follow Ernesto away from the town and ask for the return of their property. Ernesto's inability to communicate with them until a translator arrives demonstrates his initial naivety, but his immediate return of the horses and refusal to be complicit in class oppression shows that his experiences of differential treatment based on class have led to a moral conviction not to benefit from class privilege.

Ernesto's political evolution is not just one of awareness, but also one of action. Just as he becomes more aware of the effects of class oppression, Ernesto begins to admire people he meets who work to alter the status quo, which foreshadows his becoming a political revolutionary. The doctors Ernesto and Alberto meet in the **leprosy colonies** leave a profound impression on Ernesto. Instead of using their profession to enrich themselves personally and socially, these doctors work to ameliorate the lives of the most neglected and despised groups. By noting that "the people who are in charge do a great job, even if it goes unnoticed," Ernesto stresses that it's noble to work for the betterment of others with little possibility for reward.

Ernesto also finds inspiration in working class and poor people, which marks a more radical departure from his middle-class upbringing. When Ernesto and Alberto are staying near some Chilean mines, Ernesto has an inspiring encounter with a working class couple who have been labeled Communists (at the time, this was illegal in Chile) and barred from employment because they agitated for better wages. Describing the husband as having "a mysterious, tragic air," Ernesto portrays him in almost mythic proportions despite his lowly circumstances. Subsequently, Ernesto declares that this couple is "a living representation of the proletariat in any part of the world," thus showing that he sees the couple as a general example of how class struggle can better the lives of the poor. This reveals that Ernesto is transforming his personal experiences into both moral convictions and political strategies.

Ernesto's sprawling journey across his home continent eventually leads him to sweeping conclusions about South America's political future. Noticing the dire living conditions and simmering frustrations of the impoverished proletariat, Ernesto expresses grave doubts as to "how long this present order, based on its absurd idea of caste" can persist. Similarly, after parting from the Communist mining couple, Ernesto concludes that Communism is only "a natural longing for something better" and "a protest against persistent hunger," which rebrands Communism—an ideology feared and despised by the middle classes—as a rational and sympathetic reaction to an unjust world. This is one of Ernesto's most explicit indications of his revolutionary future, showing that he believes that a Communist rebellion against the status quo is the only way to liberate oppressed South Americans.

While Ernesto begins his trip with little awareness of the injustices of social class, his experiences and observations give him a strong sense of the oppression faced by those in the lower classes. By the end of the memoir, Ernesto sees everything through the lens of class, and his critique of class-based oppression solidifies his commitment to working to better the lives of others. Notably, Ernesto does not, in the face of oppression, commit himself to compassion or charity; instead, he comes to believe that the simmering resentment of large swaths of oppressed people has the potential to overthrow oppressive systems. As such, he commits himself to helping those people revolt.

SUPPRESSION AND RECLAMATION OF INDIGENOUS CULTURE

Ernesto travels across a continent in which, ever since the arrival of the first conquistadors, white Europeans have controlled cultural institutions and historical narratives. European landmarks, religions, and languages have replaced pre-Columbian ones, and serious study of indigenous culture is a rarity. Moreover, the impoverished proletarian classes are mostly comprised of indigenous people whose economic and political oppression coincides with the erasure of their culture. Ernesto makes the connection between class and culture, asserting that these two kinds of oppression are interdependent and that treating native culture with seriousness and dignity is key to empowering the proletarian classes. Eventually, he comes to believe that reclaiming culture and history is both a goal of social change and a vehicle to effect it.

Over the course of his journey, Ernesto learns about the European suppression of indigenous culture and comes to view the perseverance of this culture as evidence of an indomitable Latin American spirit. As an urban South American of European descent, Ernesto has little knowledge of indigenous culture at the outset of the journey, but he quickly acquires it by examining cultural sites and observing the people he meets. He

gives evocative descriptions of cultural artifacts that Europeans have either willfully destroyed or neglected. In Cuzco, he conjures up the city when it was the center of the Inca empire, and contrasts this sophisticated ancient society with the "illiterate Spanish conquistadors" who ruined it. Reversing cultural stereotypes which assert the simplicity of native people and intelligence of Europeans, he shows his preference for indigenous to European culture. The fact that Ernesto has to make his point through an act of imagination shows the scope of European domination, both of the physical monuments and of the "proud" ancient cultures he imagines which have given way to the "defeated race" he sees around him today. However, Ernesto also enthusiastically notes instances of cultural survival. In Peru, a native schoolteacher explains to him that a particular mountaintop marked with a cross is actually a pre-Christian holy site appropriated by Catholic monks; the gestures of native travelers as they approach it are a version of an ancient ritual. Ernesto finds this fidelity to pre-Columbian culture poignant but also encouraging; it shows the use of culture as a tool of proletarian resistance, when they often seem to have none.

Through the presentation of his experiences, Ernesto contends that cultural suppression traps indigenous people in the lower classes and leaves them vulnerable to exploitation both by their own society and by foreign powers. In Cuzco, Ernesto connects the "violated ruins of the temples" and "sacked palaces" to the "brutalized race" of indigenous people. Thus, the issue at hand is bigger than the destruction of art or artifacts; disrespect of culture causes disrespect for a people and their political rights. The same Peruvian schoolteacher who explains the cross on the mountain asserts that the perception of indigenous culture as inferior has serious social ramifications. The few Indians who manage to obtain an education are taught the "white man's" creed of cultural superiority, which "fills them with shame and resentment," rather than giving them tools for self-improvement. Subsequently, they have to live "within a hostile white society which refuses to accept them" because of this perceived inferiority. Thus, cultural suppression prevents Indians from achieving upward mobility and imprisons them in the impoverished proletarian class.

Because indigenous people are not upwardly mobile, positions of economic and political power belong only to those of European descent or to foreigners. In a Chilean mine, Ernesto sees "blond [and] arrogant" American bosses spirit profits away to other countries while their workforces scramble to secure marginal wage increases. The workers mock their bosses as "imbecilic gringos" but can't combat them effectively because they don't have the knowledge or education to do so. This situation is particularly symbolic because it shows the extent of foreign cultural influence over the very earth occupied by indigenous people for millennia. In this way, the denigration of indigenous culture emerges as one of the factors creating the proletariat and preventing them from flourishing in their own society.

Eventually, Ernesto decides that reclaiming indigenous culture and asserting its importance will help the South American proletariat challenge the economic and political status quo. Through the Peruvian schoolteacher, Ernesto voices the necessity to "build schools that would orient [indigenous] individuals within their own world" (in other words, allow them to embrace their own culture and historical narratives rather than that of the European conquerors). This will allow them to "play a useful role within" society, rather than being a marginalized and impoverished underclass. In Lima, Ernesto encounters the Museum of Archeology and Anthropology, one of the only institutions to approach indigenous history academically. The museum fascinates Ernesto and its curator, a "pure blood Indian scholar," is a rare example of an Indian who is able to flourish in European society without abandoning his origins; in fact, he helps promote general understanding and appreciation of his culture. However, incidents like this are rare and by the end of the book it's clear that Ernesto doesn't envision increased mobility within the current order as the goal of embracing indigenous culture. Rather, he sees embracing indigenous culture as a tool to catalyze revolutionary social change.

While Ernesto makes a strong case that racial and political oppression go hand in hand, it's important to note that in discussing this issue, he displays some troubling views on race. Ernesto becomes preoccupied by class early in the book, whereas his interest in indigenous culture comes later and, at least initially, stems from his sense of its utility as a means of unifying the proletariat toward social change. In this sense, he sometimes seems to treat racial issues as subsidiary to class ones, rather than acknowledging that class inequalities often originate in racial prejudice. Ernesto views Latin America as a cultural whole and envisions shared culture as a unifying force that will help the proletariat rise up against corrupt, European regimes. However, this sense of cultural and historical unity seems to stem mostly from his sense the similarities in the current plight of the proletariat in many nations, and it erases the serious differences among various South American cultures. For example, the Inca were themselves a colonial power who subjugated many of the tribes around them. But Ernesto mentions the "formidable empire" of the Incas and the "proud race that repeatedly rose up against Inca rule" in the same breath, ignoring the nuances of cultural history in order to promote his own political narrative. In some incidents Ernesto blatantly romanticizes the Indians he encounters, for example when he notices that, unlike him, they don't "need" shoes to walk in the snowy mountains. Ernesto sketches the tableau of barefoot Indians as romantic and picturesque, but it's almost certainly a function of poverty, not a cultural statement. While Ernesto is serious about his advocacy for

indigenous people, he sometimes dips into stereotypes when discussing them.

Nonetheless, as Ernesto progresses through South America, he becomes increasingly aware of native culture and the ways in which indigenous peoples have suffered under and persevered through centuries of European domination. Furthermore, Ernesto shows that the inheritors of this culture are the current proletariat, not as a dispossessed and powerless underclass, but as a dignified cultural group brimming with latent power and waiting for "the blood of a truly emancipating revolution." Ultimately, Ernesto identifies indigenous culture as a catalyst for proletarian unity and revolution.

MEDICINE, POLITICS, AND HELPING OTHERS

At the time of their motorbike trip across South America, Ernesto and Alberto are studying to become doctors in Buenos Aires, a wealthy city in which the average middle class citizen has access to sophisticated medical care and training. However, their journey through remote parts of the continent reveals to them that modern medicine is rare or nonexistent for many of their countrymen. Witnessing the disparities in medical care across South America teaches Ernesto and Alberto the promises and limitations of modern science. Even small improvements in medical care for the impoverished can dramatically improve people's quality of life, and Ernesto is proud when he can provide care to those he meets. But individual efforts alone cannot fix unequal access to care; only a change in the political system that undervalues poor people can ensure equal treatment for all. The benefits of modern science, he concludes, will remain limited and unequally shared if the society's underlying political system is unjust. Thus, Ernesto's compassion for the circumstances of those he meets leads him, at first, to give medical care to the poor, but then to turn his attention to politics.

Initially, Ernesto and Alberto believe that modern science alone can solve the public health problems they frequently encounter. The two men often meet people so lacking in basic medical services that even though Ernesto and Alberto aren't fully qualified doctors, they are able to provide tangible help. For example, patients in the underserved **leper colonies** they tour are ostracized by the local communities because of superstitions surrounding the disease and misconceptions about the risk of transmission. Because the two men have a scientific understanding of the disease, they are able to give a "psychological lift" to the patients by shaking their hands "as we would shake anybody's," by playing football with them, and treating them as people with dignity rather than outcasts. Ernesto also views the doctors who work in the leper colonies as role models, remarking on the sophisticated research they do with few resources and admiring their commitment to a field that mainstream society does not value. This admiration marks a change in the two men's personal behavior. At the beginning, Ernesto professes himself already "jaded" with the medical profession he's preparing for, and uses his status as a medical student chiefly as a tool by which he and Alberto can quickly obtain respect, assistance, and free drinks from unsuspecting townspeople who believe they are real doctors. However, as he begins to understand how desperately rural communities need medical care and how much even a half-trained doctor can help, he begins to truly grow into the role he adopted as a farce, seeking out doctors wherever he travels and providing care to people who need it along the way. In this part of the memoir, Ernesto's focus on the things doctors can achieve makes it seem like the efforts of educated and well-intentioned individuals can be a solution to the social crisis of unequal healthcare.

However, eventually Ernesto realizes that it is impossible for individuals to provide sufficient healthcare, especially to the poor, without the backing of adequate social services. In the leper colonies, Ernesto notes the that due to the neglect of government and local communities, patients live in "disastrous" conditions and the facilities are bug-ridden lack surgical equipment. Conditions like these prevent doctors from providing more than the most basic care. In another instance, Ernesto attempts to treat a poor woman's asthma and realizes how little he can actually do to help her. While Ernesto also suffers from asthma, he can buy inhalers which allow him to go about life unimpeded. Since this woman has no access to innovations like these, he can only provide a stopgap by giving her some asthma pills he knows she'll be unable to replace.

Ernesto argues that if health care is unequally distributed, it works to heighten class disparities rather than reducing them. As a member of the middle class, Ernesto doesn't let asthma prevent him from attaining an education, making a living, or even going on vacation. However, this treatable ailment derails the poor woman's entire life. By preventing her from working as a waitress, asthma drastically decreases her economic status. In her hardscrabble community, this affects her social position and even basic family relationships. Her inability to contribute makes her "a purely negative factor in the struggle for life and, consequently, a source of bitterness for the healthy members of the community." Although they deal with the same illness, this woman faces a set of dire consequences Ernesto has never had to consider.

By the end of the memoir, Ernesto comes to understand that poor healthcare is part of a broader crisis of a political system which both fosters and depends on inequality. Modern science cannot provide real benefits to the poor without radical change in the government. Ernesto makes more and more explicit connections between individual medical cases and political injustice in general. For example, the chapter about the asthmatic woman begins as an explicitly medical episode but ends with Ernesto realizing the broader "injustice" of the

political system and commenting on the "profound tragedy circumscribing the life of the proletariat the world over." The leper colonies also showcase this revelation. Because lepers are a particularly powerless and despised group, society (and the ruling class that decides how social resources are allocated) explicitly denies them social services and ostracizes them, just as it implicitly does the proletariat. Contrary to Ernesto's initial impression, even the most well-intentioned individuals with the best scientific training cannot ameliorate the plight of these people. Only wider social change can accomplish that.

Ernesto's experiences as a medical student and faux-expert on leprosy both inspire him to serve those less fortunate than him and change the way in which he intends to do so. While he begins the trip taking his access to the benefits of modern science for granted and regarding the medical profession as a vehicle for personal advancement, Ernesto comes to realize the importance of his profession in extending access to science beyond the upper and middle classes. However, he also realizes that working toward this goal as a doctor is not enough. Alberto is seriously considering a job as a leprologist by the end of the book, but Ernesto declares himself ready to be "immolated in the genuine revolution," committing himself to much more drastic action. His experiences with medical care on the road ultimately galvanize Ernesto's shift away from the bourgeois world of his youth, towards radical activism. Rather than doing good works as a doctor, he will become a revolutionary.

GROWING UP

Ernesto begins his road trip through South America as a bourgeois medical student seeking an adventure before resuming his studies; he finishes it as a budding revolutionary with a growing awareness of the faults of the social and political systems within which he lives. As the memoir progresses, Ernesto shifts from narrating personal escapades in a lighthearted manner to conducting serious class and cultural analysis based on his observations and experiences. Alberto also matures significantly, but for him this means growing into the role of middle class doctor he always expected to assume eventually; moreover, he never quite abandons the mischievous spirit that dominates him at the beginning. For Ernesto, growing up is a much more dramatic process. He shifts from an inward to an outward focus on life, and he distances himself from his class origins and the future expectations he had at the beginning of the book.

At the beginning of the memoir, Ernesto is a pleasure traveler bent on squeezing every ounce of adventure and novelty out of his summer road trip. The narrative opens with an image of Ernesto drinking *mate* with his friends and discussing "this bitch of a life"—typically youthful student behavior. Looking back, Ernesto notes that even as he an Alberto decide to make the trip, "the enormity of our endeavor," with all its future significance, "escaped us in those moments." Instead, the two men focus on "the dust of the road ahead and ourselves on the bike," clearly envisioning the trip as an adventure centered around their personal gratification. Alberto has an enormous supply of ingenious and sometimes unscrupulous ploys to convince others to foot the bill for their food and shelter. While Ernesto usually plays second fiddle in these charades, he devotes significant space to relating them and does so with mirth and appreciation, showing how much he admires his friend's behavior. Although Ernesto has a girlfriend, Chichina, whom he visits before he sets off, he recounts with delight an episode at a Chilean dance in which he meets a woman who is "hot and clearly in the mood" and subsequently fights with her husband, as a result of which Alberto berates Ernesto for alienating their supply of free drinks. Through his heavy focus on these kinds of escapades, Ernesto depicts himself at the outset as a youthful and somewhat thoughtless protagonist.

As the trip progresses Ernesto and Alberto mature significantly, but in different ways. Ernesto shifts from being interested in only those who have food or wine to offer to being intrigued by and involved in the lives of many different kinds of people, such as the inhabitants of the **leper colonies** and the poor people to whom he provides healthcare. By the time he reaches his final destinations, Ernesto is totally focused on visiting museums, seeking out older men as mentors, and analyzing the history and culture of the cities he sees. This serious behavior, compared to his propensity for carousing earlier in the book, demonstrates an increased maturity and corresponding shift in values. His narrative style also shifts, transforming from a series of somewhat disconnected travel notes to a series of observations of class conditions that build off each other and focus comparatively little on his personal life.

Alberto also matures, transforming from a student pretending to be a doctor to a man ready to dedicate his career to treating leprosy. However, he matures along the conventional middle-class trajectory of committing to a profession. Ernesto, who says he doesn't know how long he'll be interested in leprosy, even as he investigates it seriously, is clearly seeking some way to grow up without choosing a bourgeois career path.

By the narrative's end, Ernesto diverges completely from Alberto's path, shedding his middle-class trappings and declaring his intent to become an activist and a political leader. Although he feels Alberto's absence "sharply" when the two friends part ways, solitude allows him to focus even more on abstract concepts and distance himself from the bourgeois pleasure-seeking which characterized their earlier experiences and which Alberto spearheaded. Ernesto announces this parting in two brusque sentences, giving little explanation, but the reader can deduce that they're no longer the compatible traveling companions they were at the beginning, given Ernesto's increasingly abstract and radical state of mind versus Alberto's stolid practicality. In the final chapter, Ernesto meets

an enigmatic stranger who makes a revelatory speech about the terrible necessity of revolution, prompting Ernesto to declare his own commitment to "take my bloodstained weapon" and fight on behalf of the "triumphant proletariat." The heightened, graphic language of this last paragraph, in which Ernesto's conception of his future is totally centered on revolutionary struggle, shows how much his sense of direction in life has changed since the inception of the trip.

It's easy for students of history to forget that Che Guevara wasn't always a revolutionary leader but, in fact, started out as a quotidian middle-class student. *The Motorcycle Diaries* shows how a young, smart, and inquisitive protagonist can react to his experiences by synthesizing revolutionary ideas. By depicting his own development next to Alberto's very different path, Ernesto shows both his unremarkable origins and the extraordinary process and results of his growing up.

INDIVIDUALITY VS. IDEOLOGY

As Ernesto grows into an avid Communist during his trip, he has to decide whether to prioritize his own needs and desires as an individual or the demands of the broader ideology to which he is committed. Structuring his memoir as a collection of impromptu notes jotted down *in medias res*, Ernesto gives the reader a compelling self-portrait of himself as a unique individual with his own set of personal goals and questions. He also provides highly realistic portraits of those he meets. However, as time goes on and Ernesto become more and more preoccupied by his developing ideological beliefs, he gives much broader and more generalized depictions both of himself and of those around him. Ultimately, although Ernesto views his commitment to Communism and revolution as a noble goal worth any degree of personal sacrifice, the reader has to decide if the pursuit of ideology demands too great a sacrifice of individual character.

Through his actions and his writing style, Ernesto shows himself as a complex, highly characterized individual full of desires and plans that have nothing to do with his political ideology. Ernesto prefaces the book by describing its chapters as a series of "fleeting impulses that raised my fingers to the [typewriter]," making it clear that the reader will be situated directly within Ernesto's own stream of consciousness. This gives the reader very specific and personal insight into Ernesto's character. In the next chapter, he details his own personal character, saying that he has the "spirit of a dreamer" and then describing his apprehensions about medical school, showing a clear focus on his individual desires and goals

In particular, Ernesto's relationship with his girlfriend, Chichina, shows how much he is focused on his path as an individual. While Ernesto travels, Chichina remains at home, representing the interests and concerns of the bourgeois world which, at this point, they both inhabit. It's clear that a more serious commitment to Chichina would entail a commitment to a bourgeois life as well, in which Ernesto's prime concern would be for the success and prosperity of himself and his family. It's also clear that, in many ways, Ernesto finds such a commitment appealing; he prolongs his visit with her and describes how "the entire universe drifted by, obeying the impulses of my inner voice," showing the allure of a life centered around the individual. He also gives Chichina a dog named **"Comeback,"** which represents (at least at this point in the novel) an intention to return and start a life together with her.

As Ernesto travels, he generally derives his ideological principles from concrete individual experiences. For example, his frustrating inability to treat an old woman's asthma leads him to synthesize broad judgments not just about healthcare, but also about class structure and the likelihood of a proletarian revolt. The ideological principles Ernesto synthesizes are compelling in large part because they derive from these meaningful individual experiences, rather than abstract ideas or political jargon. Thus, by the middle of the memoir, Ernesto has managed to combine ideology and individual experiences, both his own and others', in a meaningful and productive way.

By the end of the book Ernesto's overwhelmingly strong ideological commitments obscure his personal character and experience. In the final chapter, Ernesto meets a stranger who talks to him about the revolution he foresees. After this, Ernesto has a vision in which he foresees himself fighting in this revolution, "howling like one possessed" and "savoring the acrid smell of gunpowder, blood, [and] the enemy's death." In this graphic passage, Ernesto envisions himself transformed into a mechanism of proletarian force; his entire individual personal is subsumed in the power of his ideals. Because of the structure of the novel, the reader is still firmly rooted in Ernesto's consciousness, but he has removed almost any trace of himself as an individual from that consciousness. Notably, Ernesto barely characterizes the stranger he encounters. Their interaction is a vehicle for an ideological dialogue, whereas many of Ernesto's earlier experiences showed compelling connections between individuals. The memoir's end shows that in order to seriously pursue his ideology, Ernesto must subsume his personal character.

Ernesto matures as an individual throughout his journey, but he also changes by subjugating his individual character to his ideology. While Ernesto begins the trip as a highly individualistic traveler, he exchanges this for the set of ideological principles he develops over the course of the novel. The reader has to decide whether the benefits of an ideological system merit the demands it places upon the individual character.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

LA PODEROSA

Ernesto begins his narrative with an image of his friend Alberto's motorcycle, which is the vehicle that makes possible Ernesto and Alberto's road trip across South America. The motorcycle's nickname, "La Poderosa" or "The Powerful," is obviously a joke to the two men, since La Poderosa is far from a powerful machine—it's difficult to ride, it breaks frequently, and it dies forever halfway through the trip. In this sense, the motorcycle symbolizes the youthful scrappiness of their adventure and their reckless desire to embrace risk and improvisation. However, just as Ernesto transforms from a naïve and unfocused youth to a serious political revolutionary over the course of the book, the symbolism of the motorcycle shifts, as well. When Ernesto and Alberto finally lose the motorcycle and become "bums without wheels," Ernesto realizes that owning a motorcycle had identified him as a member of the middle class, which had led people to respect him and Alberto in the poor towns he visited. Without the motorcycle, the two men begin to live and to be treated like members of the proletariat. Thus, La Poderosa *does* signify real power—the power of class advantage—which the men had been previously unaware that they possessed. The transition in the motorcycle's symbolism foreshadows Ernesto's eventual disavowal of his bourgeois roots and his embrace of the proletarian cause.

CHICHINA AND "COMEBACK"

After leaving Buenos Aires but before beginning their trip in earnest, Ernesto and Alberto visit Ernesto's girlfriend Chichina at her summer house. Like Ernesto, Chichina is from an urban, upper-middle class family, but while Ernesto feels ambivalent about his privileged background, Chichina is completely comfortable with it; She always appears within the comfort of her luxurious summer home or on a private beach, and she expresses her love for Ernesto through material goods, giving him a gold bracelet before they part ways. Ernesto considers himself to be in love with her, but he also characterizes her presence as intoxicating, like a drug—enticing him and tempting him to abandon his road trip, but not necessarily making him content. Thus, Chichina simultaneously symbolizes the comforts and attractions of conventional bourgeois life, and Ernesto's anxieties about remaining within this social sphere. Ernesto names the dog he brings Chichina "Comeback," as a promise that he will resume his life with her after the road trip. Thus, theoretically Comeback symbolizes Ernesto's commitment to the kind of conventional life Chichina represents. However, Comeback almost dies several times on the way to Chichina's summer house, falling off the motorcycle and refusing to eat. This suggests that Ernesto's commitment to life with Chichina is tenuous from the start, and it foreshadows their breakup and his eventual rejection of bourgeois values. In retrospect, both Chichina and Comeback show how much Ernesto's commitments change as a result of his road trip.

THE LEPER COLONY

Because lepers are easy to fear and despise, the government and local communities ignore them and refuse to allocate necessary resources to them,; they are completely excluded from the normal benefits of belonging to society, and are instead consigned to isolated colonies. However, Ernesto finds a lot to inspire him when he reaches the San Pablo Leper Colony in the remote jungle of Peru. Within San Pablo colony, patients have created a society that allows them independence and dignity. They live in their own cabins and adjudicate disputes with their own judges and policemen. While the material conditions of the leper colony show Ernesto the necessity of social change, its atmosphere is reminiscent of the post-revolutionary future Ernesto imagines, in which the proletariat are liberated and empowered to govern themselves. While Ernesto doesn't explicitly compare the lepers and the proletariat, he makes his first political speech at a banquet in the colony, in which he stresses the unity of Latin American peoples. Because of its egalitarian values, the leper colony is a microcosm of the ideal Communist society Ernesto envisions, and it helps him articulate his nascent political views.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Ocean Press edition of *The Motorcycle Diaries* published in 2003.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ In nine months of a man's life he can think a lot of things, from the loftiest meditations on philosophy to the most desperate longing for a bowl of soup—in total accord with the state of his stomach.

Related Characters: Ernesto Guevara (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

In the narrative's preface, Ernesto takes a moment to reflect as an adult on the notes and diary entries he wrote as a young man on a road trip that would turn out to be much more influential than he expected. In his passage, he comments on his own personal development throughout the trip as he now understands it. Ernesto matures a lot during the trip, but that process of maturation doesn't have a clear or constant trajectory—rather, it seems to come and go. One minute he'll be musing about the economic effects of poor healthcare, and the next he'll be drinking all night in a bar or making offensive generalizations about black people. Often, his state of mind depends on the simplest external conditions, like the availability of food. The narrative therefore depicts a process of growing up that is messy and non-linear, but nevertheless realistic and compelling.

❝ Man, the measure of all things, speaks here through my mouth and narrates in my own language that which my eyes have seen. It is likely that out of 10 possible heads I have seen only one true tail, or only vise versa....Okay, but this is how the typewriter interpreted those fleeting impulses raising my fingers to the keys, and those impulses have now died. Moreover, no one can be held responsible for them.

Related Characters: Ernesto Guevara (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

Although *The Motorcycle Diaries* is supposedly a memoir, based on real events and facts, at the very outset Ernesto undermines the idea that the narrative contains any absolute truth. By emphasizing the subjectivity of his narration, he opens the reader to the possibility that the book isn't a hard-and-fast representation of actual truths, but a semi-fictionalized representation of ideas.

This acknowledgement of subjectivity is also important because it destabilizes the political convictions Ernesto develops in the course of his trip by acknowledging the subjective nature of the narrative and all the ideas presented in it. Notably, Ernesto quotes the Greek philosopher Pythagoras, who famously said that "Man is the measure of all things," meaning that knowledge is derived from subjective human thought, rather than objective laws or values. Invoking this maxim at the outset of the book suggests that perhaps Ernesto is aware that the radical political views he has developed by the end of the book are not necessarily a reflection of objective reality.

Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ The enormity of our endeavor escaped us in those moments; all we could see was the dust on the road ahead and ourselves on the bike, devouring kilometers in our flight northward.

Related Characters: Ernesto Guevara (speaker), Alberto Granado

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

As he and Alberto go about packing their things, acquiring visas, and saying farewell to their parents, they don't have much on their minds besides having a fun vacation between terms of medical school. However, the older Ernesto, looking back on his younger self, knows that he can trace many of his fundamental political convictions to the experiences he's going to have in the next few months. This remark shows a nostalgic, almost wistful cognizance of the gap between Ernesto the youth, setting off on this trip, and Ernesto the adult, sitting down many tumultuous decades later to write this book.

This gripping image also hints at the way Ernesto will shift from thinking in terms of his individual desires to his budding political ideology. The picture of the motorcycle fading into the distance evokes a sense of spontaneity and solitary adventure, and maybe even personal development. However, La Poderosa (the motorcycle) will come to demonstrate the men's increasing consciousness of class issues, and its final breakdown will coincide with their rejection of their own bourgeois class status.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ I remember the day my friend the sea came to my defense...The beach was deserted and a cold onshore wind was blowing. My head rested in the lap tying me to this land, lulled by everything around. The entire universe drifted rhythmically by, obeying the impulses of my inner voice...And then, for the last time, I heard the ocean's warning.

Related Characters: Ernesto Guevara (speaker), Chichina

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

Once Ernesto arrives at Chichina's summerhouse at Miramar, he finds it hard to leave. His girlfriend is beautiful and her sensual aura entices him, making him forget all his goals in a romantic stupor. Moreover, the atmosphere of upper-middle class familial comfort makes him remember all the good things about the life he was so eager to get away from. Ernesto's depiction of himself lying almost insensate in Chichina's arms shows the overwhelming temptation of bourgeois values. It also suggests the insidiousness of those values, since Ernesto describes himself as lacking thought or self-awareness while he's under their sway, totally oblivious to all the things in the "universe" worth examining.

However, eventually the ocean rouses Ernesto and reminds him it's time to move on. Notably, this inspiration comes from nature, foreshadowing Ernesto's increasing admiration for the land and eventual assertion of South Americans' unique connection to and ownership of the territory in which they live. Even though the choice to leave Miramar and continue with an already-planned road trip may not seem momentous, the heightened language with which Ernesto describes it makes it a turning point, showing that Ernesto already sees something wrong with the conventional trajectory of bourgeois life. Moreover, even at this early point it's becoming clear that the pull of abstract things like nature and philosophy is stronger than that of family or individual relationships.

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ I now know, by an almost fatalistic conformity with the facts, that my destiny is to travel, or perhaps it's better to say that traveling is our destiny, because Alberto feels the same.

Related Characters: Ernesto Guevara (speaker), Alberto Granado

Related Themes:

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

When Ernesto and Alberto reach San Martín de los Andes, they're struck both by the sublimity of the natural landscape and the abject poverty of the local people. They daydream about one day starting a clinic there, simultaneously living in a beautiful place and doing good as doctors. When he discards this possibility in favor of traveling, Ernesto begins a pattern of imagining different careers within the professional field he's been preparing for and then rejecting them, showing his increasing distaste for the bourgeois values he grew up with. However, at this point he's fantasizing, rather unrealistically, about traveling forever for his own personal gratification, demonstrating that he has a lot of maturing to do before he ultimately rejects medicine altogether for radical politics. It's also interesting that he seems to see his future as being predestined: he talks about his own "destiny," as well as his "fatalistic" interpretation of facts. While the adult Ernesto in the preface seemed unsure if objective truth can be found anywhere, even in recollections of his own experiences, the young Ernesto is a lot more certain about the existence of fate in everyday life.

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ The huge figure of a stag dashed like a quick breath across the stream and his body, silver by the light of the rising moon, disappeared into the undergrowth. This tremor of nature cut straight to our hearts. We walked slowly so as not to disturb the peace of the wild sanctuary with which we were now communing.

Related Characters: Ernesto Guevara (speaker), Alberto Granado

Related Themes:

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

Outside Juntín de los Andes, a dismally poor rural town, Ernesto and Alberto come across a mountain and spontaneously decide to hike it. As with many of their expeditions, they're completely ill-prepared, and wind up stumbling down the mountain after dark, starving and soaked. Despite his physical discomfort, Ernesto appreciates the sublimity of the deer's sudden appearance and his harmony with the natural environment. Describing themselves as "communing" with forest, he places himself and Alberto within the harmonic scene with the stag. This shows Ernesto's growing desire to be part of something larger than himself—a desire which he will eventually channel into political activism. Moreover, his instinctive connection with nature shows that he's becoming

increasingly rooted in the South American environment. This foreshadows the strong identification with indigenous cultures he will develop later in the trip.

Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ A feeling of profound unease came over me; I felt that I was incapable of feeling anything. I began to feel afraid for myself and started a tearful letter, but I couldn't write, it was hopeless to try. In the half-light that surrounded us, phantoms swirled around and around but "she" wouldn't appear. I still believed I loved her until this moment, when I realized I felt nothing.

Related Characters: Ernesto Guevara (speaker), Chichina

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

While waiting out a thunderstorm in a police office, Ernesto receives a letter from Chichina in which she breaks up with him. At first, he's devastated and unmoored. Even though he didn't seem to take his relationship seriously, her presence in the background was a comforting symbol of the stable home life waiting for him when he was done with his adventure. When he discovers that his feelings of loss are only superficial and that he hasn't really loved Chichina in a long time, he worries that he's emotionally inadequate because he's unable to feel what he should. However, the real problem is that the values and the way of life he used to take for granted no longer satisfy him. In this passage, the allure of Chichina and her bourgeois values, which used to be almost irresistible, finally fades away. This is a moment of personal development for Ernesto, in which the individualistic relationships of his youth start to become less important than his politics. It also creates an ideological vacuum: since he no longer aspires to a bourgeois life with Chichina, he's more open to different political theories and more willing to commit himself to a new ideology.

Chapter 13 Quotes

❝ [We were] no longer a pair of more or less likable vagrants with a bike in tow; no, we were now "The Experts," and we were treated accordingly.

Related Characters: Ernesto Guevara (speaker), Alberto Granado

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

In the remote towns of Chile, where doctors are rare and the specialized skillset of treating leprosy is almost completely unknown, Ernesto and Alberto manage to pass themselves off as qualified professionals rather than the medical students they are. An interview with a local paper, in which they claim to be leprosy specialists touring South America, makes them famous and respected throughout the region. Their opportunistic attitude toward this development shows the men still have a cavalier attitude toward the medical profession. Even though they're starting to see the dire state of public health in these small towns, for the most part they use their status as "doctors" to help themselves, not others. However, this escapade is important to Ernesto's blossoming consciousness about issues of class. He realizes that the way others treat him has less to do with his actual character or merits than his perceived social status. Going forward, Ernesto is much more observant of subtle class distinctions and the way they govern everyday interactions.

Chapter 15 Quotes

❝ It was our last day as "motorized bums"; the next stage seemed set to be more difficult, as "bums without wheels."

Related Characters: Ernesto Guevara (speaker), Alberto Granado

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis

Masquerading as doctors unexpectedly lifted Ernesto and Alberto's social status, but when La Poderosa breaks down for good they experience an unexpected drop on the social ladder. Without the motorcycle, the men are much more dependent on the kindness of strangers, which in turn gives them an opportunity to engage with people from all walks of life, but also shows them how people behave towards those they believe to be of low social status. Ernesto is learning

what it's like to live in different social strata, but he still has a tendency to romanticize working-class life, looking forward to hitchhiking as an adventure and referring to himself as a "bum." In short, he's excited by the idea of living life "on the edge," but he's still oblivious to the true hardships that working class people endure.

Chapter 17 Quotes

❝ To a certain extent we had been knights of the road; we belonged to that long-standing "wandering aristocracy" and had calling cards with our impeccable and impressive titles. No longer. Now we were just two hitchhikers with backpacks, and with all the grime of the road stuck to our overalls, shadows of our former selves.

Related Characters: Ernesto Guevara (speaker), Alberto Granado

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis

As Ernesto reflects on how life changes after the loss of La Poderosa, the motorcycle's significance as a symbol changes completely. Ernesto used to think taking a faulty motorcycle on a spontaneous journey showed his own sense of adventure and ability to defy middle-class norms. Now he realizes that even a bad motorcycle is inherently a symbol of the very same middle-class norms he sought to escape, as an expensive indicator of class that insulated him from the perils of the road and marked him as someone to be treated well. Now, although he somewhat romanticizes life with the motorcycle (e.g., by referencing the "wandering aristocracy," he draws a parallel to Don Quixote, the errant knight of Spanish literature), he's coming to terms with his own privilege for the first time. Notably, even when he has a fuller picture of life stripped of those privileges, he embraces the challenge, showing his inner fortitude.

❝ It is at times like this, when a doctor is conscious of his complete powerlessness, that he longs for change: a change to prevent the injustice of a system in which only a month ago this poor woman was still earning her living as a waitress, wheezing and panting but facing life with dignity.

Related Characters: Ernesto Guevara (speaker), Old Woman with Asthma

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

While waiting in a small town to secure passage to the leper colony at Easter Island, Ernesto meets an old woman crippled by severe asthma. Hoping to treat her, he visits her home, which turns out to be dusty, dirty, and crowded with more family members than it can fit. Her unhealthy living conditions and the lack of local clinics or pharmacies mean that Ernesto can only give her some pills for temporary relief. For the first time, he sees how powerless individual doctors are when the larger political "system" doesn't provide adequate healthcare or infrastructure. He also makes the connection between the woman's asthma and her poverty, showing that healthcare isn't an isolated issue but contributes to other social inequalities. This episode foreshadows his realization that instead of working for social reform as a doctor, he should try to change the political systems that permit such injustices.

❝ It is there, in the final moments, for people whose farthest horizon has always been tomorrow, that one comprehends the profound tragedy circumscribing the life of the proletariat the world over.

Related Characters: Ernesto Guevara (speaker), Old Woman with Asthma

Related Themes:

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

After he realizes the futility of attempting to treat the old woman's asthma, Ernesto reflects that her situation must be identical to that of millions of other working class people. Implicitly, he contrasts the woman's plight to his own privilege. While Ernesto's life is currently defined by mobility (he gets to choose both where to go on the road trip and, in broader terms, what he wants to do with his life) the woman's life is limited by social circumstances outside of her control. Ernesto is encountering an age-old problem, as he indicates with the word "always": in most societies, great numbers of people live lives made unspeakably hard by poverty and political instability. However, he resists making the conclusion that because things have always

been this way they should or must continue to be this way. Instead of presenting social inequality as a grim fact, he casts it as a "tragedy," something that should astonish the reader and push him into action. Ultimately, Ernesto uses the woman's individual case to realize the need for more general political action.

How long this present order, based on an absurd idea of caste, will last is not within my means to answer, but it's time that those who govern spent less time publicizing their own virtues and more money, much more money, funding socially useful works.

Related Characters: Ernesto Guevara (speaker), Old Woman with Asthma

Related Themes:

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

Ernesto goes much farther than simply identifying the situation of the proletariat, represented by the old woman, as a grave injustice; he suggests that the working class has the potential to topple the government. This is the sharpest part of his critique, because instead of just referencing the "system" that disadvantages the working class, he points directly to a corrupt elite class directly contributing to the hardship of the rest of the country. For the first time, Ernesto provides a practical strategy to counter the social ills he's observing: he thinks that the distribution of resources must fundamentally change to give the proletariat the services they need. Notably, Ernesto is skeptical that this can ever happen and hints that no change within the existing system can ever be enough. Even though he's just beginning to write explicitly about politics, his thoughts are trending toward revolution.

Chapter 19 Quotes

By the light of the single candle illuminating us, drinking mate and eating a piece of bread and cheese, the man's shrunken figure carried a mysterious, tragic air. In his simple, expressive language he recounted his three months in prison, and told us about his starving wife who stood by him with exemplary loyalty, his children left in the care of a kindly neighbor, his fruitless pilgrimage in search of work and his compañeros, mysteriously disappeared and said to be somewhere at the bottom of the sea.

Related Characters: Ernesto Guevara (speaker), Mine Workers

Related Themes:

Page Number: 77

Explanation and Analysis

On their way to visit the Chuquicamata copper mine, Ernesto and Alberto stop to camp for the night and meet two mine workers, a husband and a wife who were fired from their jobs because of their Communist views. Now they're going to look for work at Chuquicamata, where the conditions are so notoriously poor that no one will ask questions about their political backgrounds. These people are among the most desperate and poor that Ernesto has encountered yet. The typical upper-class person might look down on them for their working-class origins and mistrust them for their political views (at the time, Chile's rulers feared Communism so much that they outlawed it). However, Ernesto treats the mine workers with respect and dignity. He stresses their strength of character and perseverance in the face of adversity. In doing so, he completely reverses conventional narratives about the working class. Rather than people to be ignored—or at best pitied—Ernesto casts the proletariat as the heroes of society, possessing qualities that people of other classes should strive to emulate.

It's a great pity that they repress people like this. Apart from whether collectivism, the "communist vermin" is a danger to decent life, the communism gnawing at his entrails was no more than a natural longing for something better, a protest against persistent hunger transformed into a love for this strange doctrine, whose essence he could never grasp but whose translation, "bread for the poor," was something which he understood and, more importantly, filled him with hope.

Related Characters: Ernesto Guevara (speaker), Mine Workers

Related Themes:

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

His moving encounter with the mine workers leads Ernesto to a more abstract contemplation of political ideas. Thus he continues the habit he began when he met the old woman with asthma, of extrapolating ideological principles from the

circumstances of individual people. Here, he refutes two arguments against Communism as a political system: that it's dangerous to "decent life," and that people who espouse it are somehow unnatural or bad. Communists don't want to arbitrarily disrupt "decent life;" rather, they are people whom society denied a decent life in a first place, who have to contend with "persistent hunger" while a well-fed ruling class complains about "communist vermin." In fact, the aim of Communism is to achieve a better life for everyone in the society.

Moreover, using the mine workers as evidence, Ernesto asserts that Communists are superlatively "natural," in other words motivated by universal concerns. The mine workers turn to Communism because they are hungry and because they need something to believe in—two issues that any reader can understand. By framing Communsim in these simple terms, Ernesto makes it much more relatable and appealing to the reader.

Chapter 20 Quotes

And how many of those mountains surrounding their famous brother enclose in their heavy entrails similar riches, as they wait for the soulless arms of the mechanical shovels to devour their insides, spiced as they would be with the inevitable human lives…

Related Characters: Ernesto Guevara (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 80

Explanation and Analysis

When he visits the Chuquicamata copper mine, Ernesto is appalled both by the terrible working conditions and by the fact that foreign corporations are extracting South America's mineral wealth without contributing to the local economy or even providing their workers a living wage. After leaving the mine, he looks at the beautiful mountains surrounding it and reflects that under the current system they, too, face destruction. Ernesto connects destruction of the natural environment (the mountain) with destruction of human life (the workers), showing both that South Americans are intimately connected to their own land and that threats to the land are also threats to human quality of life. In contrast, the "soulless" machines show that the mining companies lack ethics and a connection to the land, and as such don't belong there. Lyrical passages like this help Ernesto develop his twin doctrines of proletarian entitlement to the land and rejection of foreign presence in South America.

Chapter 24 Quotes

But the people before us are not the same proud race that repeatedly rose up against Inca rule, forcing them to maintain a permanent army on their borders; these people who watch us walk through the streets of the town are a defeated race. Their stares are tame, almost fearful, and completely indifferent to the outside world.

Related Characters: Ernesto Guevara (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

Entering Peru, Ernesto and Alberto hitch a ride in a truck toward the ancient city of Tarata. As they drive, they realize that the natural landscape and the man-made architecture hasn't changed in the hundreds of years since the Inca were the dominant power in the region. Ernesto gives a lush and evocative description of the unspoiled vistas, local markets, and traditional clothes worn by the locals, but he also notes that, beneath the picturesque veneer, poverty and repression are everywhere. The local people have no reason to expect their lives to improve and are "indifferent" to the outside world because it has never brought them anything good. Here Ernesto juxtaposes the low status of contemporary indigenous people with the strength and power of their ancestors. This technique highlights the current plight of the Indians by showing how much they have been marginalized in their own homeland. However, it also offers a hope of renewal, implying that what once existed can and should exist again.

Chapter 25 Quotes

He spoke of the need to build schools that would orient individuals within their own world, enabling them to play a useful role within it; of the need to change fundamentally the present system of education, which, on the rare occasion it does offer Indians education (according only to white man's criteria), simply fills them with shame and resentment, rendering them unable to help their fellow Indians and at the severe disadvantage of having to fight within a hostile white society which refuses to accept them.

Related Characters: Ernesto Guevara (speaker),

Schoolteacher

Related Themes:

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

While they are riding in the bed of a truck through Peru, Ernesto and Alberto befriend a Peruvian schoolteacher. The schoolteacher is a rare example of an Indian who has managed to obtain an education and transcend (at least somewhat) the class status of his birth. However, because he is an Indian, bourgeois society will never truly accept him. He feels stymied and caught between the working-class world he's left and the middle-class one he can't enter. Based on his personal experience, he argues that class barriers aren't totally dependent on political and economic factors, especially since most of the proletariat are Indians, while the ruling class is of European descent. Rather, normalized racism and prejudice against indigenous culture are just as powerful in keeping indigenous people from improving their lives or feeling like full members of society. This encounter helps Ernesto realize how important it is not just to advocate egalitarian politics but to also focus on reclaiming and generating respect for indigenous South American cultures.

Chapter 28 Quotes

❝ The vision of this Cuzco emerges mournfully from the fortress destroyed by the stupidity of illiterate Spanish conquistadors, from the violated ruins of the temples, from the sacked palaces, from the faces of a brutalized race. This is the Cuzco inviting you to become a warrior and to defend, club in hand, the freedom and the life of the Inca.

Related Characters: Ernesto Guevara (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 104

Explanation and Analysis

After traveling through rural Peru, Ernesto arrives in one of its largest cities, Cuzco. Once an Inca stronghold, Cuzco was captured by the conquistadors and completely transformed as a colonial city. Ernesto uses his walks through the city to imagine the relationship between Inca and European, conquered and conqueror. In doing so, he reverses the stereotypical narratives of colonization. Rather than portraying the Spanish as enlightened settlers bringing civilization to a primitive people, he portrays them as stupid and "illiterate," destroying a society whose sophistication they can't even grasp. Moreover, he explicitly invites the reader to identify with the Inca, defining them by positive qualities like "freedom" (although this appraisal ignores the fact that the Inca themselves were imperialists throughout South America). In Ernesto's story of colonization, the indigenous people are portrayed as the moral leaders.

Chapter 29 Quotes

❝ Even today, when the bestial rage of the conquering rabble can be seen in each of the acts designed to eternalize the conquest, and the Inca caste has long since vanished as a dominant power, their stone blocks stand enigmatically, impervious to the ravages of time.

Related Characters: Ernesto Guevara (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 106

Explanation and Analysis

Touring Cuzco's monuments and archeological sites, Ernesto comes to understand architecture as a representation of political power—each building raised up or torn down serving as a statement "designed to eternalize the conquest." While Ernesto is struck by the grandeur of colonial churches and palaces, he's even more impressed by the ability of ancient Inca architecture to withstand hundreds of years of attack. Since art, to him, is political, he views this as a testament to the fundamental power of South America's indigenous people and proof of lurking weakness in European control. Even though it seems like the current upper class (the inheritors of colonial power) are invulnerable, the perseverance of South America's architecture mirrors that of its people, who are waiting for the moment to regain the dominance they have lost. In his time in Cuzco, Ernesto uses art to create a narrative of indigenous strength and empowerment.

Chapter 37 Quotes

❝ Afterwards some of [the patients] came to say goodbye to us personally and in more than one case tears were shed as they thanked us for the little bit of life we'd given them. We shook their hands, accepted their gifts, and sat with them listening to football on the radio. If there's anything that will make us seriously dedicate ourselves to leprosy, it will be the affection shown to us by all the sick we've met along the way.

Related Characters: Ernesto Guevara (speaker), Alberto Granado

Related Themes:

Page Number: 137

Explanation and Analysis

When they arrive in Lima, Peru's other major city, Ernesto and Alberto befriend Dr. Hugo Pesce, an eminent leprosy specialist, and spend a lot of time exploring the hospital he runs. When it comes time to leave, the patients they've befriended are overwhelmed with emotion. They're grateful that Ernesto and Alberto treated them as friends and equals—people to listen to the radio with—rather than spectacles of medicine or social pariahs. Ernesto's treatment of the patients, who are far less privileged than he is, mirrors his treatment of people from different class backgrounds—that is, respectful and generally egalitarian (although he can often be patronizing). In a sense, his behavior here is a metaphor for his growing class consciousness. His stay at the hospital also shows that Ernesto derives a lot of personal satisfaction from the work that doctors do. Still, he no longer takes it for granted that he himself will become a doctor. He talks about "dedicating ourselves to leprosy" as a possibility, not a definite decision. While his respect for the medical field is intact, his personal priorities have shifted during the trip.

Chapter 40 Quotes

❝ There are 600 sick people living independently in typical jungle huts, doing whatever they choose, looking after themselves, in an organization which has developed a rhythm and style of its own. There is a local official, a judge, a policeman, etc. The respect Dr. Bresciani commands is considerable and he clearly coordinates the whole colony, both protecting and sorting out disputes that arise between the different groups.

Related Characters: Ernesto Guevara (speaker), Dr. Bresciani

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 146

Explanation and Analysis

After leaving Lima, Ernesto sails down a tributary of the Amazon, away from any mainstream civilization, to arrive at the San Pablo Leper Colony, run by the leprologist Dr. Bresciani. Just as when he visits other hospitals, he's appalled to see the colony's spartan facilities and lack of equipment, as well as the hostility with which their neighbors treat them. This reflects his growing frustration, specifically with the state of public healthcare, and more broadly with the fact that not enough of society's resources are directed towards the poor.

What's different about the San Pablo colony is the remarkably high level of social organization and morale among the lepers. Even without any material resources, the lepers have created a small society with a government predicated on order and justice. Dr. Bresciani may be in a position of leadership, but he governs by "respect" rather than fear or coercion. The lepers have much in common with the proletariat, in that both groups are reviled and marginalized by the more powerful classes of society. Their ability to come together in order to take care of each other reflects Ernesto's hopes for how the proletariat would behave if they could govern themselves. The egalitarian nature of the colony helps Ernesto refine his picture of an ideal post-revolutionary society.

Chapter 41 Quotes

❝ We constitute a single mestizo race, which from Mexico to the Magellan Straits bears notable ethnographical similarities. And so, in an attempt to rid myself of the weight of small-minded provincialism, I propose a toast to Peru and to a United Latin America.

Related Characters: Ernesto Guevara (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 149

Explanation and Analysis

During his long stay at the San Pablo Leper Colony, Ernesto turns 24. This is a big milestone for him, marking almost a quarter-century of life, and the doctors and patients throw him a huge party. When asked to give a toast, Ernesto makes a speech about South American solidarity. Ernesto himself remarks later that his remarks were off-topic for a birthday celebration, but it's important that he gave this speech at this moment. The atmosphere of the colony has inspired him to express his political views publicly for the first time,

and this underscores the important role the colony has played in shaping those views. Moreover, Ernesto says this is a high point in his life as an individual, but he chooses to talk about his developing ideology. For Ernesto, the personal and political are becoming more and more intertwined. He's a lot more mature than he was at the outset, and he's beginning to think about himself in terms of his political beliefs and moral principles rather than in terms of his personal aims and desires.

Chapter 45 Quotes

❝ Littered along the edges of the road are containers for transporting cars, used by the Portuguese as dwellings. In one of these, where a black family lives, I can just glimpse a brand new refrigerator, and from many of them radios blare music which their owners play at maximum volume. New cars are parked outside the most miserable "homes."

Related Characters: Ernesto Guevara (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 162

Explanation and Analysis

In Caracas, Venezuela, Ernesto finally parts ways with Alberto and wanders alone through the slums in the city's outskirts. He observes that the children are ragged and that most people live in tiny, cramped houses, some of which are just repurposed shipping containers. Despite this, many families own new consumer products like radios, refrigerators, or cars. The image of shiny appliances scattered around a neighborhood filled with shacks and hungry children is striking, and shows what Ernesto sees as the utter perversion of capitalism. The goods it produces aren't worthwhile enough to justify the wrongs it perpetuates—in other words, new refrigerators don't compensate for the fact that people don't have enough to eat. Juxtaposing the highs and lows of capitalism, Ernesto draws a picture of a society in which things fundamentally don't make sense, and therefore must change.

Chapter 46 Quotes

❝ The terrible thing is the people need to be educated, and this they cannot do before taking power, only after. They can only learn at the cost of their own mistakes, which will be very serious and will cost many innocent lives.

Related Characters: The Stranger (speaker), Ernesto Guevara

Related Themes:

Page Number: 164

Explanation and Analysis

Ernesto is staying in a remote hill town outside of Caracas when he meets a stranger, a fellow traveler about whom he gives very few details besides that he was somehow involved in Communist movements in Europe and fled the country because of his beliefs. The stranger talks to Ernesto about revolution, presumably speaking from his own experiences. Most importantly, he talks about what he sees as the necessarily messy process by which the proletariat must assume power. No amount of theory or forethought can prevent violence in revolution, violence which the stranger implies will affect civilians and innocents. Until now, Ernesto has been meditating mostly on the injustice of the current system and the utopian possibilities for a post-revolutionary society. He hasn't thought much about how this social transition will occur, but he doesn't blink an eye at the stranger's prediction that it will be bloody. Violence and terror are the terrible cost of revolution, and the fact that Ernesto accepts them without hesitation as a necessary cost shows how much his political views have come to matter to him—more than individual lives.

❝ I knew that when the great guiding spirit cleaves humanity into two antagonistic halves, I would be with the people. I know this, I see it printed in the night sky that I, eclectic dissembler of doctrine and psychoanalyst of dogma, howling like one possessed, will assault the barricades or the trenches, will take my bloodstained weapon and, consumed with fury, slaughter any enemy who falls into my hands.

Related Characters: Ernesto Guevara (speaker), The Stranger

Related Themes:

Page Number: 165

Explanation and Analysis

In the final paragraph of his memoir, after parting with the stranger, Ernesto asserts his absolute commitment to pursuing political activism through revolution. He uses a heightened and emotional tone that differs from his usual, even language, showing that this is a climactic moment for

him as a person. Indeed, after wondering for the whole trip who he is and what he will do, he finally defines himself as a revolutionary. He's entirely different from the young medical student who set out on vacation before resuming preparation for a bourgeois career. This moment represents the culmination of a process of personal development that totally changes Ernesto's character. He also shows that he has sublimated many aspects of his personal character into his ideological goals, describing himself as a "dissembler of doctrine and psychoanalyst of dogma." Moreover, he's willing to do anything in pursuit of his ideology, even "slaughter" other people. Ernesto is committing not only his life but his entire being to something he thinks will help millions of other people, but in doing so, he has ceased to be the relatable, human character he once was. Ideology has turned him into a true revolutionary, leaving Ernesto at odds with the reader in much the same way he is at odds with the political status quo.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

1. ENTENDÁMONOS (SO WE UNDERSTAND EACH OTHER)

Ernesto prefaces his narrative by noting that his story is not meant to describe heroism, nor is it meant to be cynical. It is simply an impromptu diary that details "two lives running parallel for a time." He writes that, "Man, the measure of all things, speaks here through my mouth." Ernesto notes that he may only sometimes glimpse truth, since he can only describe what he saw, and his vision was "never quite complete."

Ernesto claims to be communicating general truths in his memoir, saying that he speaks for all of "man." However, by arguing that truth is subjective and depends on perception, he excuses himself from writing with exact accuracy and leaves himself free to reimagine his trip as he wishes.

Ernesto adds that his younger self, who wrote the notes that are the basis of this memoir, "passed away" by the time the trip he is about to describe ended. Now, as he "reorganizes and polishes" the notes from his trip, he is a different person entirely. Ernesto warns the reader that they will not be able to check his memories against the truth of what happened, but that it matters little. With that, he introduces the reader to "myself, the man I used to be."

Ernesto sees personal character as constantly fluctuating, influenced by events and experiences. While he is no longer the same person who embarked on this motorcycle trip, the events of the trip helped transform him from that character to the person he is today.

2. PRÓDROMOS (FOREWARNINGS)

Ernesto Guevara and his friends, including Alberto Granado, are home for vacation from medical school. The young men pass the time in Alberto's garage, fixing his **motorcycle** (which they call "La Poderosa") and discussing plans and anxieties about their professional futures. Alberto and Ernesto have just quit their jobs, and Ernesto remarks that he was happy to do so because, "having the spirit of a dreamer," he had been feeling "uneasy" and also "jaded" about his experiences with "medical school, hospitals, and exams."

Before they embark on their trip, Ernesto and Alberto are typical middle-class students, firmly situated in a bourgeois social circle and on a bourgeois career path. However, Ernesto is already unfulfilled by the studies he has chosen and eager to orient his life around something besides medical school. It's notable that he's already seeing the inadequacies of medicine, though in this moment his dismay manifests as juvenile rebellion, rather than political consciousness.

Alberto suddenly suggests that he and Ernesto take a road trip to North America on **La Poderosa**, and Ernesto instantly agrees. Ernesto notes that the trip that followed remained in the spirit in which it was conceived: improvisation. The two men hurry to make plans, and Ernesto remarks on the vast and complex bureaucracy of obtaining visas and documents for the trip, lamenting the "many hurdles modern nations erect in the paths of would-be travelers." As they prepare for the trip, its "enormity" is not apparent to them—all they can see is their daydream.

Ernesto and Alberto will remain committed to spontaneity throughout the trip. However, they have to balance these mentalities with practical concerns that persist even for rugged travelers. The men are also preoccupied with the personal excitement of the trip. They don't predict that it will be ideologically significant or affect their characters.

3. EL DESCUBRIMIENTO DEL OCÉANO (DISCOVERY OF THE OCEAN)

1,200 kilometers later, the men are staying with Ernesto's uncle in northern Argentina. They sit by the sea in the moonlight, alone with their individual thoughts. Ernesto reflects that, for him, the water is a comforting, familiar presence. However, for Alberto—who is almost 30—this is his first experience with the ocean. It is a new and intense experience for him, and Ernesto reflects that Alberto is "overwhelmed by this discovery that signifies an infinite number of paths to all ends of the earth."

Although Ernesto and Alberto share the experience of seeing the ocean, they respond to it in very different ways, just as they will react differently to the trip overall. This moment also has symbolic resonance with the remainder of the book. As Ernesto looks at the ocean, he thinks of the infinite paths "to all ends of the earth," signifying his ambition and his ability to think outside the box of his upbringing.

Ernesto explains that he is bringing a dog, named **Comeback**, to his girlfriend, Chichina. He describes Comeback as a "symbol and a survivor." Comeback is a symbol in that his name references Ernesto's promise to his girlfriend that he will return to their life together, and Comeback is a survivor of a horse trampling, severe diarrhea, and several falls from the motorcycle, which is hard to control and tends to get into collisions.

Comeback is ostensibly a symbol of the strength and endurance of Ernesto's relationship with Chichina. However, the number of near-death experiences he has before they arrive suggests that the relationship he represents is more tenuous than Ernesto admits.

Though the first 1,200 kilometers are supposedly the easiest of the journey, Ernesto and Alberto already have a sense that their trip will be difficult. The way Alberto had planned the trip, they should have been almost finished by now, which makes them uncertain that they will reach their destination at all.

The trip, which was supposed to be a fun vacation, is already turning out to be more arduous and thought-provoking than expected. The notion that they may not reach their destination can be seen as symbolic—Ernesto will never become the person he thought he would at the journey's outset. He reaches a different destination altogether.

4. PARÉNTESIS AMOROSO (LOVESICK PAUSE)

Ernesto arrives in Miramar, where Chichina is spending the summer with her family in a luxurious summer house. The beauty of the landscape, the material comfort of the bourgeois vacation, and the alluring presence of his girlfriend tempt Ernesto to abandon his road trip and remain within the environment to which he is accustomed. Alberto becomes frustrated with Ernesto's reluctance to move on.

After his first taste of "roughing it," Ernesto gets to immerse himself once again in bourgeois family life. Even though he wants to be an intrepid adventurer, it's hard to break free from the ease and familiarity of the life he's always known.

Resting drowsily on the beach with his head in Chichina's lap, Ernesto observes the formidable presence of the ocean and interprets it as a voice calling him to something more important than a life of leisure with Chichina. He decides that they must move on at last.

Just as the ocean spoke to Alberto about the world's many possibilities, it now reminds Ernesto that he needs to challenge himself and pursue personal growth.

Chichina makes a big fuss over his departure, which Ernesto appreciates but only takes somewhat seriously. She gives him her gold bracelet as a love token, but Ernesto and Alberto turn this gesture into a joke, implying they might sell it when the going gets rough along the way.

Ernesto and Chichina never quite see eye-to-eye. Her parting gesture is meaningful to her but not to him, and he takes it only partly seriously. Although Ernesto likes the idea of romance in theory, he can't quite commit to it in practice.

5. HASTA ROMPER EL ULTIMO VÍNCULO (UNTIL THE LAST TIE IS BROKEN)

The men visit two older doctors, friends of Alberto. Both visits are unsatisfying: one friend has an unpleasant wife who is clearly suspicious of their itinerant lifestyle and worried about their influence on her husband, and the other friend is highly involved with the Radical Party, which Ernesto considers to be an outdated and ridiculous political movement. Ernesto is anxious to avoid following the life paths of either of these men.

By visiting men who are medical professionals, Ernesto and Alberto see two paths down which their own lives could lead them. They are repulsed by the personal and political lives of bourgeois professionals, even though they themselves are preparing to become these professionals.

When Ernesto and Alberto depart from these friends, they leave civilization behind as well, sleeping in the open air and eating cheaply on their meager budget. **La Poderosa** turns out to be prone to accidents and often hinders their progress. Still, they are happy to be liberated from the confines of the conventional lifestyle that seems so unappealing to them.

Ernesto and Alberto are starting to become more comfortable with embracing chance and hardship than staying within the confines of bourgeois life. They were always ambivalent about bourgeois life, but now they seem more settled into the prospect of rejecting it.


6. PARA LAS GRIPES, CAMA (FOR THE FLU, BED)

After arriving at Choele Choel, an Argentine town, Ernesto gets the flu and has to stay in the hospital for several days. Even in this unfamiliar city, he is able to obtain good medical care from a kind doctor who personally supervises his treatment. Although it's an inconvenience, Ernesto sees this experience as evidence that he's roughing it and having a real adventure.

Ernesto experiences health problems, but because he has some medical knowledge and is able to pay for healthcare, they don't seriously hinder his trip. At this point, Ernesto doesn't think about access to healthcare as a serious issue—in fact, he sees his suffering as proof of his distance from his bourgeois life, rather than realizing that his access to care is evidence of his privilege.


As soon as the doctor gives his permission, Ernesto and Alberto depart, but **La Poderosa** quickly suffers several breakdowns. Ernesto and Alberto have to find people to fix the bike and to put them up for the night, and they befriend locals from all walks of life. Ernesto is equally comfortable with and fascinated by the life of the mechanic who fixes the bike, the ranching family who gives him shelter, and the farm laborers they employ.

As open-minded young men, Ernesto and Alberto prove themselves at ease among many different kinds of people. Their interactions and friendships aren't limited by their bourgeois class background. This is the first real evidence that Ernesto is capable of transcending his upbringing and belonging among people who are different than him.

7. SAN MARTÍN DE LOS ANDES

Moving onwards, Ernesto and Alberto are charmed by San Martín de los Andes, an impoverished lakeside town surrounded by majestic mountains. Ernesto stresses the material scarcity in the town with the richness of the "densely wooded mountains" that surround it.

The rich natural landscape shows the region's potential for prosperity, while the impoverished town shows that current political and economic circumstances haven't lived up to that potential.

Both men are so captivated by this region that they flirt with the idea of returning there as doctors one day. They could build a laboratory and a clinic in the town, which lacks local medical services. However, although San Martín appeals to the "sedentary part of ourselves," Ernesto says that it's his "destiny" to travel. He resists the idea of settling anywhere permanently, no matter how idyllic.

Ernesto and Alberto think about their futures in terms of their ability to help others, which they believe they can best do as doctors in underserved communities. However, Ernesto is already convinced that he is meant for something else besides a traditional career. Although this conviction manifests now as a youthful desire for adventure and refusal to grow up and settle down, it foreshadows his development as an itinerant revolutionary.


In exchange for provisions for the next stage of the trip, Ernesto and Alberto agree to help a local man host a town barbecue. At the party, they play a complex prank conceived by Alberto, pretending to be drunk in order to steal bottles of wine when they go outside to "vomit." When they finally go to collect their ill-gotten gains, they find someone has caught onto them and taken all the bottles. Dismayed and amused in equal measure, Ernesto relates this escapade with relish.

Despite their high-minded aspirations for the future, Ernesto and Alberto are still young men with a tendency towards mischief and pranks. They're willing to steal from people who help them, which shows their underdeveloped empathy and their immaturity.

8. EXPLORACIÓN CIRCUNVALATORIA (CIRCULAR EXPLORATION)

In Junín de los Andes, Ernesto and Alberto run into some friends of Alberto's, which means they have the luxury of spending the night in a real bed. They take a day to fix the **motorcycle**'s mechanical problems and reminisce together about past exploits. At dinner, the friends treat them to an elaborate Argentine lamb barbecue.

When they meet bourgeois people from their past, Ernesto and Alberto depart from the rugged life of the road and return to living as middle-class students. However, unlike with his visit to Chichina, Ernesto doesn't depict this as a romantic or alluring sojourn. He isn't tempted to remain.

Ernesto and Alberto continue on to Carrué Chico, a lake surrounded by mountains. They set off to climb the highest peak, but since they don't have enough food or the right gear for the winter weather, the hike is freezing and perilous. It takes them until after midnight to hike down the mountain, by which time they are soaked through and sore. Despite the difficulties, Ernesto is impressed with the solitary and undisturbed landscape. By spending time in a wild space unmediated by human presence, he feels he has reached a true communion with nature.

Ernesto feels an intense and almost spiritual connection with the land, which is deeper than many of his personal relationships and persists through material hardship and difficulties. That Ernesto is increasingly drawn towards nature and isolation shows his drift away from his bourgeois upbringing. His increasing impulse to think spiritually and philosophically shows a realignment of his values from his dissatisfied, impish youth.


9. QUERIDA VIEJA (DEAR MAMA)

Ernesto transcribes a letter to his mother in his diary, in which he addresses her affectionately and includes greetings for the rest of his family. He recaps the main events of the book so far, from his hospital stay to his fascination with San Martín de los Andes. He's enthusiastic about the adventurous nature of the journey, telling her that "our faces are beginning to resemble the texture of Carborundum" (a very rough mineral) from the constant driving. But he excises any mention of his drunken escapades or the physical dangers he faces from motorcycle breakdowns or risky hikes.

Although he is becoming an independent traveler, Ernesto is still the young son of anxious parents. The tone of his letter has less swagger and more humility than that of his diary entries, so it shows another side of his personality.

At the end of the letter he mentions he's enclosed another page for Chichina. However, he doesn't show the reader this part of the letter.

Ernesto still has a relationship with Chichina, but the fact that he doesn't often speak of her or include his letter to her suggests that all is not well.

10. POR EL CAMINO DE LOS SIETE LAGOS (ON THE SEVEN LAKES ROAD)

Ernesto and Alberto move onward towards the town of Barioloche. The cold is so severe that they can't face the prospect of sleeping outside, and they pretend to have a broken headlight in order to obtain shelter in a road laborer's hut. In the hut, they meet a couple who are living in a tent by the shore of the lake, with only sleeping bags and blankets as protection against the weather. Ernesto greatly respects these people who are living and traveling in even harsher circumstances than he is.

Ernesto is impressed by the simplicity in which other people can live. Many things that he is accustomed to—even things he had once considered to be absolute necessities—now turn out to be non-essential wants. Ernesto shows his developing character by responding to privation and adversity with humility and admiration, rather than with suffering and complaints.


In the next town, a caretaker allows them to stay in an empty barn but warns them that many pumas have been spotted in the region lately. When Ernesto wakes up in the middle of the night to find an animal beside him in the dark, he assumes it's a puma and immediately shoots it. However, it turns out to be the caretaker's wife's dog, and the men have to make a quick exit to dodge her fury.

This escapade continues to show the haphazard nature of the journey and the tenuous thread by which Ernesto's personal safety hangs. However, the fact that the men don't own up to what they've done and instead sneak out in the night shows that they are still immature.

11. Y YA SIENTO FLOTAR MI GRAN RAÍZ LIBRE Y DESNUDA… (AND NOW, I FEEL MY GREAT ROOTS UNEARTH, FREE AND…)

Ernesto and Alberto are sheltering from a thunderstorm in a village police station crowded with other itinerants when Ernesto receives a letter from Chichina. He doesn't tell the reader what the letter says, but it's clear that she is breaking up with him. Ernesto is completely blindsided by this development; although he always took Chichina for granted, he feels now that his image of home and his future life is inextricably linked to her presence. With the loss of his girlfriend, his prospects after the end of the road trip seem much less stable and certain.

Up to this point, Ernesto had a fairly stable conception of the life to which he would return. Without Chichina, he has less stability to fall back on, but he also faces a larger array of possibilities. Ernesto already had doubts about returning to his old life, but now, knowing that he can't, he is thrown fully into his new circumstances.

Although he at first articulates a strong sense of his emotional dependence on Chichina, Ernesto reconsiders this while trying to write a response to her letter. Upon examining his feelings, he realizes that, while he thought he loved Chichina, he hasn't felt anything for her for a long time. Shocked by the fundamental emptiness of a relationship that once seemed of paramount importance, Ernesto feels uneasy and worries that he is "incapable of feeling anything."

Since Chichina is closely associated with Ernesto's bourgeois upbringing, his lack of emotion about their breakup should signal to the reader that Ernesto has fully left behind his attachment to his old life. While he fears that this means he can't feel, it actually signals that his feelings have shifted—after all, he has felt his recent experiences in nature deeply.

Even though Ernesto frets the night away, when the storm lets up and he and Alberto can start traveling again, the good weather and excitement of crossing the border into Chile—the first of many foreign countries they hope to explore—does much to reinvigorate him.

Ernesto proves to be naturally suited to travel and adventure—new places always cheer him up when he is troubled emotionally. This underscores the changes that the road trip will bring to Ernesto.

12. OBJETOS CURIOSOS (OBJECTS OF CURIOSITY)

In their first days traveling through Chile, the men meet several other doctors. They ask about their professional experiences and talk about their own aspirations. Leprosy (Alberto's particular area of study) is neither common nor well-known in Chile, and people assume Ernesto and Alberto are highly qualified doctors, even leprosy experts, even though they are only medical students.

By appearing as qualified and educated professionals, even though they really aren't, Ernesto and Alberto command a lot of respect they don't technically "deserve." This lack of humility shows that they are still somewhat immature, despite the experiences they've already had.

Ernesto and Alberto capitalize on this perception, using their unexpectedly privileged status in order to gain respect and assistance in the towns they pass through. One local newspaper even writes an article about them, in which they insinuate that they are doctors on a research tour of remote areas.

Social status affects almost every action in daily life. Ernesto becomes increasingly conscious of this phenomenon because he's masquerading as someone of higher status than he actually is. However, Ernesto is not yet class-conscious enough to object to using status to gain power.

Although Ernesto acknowledges that this behavior is in large part a "scam" they've employed to make the journey easier, both men really are eager to learn about leprosy in remote communities. After a local doctor tells them of a remote leper colony on Easter Island and gives them letters of introduction, Ernesto and Alberto decide to change their itinerary and travel there.

Rather than pursuing a medical field that will allow them to become wealthy or well-known, Ernesto and Alberto want to use their careers to serve underprivileged communities. Their willingness to reroute their trip on a whim shows that they're still open to spontaneity.

13. LOS EXPERTOS (THE EXPERTS)

Ernesto and Alberto continue to enjoy what Ernesto characterizes as characteristically Chilean hospitality, which in fact depends on their perceived status as medical professionals. Wherever they go, they are able to find someone within the network of local doctors to help them. At worst they can sleep in a townsperson's shed; at best, a friendly local funds a night of drinking.

That Ernesto first interprets the doctors' kindness as "characteristically Chilean hospitality" shows his inability to recognize his own privilege. Such treatment would likely not be afforded to a poorer man, but Ernesto has not yet seen enough of South America's poverty to recognize that his experience is not characteristic of others' experiences.

In Temuco, they give an interview to the newspaper in which, while they don't state their exact qualifications, they don't think they've strayed too far from the truth. The next day, they wake up to find an article describing them as "leprosy experts" renowned throughout the Americas and involved in a large-scale research project. This publicity catapults them to local fame, and townspeople begin to treat them not like "a pair of more or less likable vagrants" but as important visitors. Rather than consigning them sleep in barns or outbuildings, families put them up in their own houses, attended by servants.

The extent to which the men can carry their deception about their class status shows how fallacious and fundamentally silly class distinctions are. Although they acknowledge this, they see no problem in enjoying all the special treatment it affords them. It's significant, too, that Ernesto begins to understand the nuances of status by being treated better than he expects, rather than worse. This suggests Ernesto's natural upward mobility, and it demonstrates that his eventual life trajectory was a radical choice.

14. LAS DIFICULTADES AUMENTAN (THE DIFFICULTIES INTENSIFY)

La Poderosa breaks down twice, but this is no longer such a hindrance. Each time, Ernesto and Alberto are stranded, they quickly find help from people who recognize them as "The Experts" described by the newspaper.

La Poderosa is an extremely inconvenient method of travel and Ernesto uses its various malfunctions as evidence that he's having a rough-and-tumble experience. However, the very fact of owning a vehicle demonstrates a high social status. At this point in the narrative, La Poderosa represents both the freewheeling nature of the travelers and the extent to which they are protected from any real harm by their class status.

After befriending a local mechanic who fixes the motorcycle, Ernesto and Alberto accompany him to a village dance. The mechanic asks Ernesto to keep an eye on his wife but Ernesto, too tipsy, makes a pass at her. Their status as medical professionals can't absolve them from this insult; the villagers chase the two young men out of town and Alberto is angry that Ernesto has lost them an opportunity for free drinks.

Despite all the benefits it brings them, they can't always keep up the pretense of being serious medical professionals; every once in a while they lapse and act like reckless young men. This shows how fluctuating and undefined their characters really are.

15. LA PODEROSA II TERMINA SU GIRA (LA PODEROSA II'S FINAL TOUR)

La Poderosa finally suffers damage which can't be fixed, and the men have to leave the motorcycle behind. From now on, they can only go between towns by walking or hitchhiking. Without La Poderosa, they face not only increased inconvenience, but also depreciation in the way others perceive them. They are leaving the region in which they're famous as leprosy experts and now they don't even have the motorcycle to distinguish themselves as "motorized bums." Instead, they are now "bums without wheels," and most people don't see any reason to help them or treat them nicely.

In its dying moments, La Poderosa completes its transformation as a symbol, coming to represent the safety net of bourgeois class status that the men are leaving behind for good. Just as their fortunes had previously swung upward, now they swing down, showing once again how superficial and precarious status is. Now that Ernesto and Alberto have left their fame behind and lost a concrete status symbol, they realize how much of the way people treat them is due to external symbols and not their actual merits or character.

16. BOMBEROS VOLUNTARIOS, HOMBRES DE TRABAJO Y OTRAS YERBAS (FIREFIGHTERS, WORKERS AND OTHER MATTERS)

Although they're no longer enjoying the luxuries of local high society, Ernesto and Alberto stay in the Chilean town of Los Angeles and find shelter among a station of volunteer firefighters. The men spend a long time lounging, enjoying the free food, and conversing with the caretaker's daughters. They even participate in a firefighting expedition, where Alberto saves a cat and is lauded as a hero.

In some ways, the loss of La Poderosa liberates Ernesto and Alberto. Now that they have to accept whatever shelter and methods of travel they can find, they're more able to fit in with people of different class backgrounds. Alberto's recognition as a town hero shows that even in a short time, he's able to integrate into a completely different stratum of society than the one he's accustomed to.

After this escapade, Ernesto and Alberto pay for passage to Santiago by working in a moving van. Once they arrive in the city, they have to obtain visas so they can legally cross over into Peru. They spend days shuttling between the Peruvian and Argentine embassies, facing endless bureaucratic processes. They officials give them the visas reluctantly and after much persuasion; they don't believe the men will be able to transport themselves home without **La Poderosa.**

Without La Poderosa to distinguish them, Ernesto and Alberto have to interact with the government as poor travelers, not young professionals, and they find the bureaucracy both unwilling to oblige them and mistrustful of their goals. This experience shows them that government structures are fundamentally hostile to the working class.

In the meantime, Ernesto and Alberto run into some friends from their hometown who are in Santiago for a polo tournament. This is a fancy occasion; the friends are hosted by the cream of Santiago society and escorted around the city by debutantes. Under the circumstances Ernesto and Alberto, now gaunt, impoverished, and underdressed travelers, are somewhat of an embarrassment for their friends. Ernesto wonders if the friends will be loyal enough to acknowledge them in public and feels grateful when they do. Still, despite the fact that they come from the same city and class background, Ernesto now feels that they inhabit "different worlds."

Ernesto and Alberto have been maturing and moving away from their middle-class origins throughout the road trip, but this is the first time their new characters clash with people from home. Comparing themselves now to men with whom they used to have much in common shows how much their personas and social life were in fact based on their class status. It's also a hint that, after this transformative trip, it will be hard to reintegrate into bourgeois life.

17. LA SONRISA DE LA GIOCONDA (LA GIOCONDA'S SMILE)

Ernesto continues to analyze the difficulties brought about by the loss of **La Poderosa**. Even a malfunctioning vehicle is more expensive than most people can afford, and owning one identified him and Alberto as members of the "wandering aristocracy." Now, when they look like poor hitchhikers, locals are much less friendly to them. Still, they manage to find a fellow Argentinian who puts them up and gives them food at his tavern, La Gioconda.

Ernesto starts to truly realize that his happy-go-lucky experience in the first part of the trip was in large part a function of his class status. Identifying himself as part of the "aristocracy" shows him explicitly acknowledging the privileges he at first took for granted. Notably, Ernesto doesn't mourn the loss of those privileges but embraces it, showing both personal maturity and an increased sense of political injustice.

While Alberto tries to obtain passage via boat to the leper colony at Easter Island, Ernesto meets an old woman with asthma in La Gioconda and attempts to treat her in her home. Although asthma is a treatable illness (Ernesto suffers from it himself), it requires regular healthcare and medicine. Ernesto can't do anything helpful for the woman because there are no reliable local medical facilities. Ernesto feels inadequate because he's able to do so little for her..

Even the most altruistic doctors working in underserved populations can't do much if there aren't adequate social services available. For the first time, Ernesto experiences the limits of what individual doctors can do to help people. This puts a damper on his career aspirations, because medicine no longer seems like such a clear path to social reform.

Looking around the woman's tiny, crowded apartment, and squalid living conditions, Ernesto observes that her sickness affects her whole family's socio-economic status. Because she can't work and because the family has no personal savings or public safety net to help handle an emergency, they remain trapped in poverty. Moreover, of her inability to contribute, the woman becomes a pariah in her own family.

By evoking the domestic tragedy catalyzed by a simple case of asthma, Ernesto shows clearly that public health isn't an isolated issue but affects economics and even basic family dynamics. At the same time as medicine begins to seem less and less like a useful career, health is emerging as a more and more central social issue.

He concludes that this woman's case is not unique, and that a lack of social services prevents the working classes from becoming upwardly mobile and makes their survival much more precarious than that of the middle class. If politicians continue to foster this kind of inequality, he theorizes, they will face radical action by the angry populace.

Public health isn't independent of political ideology—in fact, it's dependent on political circumstances. This episode shows Ernesto's political convictions proceeding directly from his early experiences in medicine. Moreover, by extrapolating from the circumstances of one woman to those of the entire working class, Ernesto shows that his ideology is rooted in personal experiences.

Finally, the men find that they can't go to Easter Island because there are no ships for the next year. Ernesto and Alberto have to change their plans and move towards a new destination. Rather than crossing the barren terrain in the middle of Chile on foot, the men stow away on a ship sailing to the north of the country.

Ernesto chose the Easter Island leper colony as a destination when his thoughts on the field of medicine and his own career were less complicated. Turning away from Easter Island is also a symbolic turning away from practicing medicine as he had anticipated.

18. POLIZONES (STOWAWAYS)

Although they hide for several hours, Ernesto and Alberto are eventually discovered by the sailors. The captain is furious, but eventually agrees to let them work to pay for their passage. Ernesto complains about unpleasant tasks like cleaning the bathrooms, but he enjoys the isolation of life at sea and the tranquil nights they spend playing cards with the crew.

Although they still get a youthful thrill out of doing something mischievous, like stowing away on a boat, now Alberto and Ernesto are much more willing to pay for their transgressions with the sweat of their brows, showing their increasing maturity. Moreover, Ernesto's ability to fit in among the working-class sailors with ease shows his shifting class identifications.

Looking out on the sea, Ernesto reevaluates the path he wants his life to follow. Up to this point, he has been fully committed to a conventional career as a doctor, even if he hoped to use that career to work for social reform. However, now he feels that such a life is not enough to fulfill him. Rather, he decides that his purpose in life is to travel and observe "everything that came before [my] eyes" without settling anywhere permanently.

At this point, Ernesto has jettisoned the bourgeois aspirations he didn't even question at the beginning of the trip, an important step on the road to becoming a revolutionary. Still, he defines his new path as a roving quest for personal development, showing he's still more focused on himself than politics or improving the lives of others.

19. ESTA VEZ, FRACASO (THIS TIME, DISASTER)

When the ship lands, Ernesto and Alberto bid farewell to the crew. Next, they want to visit the Chuquicamata copper mine, where some of Chile's most valuable mineral resources are extracted. but they have to visit various bureaucratic government offices in order to get permission to do so.

That Ernesto has to get permission from the government to visit a privately-owned mine shows the extent to which public institutions and private companies are intertwined. Moreover, the fact that ordinary people don't have access to one of the most important mines in the country shows that the people lack control over their own mineral resources.

On their way to the Chuquicamata, they fall in with two mine workers, a husband and wife, who are out of work and homeless after being blacklisted from the mines for advocating Communism in the workplace (the Communist party was illegal in Chile at the time), even though all they wanted was better wages and safer working conditions. Now they are heading towards Chuquicamata because conditions there are so dangerous and wages so low that the bosses aren't picky about their employees' political convictions.

By presenting Communism not as a frightening or abstract ideology but as a system that advocates for basic rights, Ernesto makes this political system much more relatable to the reader. He also introduces the ideology of Communism through two ordinary and unthreatening individuals—a husband and wife looking for work—whose characters and aspirations are easy for most people to identify with.

All four travelers share a spartan meal and pot of *mate*, while the husband describes in "simple, expressively language" his time in prison and the plight of his starving family. Ernesto feels deeply sympathetic towards the couple, not just because of their personal struggles but because they are an example of a universal problem; he describes them as "a living representation of the proletariat in any part of the world," and that turning to Communism is a sensible choice for people who are denied basic rights.

With lyrical language, Ernesto paints a compelling portrait of the mine workers as ordinary people fighting heroically against impossibly large forces. By mythologizing the characters in this way, he makes their politics seem much more appealing. Furthermore, by making the connection between the individual characters and the proletariat as a whole, he continues his tendency to base his political convictions on individual experiences.

Seeing the mine itself, Ernesto is disgusted with the arrogance of the foreign managers, whom he describes as "blond and arrogant," only concerned with squeezing as much profit out of the land as possible. The native workers mock the bosses as "ignorant gringos," but they are unable to challenge their bosses' complete power over the natural resources and local economy. the mine's profits.

Chuquicamata shows Ernesto that the presence of foreign corporations does twofold damage to South American countries: it removes sources of natural wealth that could benefit local people, and it keeps the native workforce trapped in poverty. Here, Ernesto starts to conclude that capitalist economics are fundamentally detrimental to the proletariat.

Ernesto makes a point of asking the foreman how many people have died due to unsafe working conditions since the mine's inception. The foreman doesn't know the answer, but he thanks Ernesto for taking an interest in the employees rather than asking only about the mine's profits.

The issues whose importance seems self-evident to Ernesto, like worker safety, are ignored by most other people. This shows that Ernesto's ideas are truly novel and have the potential, if pursued, to be game-changing.

20. CHUQUICAMATA

Ernesto describes the layout of the Chuquicamata mine, focusing on the way it interrupts the beauty of the surrounding mountains. He worries that the remaining mountains will also face exploitation by mining companies. If so, the integrity of the natural environment will be destroyed and local communities won't even enjoy the profits, which will be sent to foreign corporations.

Earlier in the novel, Ernesto emphasized his instinctive spiritual connection and sense of belonging to the land. Here he experiences the antithesis of that connection, a situation in which companies exploit the environment and its resources to politically and economically harm the people who should rightfully control them.

Ernesto pauses to note that Chile produces 20 percent of the world's copper. Because the land is so rich in a natural resource that is in high demand, a violent political struggle is occurring between those who want to nationalize the mines and foreign capitalist entities who want to maintain control of production and profit. For Ernesto, the most important part of this struggle is the plight of the workers who aren't paid enough, have no political power, and face incredibly dangerous working conditions. He is haunted by the knowledge that many workers killed in accidents lie unburied within the huge mine.

Ernesto gives a broad picture of the injustice of Chuquicamata, in which he includes his knowledge of South American economics, his developing ability to perceive instances of economic oppression, and his instinctive sympathy for the plights of individual people. Through the road trip, he's already developed a lot as a political thinker, enabling him to deliver this political analysis that is both well-reasoned and emotionally compelling.

21. KILOMETRAJE ARIDO (ARID LAND FOR MILES AND MILES)

Ernesto and Alberto hike into the desert outside Chuquicamata without enough water or food. Quickly realizing that this is impractical and dangerous, they turn back and stay the night in the local police hut. The next day they hitchhike with striking (and drunk) mine workers.

Although the road trip took a serious turn at Chuquicamata, Ernesto and Alberto are still young men with the capacity to make obvious mistakes, like hiking into the desert, and be entertained by immature stunts like driving drunk.

While waiting to pick up another ride, the men fall in with a group of laborers who are part of an amateur soccer league. The team offers to feed them and drive them to the next town if they participate in a soccer match during the weekend, and Ernesto and Alberto agree.

Once again, Ernesto and Alberto quickly integrate themselves into a group of men of very different class backgrounds from their own. This shows their personal development as well as their growing political tendency towards egalitarianism.

In the interim, Ernesto and Alberto visit the area's nitrate-purifying plants. Ernesto remarks how easy it is, without government regulation, for foreign corporations to set up shop in Chile and "extract the mineral wealth of this part of the world," taking it away for consumption in other countries.

Ernesto reframes the economic system of capitalism as something almost criminal, akin to stealing. In turn, a government that doesn't protect its people from this kind of theft isn't an effective or just government.

22. ACABA CHILE (THE END OF CHILE)

Hitchhiking through the stark scrublands to the northern border of Chile, Ernesto remarks that they are taking the same route as the conquistador Valdivia. To Ernesto, Valdivia's unstoppable march through the hostile desert shows man's overwhelming desire to "take control of a place where he can exercise total authority." Ernesto feels that the European conquest of Chile sprung chiefly from the desire to tyrannize.

Ernesto simultaneously identifies with the conquistador (envisioning himself walking in his footsteps) and repudiates his objectives as rapacious and unjust. This hints at his own ambivalence about his own identity as a South American. Even though he feels deeply connected to South America and committed to helping its working people, he's of European descent—meaning his ancestors helped wrest control of the continent away from its original occupants.

In the port town of Arica, Ernesto and Alberto find shelter in a local hospital, although the local doctor treats them with "as much disrespect as an established, financially secure bourgeois can show" to some scruffy, young travelers.

Ernesto is treated with disdain by people like this middle-class doctor, but seems to treat it as a badge of pride, evidence that he's really fitting in among the proletariat.

Ernesto and Alberto leave Arica and head along the coast towards the Peruvian border, stopping periodically to scavenge for clams on the beach. An Argentine customs officer offers them some familiar *mate* and with this small meal they bid farewell to Chile.

Even though it was so hard to get visas to Peru, the actual border is nothing special; the land is the same on either side. This reminds readers that national borders aren't natural occurrences but constructs imposed by governments.

23. CHILE, OJEADA DE LEJOS (CHILE, A VISION FROM AFAR)

Ernesto zooms out from his usual style of narration to give the reader some retrospective insight on Chilean social and political conditions. He reiterates that public healthcare is patchy and usually expensive, that hospitals rarely have the equipment and facilities they need, and that hygiene is atrocious (in hospitals, patients throw used toilet paper on the floor). Furthermore, standards of living are very low. In the south unemployment is high, and in the north wages are dictated by mining companies who are generally unconcerned with their workers' quality of life. Of the four candidates for President, Ernesto predicts that the nationalist Ibáñez will win the election and attempt to nationalize foreign-controlled industries.

Ernesto makes the connection between popular discontent with everyday things like healthcare and wages, and political change, showing again how his political convictions stem from individual experiences. Still, he's not that excited about the predicted rise of Ibáñez, since he's skeptical that change of leadership within the existing corrupt system could be enough to truly improve the lives of the proletariat.

Finally, Ernesto notes that Chile in its current political state holds economic prospects for anyone, "so long as they don't belong to the proletariat." In order to make economic development more egalitarian and reserve the benefits of Chile's many natural resources for its native population, Chile should attempt to reduce the US economic presence in the country. Ernesto acknowledges that, given the extensive American investments in Chile and the United States' tendency to fiercely defend its economic interests, this is easier said than done.

The fact that the existing political system seems to work actively to hinder its citizens is evidence that the system is broken beyond repair. Here, Ernesto's observations at Chuquicamata have crystallized into concrete anti-foreign sentiment and political goals.

24. TARATA, EL MUNDO NUEVO (TARATA, THE NEW WORLD)

After crossing the border into Peru, Ernesto and Alberto spend a long time walking in inhospitable desert sun, unable catch a ride without having to pay for it. Soon, it becomes nighttime and there is still no sign of a town. Since it's too cold to sleep, the men hike drowsily all through the night. Eventually, they stumble across a hut occupied by a family of Indians.. Because of Alberto's dubious medical qualifications, the Indians treat them like "demigods," welcoming them with food and *mate*.

Even though Ernesto is theoretically very sympathetic to indigenous people as members of the proletariat, his behavior towards them is often troubling. He characterizes this family as simple native people, following accepted stereotypes, and is perfectly willing to accept the adulation they lavish on him as a foreigner of obviously higher social status.


The next day, Ernesto and Alberto obtain a ride in a truck transporting a group of Aymara Indian workers through beautiful rural landscape that has hardly changed since the Incas ruled South America. Although the Indians speak almost no Spanish, Alberto makes the effort to try to communicate with them. The Indians tell them some basic facts about the irrigation channels they pass, built by the Incas thousands of years ago. Even though they can't say much, Ernesto says that hearing about the landscape from the Indians who had lived there for centuries "increased the emotional impact of the surroundings."

When he can envision it controlled by the native people, or at least see it through their eyes, Ernesto describes the landscape as beautiful and existing in its purest state. This is a direct contrast to his negative descriptions of Chuquicamata, where the land is controlled by foreigners. Ernesto is developing a sense of an emotional, native connection to the land which he uses to bolster his political ideology.

Arriving in the town of Tarata, Ernesto is astonished that the architecture, clothes, crops, and cultural practices have been almost perfectly conserved from pre-colonial times. Even the village's church combines European structure with "the spirit of the local Indians." However, Ernesto is saddened that the people are not "the same proud race that repeatedly rose up against Inca rule" but an impoverished, oppressed race suffering from centuries of colonial control.

While the preservation of indigenous culture is a heartening demonstration of cultural pride and empowerment, it has a limited effect on the actual circumstances of the local people, who remain poor and politically oppressed. This suggests that ideology alone cannot affect real change—rather, power must be restored to the people for positive change to occur.

25. EN LOS DOMINIOS DE LA PACHAMAMA (IN THE DOMINIONS OF PACHAMAMA)

Ernesto and Alberto continue from Tarata in a truck with another group of Indian laborers, who are fascinated by Ernesto and Alberto's unfamiliar practice of brewing *mate* along the way. Eventually, the truck can go no further in the snow and everyone has to walk. Ernesto, in turn, is fascinated by the fact that the Indians can walk barefoot through the snow.

Ernesto views this experience as a sort of cultural exchange, in which two groups become more united by learning about one another. However, he's arguably romanticizing poverty when he praises the Indians for getting by without shoes, a basic necessity he would never go without.

Just as the men in the roadside hut did, the Indians in the truck ask about Argentina. Spurred by enthusiasm, Ernesto and Alberto spin unrealistic stories of "the idyllic, beautiful life in our country" and promise to send their interlocutor a copy of the Argentine constitution.

Again, Ernesto and Alberto are taking advantage of their status as privileged foreigners, if only to get attention. They know that Argentina isn't that different from Peru, and that life certainly isn't much easier for its working classes.

During the truck ride, they also make friends with a Peruvian schoolteacher of Indian descent who tells them "many incredible stories of Indian customs and culture." He explains the Indian custom of placing stones in a pile on the mountain peaks in order to "gift sadness" to Pachamama, or Mother Earth. Although Spanish monks tried to eradicate these non-Christian practices, they have persisted through the centuries of colonial rule.

For Ernesto, the story of Pachamama is a positive example of how indigenous cultures can interact and survive contact with European ones. Rather than disappearing, the indigenous culture absorbed a Christian symbol to create a uniquely South American ritual.

The teacher speaks about the long history of the Aymara people, who used to be a powerful and fierce tribe before the Spanish conquest. In contemporary times, Indians are trapped in poverty or, if they manage to obtain an education or improve their economic status, they are still ostracized from bourgeois European society. The way to rectify this situation, the teacher asserts, is to change education systems so that schools would "orient [indigenous] individuals within their own world" rather than pushing them to its periphery.

The schoolteacher points out that it's not just politics and economics that perpetuate inequality, but that cultural prejudice prevents even educated Indians with white-collar jobs (like him) from truly enter into the middle class. The preservation of old rituals and the attitude of schools toward Indian culture may seem like small issues, but they can either help or stymie the empowerment of the indigenous proletariat. Therefore, such issues merit the attention Ernesto will devote to them.

26. EL LAGO DEL SOL (LAKE OF THE SUN)

Ernesto and Alberto make a fruitless stop in Puno, where they can neither swim in the freezing river nor obtain any *mate* to drink. Ernesto remarks on the "lavishness" of the English trading boats compared to the impoverished town.

The only signs of prosperity in this town are the English boats, which take resources and wealth away to other countries rather than contributing to the domestic economy.

From the local doctor in Puno, the men obtain a letter of introduction to Dr. Hermosa, a real leprosy expert. Hoping he can provide further guidance and possibly material resources, they decide to make their way to Cuzco, where he lives.

Although Ernesto and Alberto have been masquerading as doctors for the entire trip, this is the first time they go out of their way to seek guidance from a professional in their field. Taking this step shows they're growing up and starting to think seriously about what they want to do within the medical field, rather than taking their careers for granted.

27. HACIA EL OMBLIGO DEL MUNDO (TOWARD THE NAVAL OF THE WORLD)

Ernesto and Alberto hitchhike to Juliaca, where they meet a drunk police sergeant who takes them out for drinks. After getting progressively more inebriated, the sergeant fires his gun into the wall. The owner of the bar calls the police, but because the sergeant is a member of the Civil Guard and Ernesto and Alberto are foreigners, no one gets punished. This outcome disgusts the owner, who shouts at Alberto that "these Argentines think they own everything."

Despite his growing preoccupation with social equality, Ernesto still takes advantage of occasions where his privilege allows him to act above the law. He relates this scene as a funny escapade, but what really happens is that reckless destruction of local property is covered up because the police are corrupt and Ernesto and Alberto are comparatively wealthy foreigners. Ernesto's tone-deaf assessment of his own bad behavior shows that he's still not capable of applying his blossoming political ideals to himself.

In their next truck ride, the men are sandwiched between a group of Indians and some young white men from Lima. The white men are intent on demonstrating their higher social status by teasing the Indians, who in turn are too wary respond to Alberto's attempts at conversation. Ernesto and Alberto feel sympathetic to the Indians, but their race and language mean that everyone else in the truck groups them together with the men from Lima.

Ernesto scorns the behavior of the men from Lima, even though he wasn't acting terribly different from them the previous night. He's much better at analyzing other people's actions than his own. He's also finding that sympathy isn't enough to transcend barriers of race and class. Even though he and Alberto feel *that they identify with the proletariat, the Indians have no reason to trust that, as white men, they will treat them with dignity or respect.*

A police officer pays for their hotel room, saying that doctors shouldn't have to sleep in the cold. The next day in the town center, before they continue on to Cuzco, they observe a traditional funeral procession wending through the village. Although it's a Christian ritual, it's very different from those Ernesto has seen before and he remarks on the exotic dress of the people, the disorder of the procession, and the "interminable babbling" of the officials during the ceremony.

Here, Ernesto uses the technique of describing an ordinary event in language that makes it seem strange or surreal. Stressing the exoticism of the ceremony and his inability to understand even the words, Ernesto describes a Christian ritual much as European writers often describe indigenous practices. In doing so, he suggests that conceptions of some cultures as normative and others as exotic are dependent on perspective, not fact.

28. EL OMBLIGO (THE NAVEL)

Imagining the rich history of Cuzco, Ernesto says there are "two or three ways the city can be summoned." He first recounts the Inca legend wherein a god, Viracocha, personally selected the ground on which to build the city. As Inca power grew, Cuzco was the center of their "formidable empire." However, the city that was the "navel" of a strong indigenous empire has been "destroyed by the stupidity of illiterate Spanish conquistadors" and is now only visible in the "violated ruins" that have survived to modern times.

Here, Ernesto completely reverses dominant stereotypes about indigenous people and European colonizers. Rather than imagining Europeans bringing civilization to primitive and weak people, he describes the tragedy of a strong and sophisticated society wrecked by brainless invaders. This new narrative empowers the indigenous people who are descendants of that ancient civilization by hinting at the kind of society they could rise up and rebuild.

Ernesto describes the tourist's Cuzco, aesthetically pleasing with "colored-tile roofs" and "gentle uniformity," and passes on to the conquistador's Cuzco. Even though Ernesto is saddened and ashamed by the memory of the conquistadors, the grandeur of Cuzco's colonial museums and libraries compel him to feel some grudging respect for the colonial endeavor. Ernesto says that he tried to explore all the versions of Cuzco during his stay in the city.

Ernesto is drawn to the colonial architecture, possibly because it represents the parts of his own heritage he doesn't want to think about. Breaking away from his middle-class roots turns out to be more complicated and difficult than changing his appearance or the people he hangs out with.

29. LA TIERRA DEL INCA (THE LAND OF THE INCAS)

Ernesto visits Cuzco's ancient Inca fortress and speculates about its tactical significance as a defense for the city. He differentiates between "sober" Quechua architecture and the "splendor" of Inca construction. He then envisions the Spanish destruction of Inca infrastructure, saying these acts were motivated not by military necessity or economic greed, but by the desire to demolish any evidence of former Inca dignity and grandeur. To Ernesto, the forcible replacement of Inca temples with Christian churches is the epitome of this violent political transition, and because of this he finds them sinister to visit.

The city's architectural history is a battleground on which different cultures compete for dominance. The preservation or destruction of old fortresses shows which cultures are in power. But just as the conquistadors used their own culture as a tool of oppression, forcibly imposing it on the people they conquered, recognizing and reclaiming ancient cultures can help contemporary members of the proletariat to begin to empower themselves.

Leaving the center of the city, Ernesto treks along the outskirts to various sites where Incas waged battles against other indigenous peoples or European forces. Ernesto admires the sophistication of these erstwhile fortresses while noting the eerie and mournful quality of their current ruins.

These ancient battle sites remind Ernesto and the reader that South America's indigenous people weren't always poor and powerless, but once commanded large armies and fought significant battles.

Finally, Ernesto visits Machu Picchu, noting that he agrees with Bingham (the American archaeologist who "discovered" the site in modern times) that it was not just a point of military defense, but also a sacred religious site. Ernesto explores the entire ruin, trying to imagine what life was like when people lived there. He concludes that sites like Machu Picchu are "irrefutable" evidence that powerful and sophisticated indigenous societies existed in South America before the European conquest, and have the potential to exist there again.

The complex archeology of Cuzco and surrounding sites makes Ernesto realize the importance of culture in moments of political strife. Even though the proletariat seem to have few weapons at their disposal, reclamation of their grand heritage is at least a strategy to bolster unity and morale, reminding them of the identity they share and fight to protect.

30. EL SEÑOR DE LOS TEMBLORES (OUR LORD OF THE EARTHQUAKES)

Back in Cuzco, Ernesto witnesses a local religious celebration in which priests parade an icon of Jesus, which supposedly protects the city against earthquakes, around the main churches. Although it's a Christian celebration, Ernesto remarks that the intense colors and the artistry of the icon give it a "pagan" flavor.

Contrary to accepted prejudices, European culture isn't naturally distinct from or more advanced than the cultures of indigenous people. After centuries of proximity and colonialism, both cultures have influenced each other in large and small ways.

Ernesto notes the contrast between Indian spectators, dressed in traditional costumes "in expression of a culture…which still holds on to living values," and North American tourists armed with cameras, representing the values of a totally different culture.

With this image, Ernesto presents indigenous people as courageously holding onto a positive culture, while the tourists, defined by their material possessions, lack any such cultural strength.

31. EL SOLAR DEL VENCEDOR (HOMELAND FOR THE VICTOR)

Ernesto describes the decline of Cuzco as a powerful city: after the Spanish conquest, Cuzco became "just another point on its periphery," and Europeans extracted its riches to "feed the opulence of another imperial court," that of Spain. The Indians who cultivated the land were vanquished, yet the conquistadors had no intention of farming, so the city no longer produced the resources it needed to prosper. While cities like Lima transformed completely during the colonial period, Cuzco remains as a "relic" of the pre-colonial era and the moment of conquest.

Because it's in many ways stuck in the past, Cuzco helps Ernesto explore a historical moment that will become important to his political philosophy. During the era of the conquistadors, control of South America transferred from its indigenous population to foreign invaders. Understanding how this power shift happened will help Ernesto understand how it might be reversed.

Ernesto describes the lavish interior of the cathedral as resembling "an old woman with too much makeup." The only parts he approves of are the choir stalls, carved from wood by Indian craftsman and combining Catholic legends with indigenous artistry. Similarly, he notes that the carving on one particular pulpit "expresses the fusion of two hostile" peoples.

Ernesto is generally unmoved by European art, always preferring pieces that have at least a touch of native influence. This shows his personal identification with indigenous culture and his sense of that culture as being more beautiful.

Finally, Ernesto visits the Church of Belén, which was damaged in a recent earthquake, and whose bell towers lie "like dismembered animals" on the hill beside it.

Since architecture represents political power, Ernesto's description of a church in ruins hints that the upper-class European regime will not last forever. Just as conquistadors reduced Incan civilization to ruins, modern revolutionaries can destroy the current order.

32. CUZCO A SECAS (CUZCO STRAIGHT)

Dr. Hermosa helps Ernesto and Alberto get "an approximate picture of Peruvian life" and procures them train tickets to Machu Picchu. During an impromptu soccer match there, they meet a hotel owner who lets them stay free of charge and educates them about ancient Inca culture. On the train ride back to the city, Ernesto notes the contrast between the third-class carriages where Indians ride and "comfortable rail coaches" reserved for tourists, most of whom have come to Cuzco because of Machu Picchu's increasing international popularity. He also remarks on the Indians' "somewhat animal-like concept" of personal hygiene and their habit of relieving themselves beside the train tracks.

Ernesto resents the wealthy foreign tourists who come to take advantage of South America's cultural sites without really understanding them. However, he himself still doesn't respect indigenous people in practice, using derogatory language to describe their habits when they differ from his own. Although Ernesto develops sophisticated cultural theories while looking at cultural ruins, he hasn't figured out how to apply them to real people yet.

Ernesto spends a lot of time in the archeology museum, even though it is "pretty poor" due to the extensive looting that took place before the government cared enough to protect ancient artifacts. The museum's curator, who is a mestizo (of mixed indigenous and European descent) speaks to Ernesto not just of archeology, but also of the deplorable present conditions of Indian people. The curator says that immediate economic improvement is necessary to "mitigate the soporific effects of coca and drink."

The condition of the museum is proof that mainstream society doesn't value indigenous culture the way Ernesto is beginning to. But the fact that the curator is passionate both about ancient artifacts and the current economic situation seems to confirm Ernesto's developing theories about the connections between culture and politics.

According to the curator, the goal of archeological study is to help people understand ancient civilizations so that modern Indians can "look at their past and feel pride, rather than, looking at their present, feel only shame." Ernesto says that the museum is not just a repository for articles of the past but a place of present importance, "proof of a race still fighting for its identity."

Reclamation of native culture isn't just important because it makes people feel better—it can have tangible effects on the political and economic situation of working class people. The mestizo curator, a rare example of an Indian who obtained an education and made it into the middle class, is an example of what this process can help accomplish.

33. HUAMBO

After exhausting all available hospitality in Cuzco, Ernesto and Alberto head north towards a leper colony in Huambo. While waiting for rides, they spend aimless days in villages along the way, exploring the local terrain. In one village, they visit a church where the priest gives an atrociously bad three-hour sermon. Ernesto has an asthma attack and has to treat himself with cigarettes until Alberto finds some adrenaline at the local hospital.

Spending time in the countryside, even if it's aimless, lets Ernesto become immersed in a way of life that, as a middle-class city dweller, he's never seen before. These experiences are much more valuable to him now that he's developed a political consciousness than they were at the beginning of the narrative.

A village mayor agrees to provide Ernesto and Alberto with horses for the journey to the leper colony. While they wait, they watch a group of native conscripts drilling under the ruthless command of a soldier who had been nice to them earlier and now treats them with "deference."

Class distinctions permeate society to such an extent that they affect every ordinary interaction. Ernesto and Alberto are noticing more and more when this happens, even when they benefit from those distinctions.

An indigenous old woman and young boy accost Ernesto and Alberto as they are riding through the mountains on the horses. Because they don't speak Quechua, Ernesto and Alberto at first have no idea what is wrong, but eventually they figure out that the mayor had taken the horses from the first Indians who happened to be passing by. Ernesto and Alberto return the stolen property and walk the rest of the way to the leper colony.

While Ernesto's inability to communicate with the Indians shows how hard it is to move away from his own social demographic, his anxiety about compensating for the mayor's misdeeds shows his refusal to be complicit in class oppression. Here, he differentiates himself from people like the soldier in command of the conscripts.

After arriving at the leper colony, they visit the hospital, where conditions are "disastrous:" there aren't enough supplies or equipment, patients are confined in a very small space, and morale is very low. Moreover, the local community is so terrified of contagion that they refuse to help the hospital or provide any services.

Again, inadequate social services mean that poor people have no access to desperately needed medical care. Mainstream society displays a remarkably similar attitude to the lepers and the proletariat as a whole. Both groups are powerless and marginalized, and no one seems to care that they live in poverty and squalor.

Ernesto and Alberto procure horses for the trip back from a landowner. The landowner gives them an indigenous guide to guide them on the way and forces the guide, traveling on foot, to carry their luggage. Once they are on their way, the men carry their bags, but Ernesto can't discern whether or not the guide appreciates this gesture.

Just as he did when he discovered he was riding a stolen horse, Ernesto tries to distance himself from the injustices others inflict on the working class. However, while he feels he's very different from other people of his own class, the guide's noncommittal attitude shows that it's unclear if actual members of the working class perceive the same differences that Ernesto himself perceives.

34. SIEMPRE AL NORTE (EVER NORTHWARD)

Ernesto and Alberto stop for a few days in the town of Andahuaylas, where Ernesto recovers from his earlier asthma attack at the hospital and they wait for a truck traveling toward Lima. They find a ride just in time, because Alberto gets in a fight with some Civil Guard officers harassing an Indian woman, and after that the local police are unwilling to help them.

Ernesto and Alberto have become mature and politically astute enough to perceive oppression even when it's affecting people unconnected to them. Repeated incidents of injustice over the past few days cause the men to align themselves so strongly with the proletariat that they alienate members of their own class, like the police who usually help them.

After a rainy and miserable journey in a truck transporting bulls to Lima, they arrive in Ayacucho, a town famous as the sight of an important battle fought by Simón Bolívar. They spend the night with a local who is interested in foreigners and continue onwards towards Lima.

Simón Bolivar was a famous revolutionary who helped many South American countries extricate themselves from Spanish rule. The fact that Ernesto envisions himself traveling in Bolivar's path shows his growing tendency to think about social reform in dramatic, revolutionary terms.

35. POR EL CENTRO PERUANO (THROUGH THE CENTER OF PERU)

Ernesto and Alberto continue to hitchhike, becoming increasingly hungry, since they're running out of money to buy food. Miserable and cranky, they experience the emotional toll that physical hardship places on people.

At this point, the men are traveling without the safety net that money, letters of introduction, or motorcycles have provided them in the past. In their euphoria at the beginning of the trip they thought they were having a wild, risky adventure, but now they're discovering the actual hardships of living outside the middle class.

While waiting at the next village's police station for their next ride, the men witness the reporting of a murder. The accusers suspect an Indian of the crime and bring a photo with them, which the sergeant shows Ernesto and Alberto, saying it's "the classic image of a murderer."

The police sergeant blatantly employs racial stereotypes to investigate a murder. This episode shows how much government institutions, such as the justice system, are biased against indigenous people.

36. ESPERANZA FALLIDA (SHATTERED HOPES)

Completely out of food and money, Ernesto and Alberto stop at the house of a friend's brother-in-law and camp out there, eating his food. To get rid of these guests whom he barely knows and clearly doesn't want, the brother-in-law offers to find them a ride to Lima. He tricks them into leaving town with a driver who abandons them, halfway through the night, at a rest stop in the middle of nowhere.

While Ernesto thought he was getting into trouble at the beginning of the book, now he's seeing what real problems look like. It's notable that he doesn't get angry or upset, even in this dire situation, but tries to devise a way out of it. He's grown up a lot since the trip started and is able to handle much more serious situations than he once could.

In order to eat, Ernesto and Alberto resort to desperate measures. In one town, they meet some drunks at a bar and pretend it's the "anniversary" of the beginning of their journey so that their new friends buy them drinks and food. In another village, they throw themselves at the mercy of a local doctor who buys them a meal. Eventually, they manage to procure a ride to Lima, even though it's with a semi-blind driver over an extremely dangerous mountain road.

The men repeat, out of necessity, the tricks they used to play for fun to con people into buying them food. This kind of behavior isn't nearly as exciting to Ernesto as it once was—now it's just a mechanism to get him to his next destination. He has more important things on his mind than playing tricks on people for fun.

37. LA CIUDAD DE LOS VIRREYES (THE CITY OF THE VICEROYS)

Arriving in Lima, Ernesto compares the city to Cuzco, saying it's much more modern and less reminiscent of the ancient past. Ernesto is moved by the beauty of the cathedral in Lima, which is more airy than that of Cuzco and shows off the best of Spanish baroque architecture. Overall, he finds Lima to be the epitome of a society which "has not developed beyond the feudal condition of a colony."

While Cuzco represented the arrival of Spanish conquistadors in South America, Lima shows Ernesto what society was like during the early colonial period. Visiting these Peruvian cities helps him understand how South American cultures transformed through history and colonization.

Of everything he sees in Lima, Ernesto is most captivated by the Museum of Archeology and Anthropology, which preserves art and artifacts from pre-Columbian Indian societies. Ernesto has never seen Indian cultures afforded the same respect and rigorous academic study as European cultures. He spends a lot of time examining the collection and library, and comes to admire Julio Tello, the "pure blood Indian" museum director.

While the archeological museum in Cuzco was a sad illustration of general disrespect for indigenous culture, the museum in Lima establishes a more general sense of equality between Indian and European culture. This is important, because perceiving the cultures as equal will eventually lead to perceiving indigenous and European people as equals.

Ernesto and Alberto also make the acquaintance of Dr. Hugo Pesce, a renowned leprologist who takes them under his wing and tells them of his many years treating the disease. He takes the young men to visit the leper patients in his hospital; Ernesto and Alberto play football with the patients and befriend them. He's also a great host, providing long dinners every night where he introduces them to other notable doctors in the city. With their material needs taken care of and so much to stimulate their minds, Ernesto and Alberto start to really enjoy Lima.

Erudite, energetic, and socially conscious, Dr. Pesce is exactly the kind of doctor Ernesto would like to become. After becoming very disillusioned with the life paths offered to young bourgeois professionals, he finally sees one he would be happy to emulate. This suggests that perhaps Ernesto will not find it necessary to turn his back on his upbringing, but rather will find a sense of balance between his past and the future he hopes for.

At one point, Ernesto and Alberto go to see their first bullfight. Although Ernesto is extremely excited at the prospect, he discovers that the actual bullfight involves little "art" or "courage." For the most part, it's just an unappealing spectacle of killing.

The bullfight is a Spanish custom, imported during colonization. Perhaps for this reason, it doesn't appeal to Ernesto as much as authentically South American art forms and cultural practices.

When it comes time to depart Lima, the patients at Dr. Pesce's hospital give Ernesto and Alberto some money they've cobbled together and an "effusive" farewell letter. They are grateful that the men shook their hands without gloves and played sports with them, treating them with dignity and humanity rarely accorded to leprosy patients.

The patients' gratitude for the simple things Ernesto and Alberto did for them demonstrates the appalling state of medical care for these lepers. But it also shows how much an altruistic person, especially an altruistic doctor, can do to help patients.

Traveling away from Lima, Alberto initiates a long night of drinking *pisco* (a Peruvian liquor) which the men can't actually pay for, and they have to leave town quickly the next morning. They continue to hitch rides away from Lima for several uneventful days, sleeping in local hospitals at night.

After being momentarily reabsorbed into bourgeois life during their sojourn in Lima, Ernesto and Alberto return to living as the working class lives. By this time, they're just as accustomed to this lifestyle as they are to their former lives.

38. UCAYALI ABAJO (DOWN THE UCAYALI)

Ernesto and Alberto sail to the **San Pablo Leper Colony** on a small passenger boat, La Cenepa. The captain lets them stay in first class cabins because they are young professionals, but the other passengers, who are too status-obsessed to "allow themselves the luxury of associating with two penniless travelers," are unfriendly and the men are isolated. They feel they have more in common with the sailors than with their fellow travelers.

Observing the petty behavior of the first-class passengers, Ernesto becomes convinced of the inherent superficiality of his own class. He's becoming more and more alienated from his own class origins, and while this is an uncomfortable experience, it also helps him grow into a more thoughtful and self-aware adult.

Ernesto has some sort of sexual encounter, which he describes vaguely as a "careless caress," with an "easy" girl on the boat. Afterward, he thinks of Chichina and imagines that she is probably in her familiar home entertaining "some new suitor." However, Ernesto isn't jealous or regretful; he feels he is "an old friend who knows and understands her" and wishes for her happiness. After reminiscing about what he calls his "preadventurer life," Ernesto looks up at the starry sky, which seems to reassure him that his travels and all their consequences are worth it.

Ernesto's use of the word "easy" suggests that he has a double standard for male and female sexual behavior, showing that his developing egalitarian principles don't transcend his society's sexist attitudes toward women. Moreover, by replacing Chichina with another, much more fleeting partner, Ernesto shows he has completely moved away from his earlier longing for a comfortable home life. He's a much different person than he was when he was Chichina's boyfriend.

The boat makes stops at a port in the city of Iquitos, and Ernesto's asthma becomes so bad that he has to stay in the hospital for several days. Afterwards, they sail onwards and arrive in San Pablo, where the director of the leper colony, Dr. Bresciani, puts them up for the night.

While Ernesto's asthma is certainly a hindrance at times, it doesn't affect him the way it does those who can't pay for medical care. That Ernesto can take a cross-continental trip while poor people with asthma can't even work shows the persistent inequalities in public health.

39. QUERIDO PAPI (DEAR PAPI)

This chapter is a transcript of a letter Ernesto wrote to his father while resting in the hospital at Iquitos. He mentions that the area near the river is full of modern settlements, and that to find "savage," or non-Europeanized, tribes, you have to sail along the smaller tributaries. He also explains the precautions they've taken against diseases like typhoid and yellow fever.

While Ernesto displays a laudable interest in learning about native cultures, he often describes them with the same stereotypical language he criticizes in others. Calling the Indians "savage" debases and exoticizes them, and characterizes them as inherently less civilized than Europeans.

Ernesto tells his father about the respect local hospitals and doctors show the "two visiting researchers." In particular, he recounts how the leprosy patients in the Lima hospital, grateful that he and Alberto played sports with them and "never wore overalls or gloves" out of fear of the disease, gave them gifts and money on their departure. Even if he isn't a qualified doctor yet, Ernesto is proud and happy to be have given a "psychological lift" to the patients, who face so much hardship and isolation.

Ernesto is still enthusiastic about his experiences in the Lima hospital. His letter to his father shows that even if he has become disillusioned with the state of public health, Ernesto is still inspired by the potential of medicine to improve the welfare of underserved communities.

40. LA COLONIA DE SAN PABLO (THE SAN PABLO LEPER COLONY)

A day after arriving in San Pablo, Ernesto and Alberto finally visit the **leper colony** they've traveled so far to see. The colony is comprised of 600 patients who live not in a hospital, but in independent cabins, taking care of themselves. The colony has an informal government with a judge, a policeman, and local officials. Still, it lacks "basic amenities" like microscopes and daytime electricity.

The patients interact with each other on equal terms and are able to govern themselves in harmony. The leper colony shows Ernesto how not just ordinary people, but people who have been exiled and ostracized, can create an ideal society that empowers disadvantaged people.

Dr. Bresciani shows Ernesto and Alberto around the **colony**. He tells them about his own research, which examines patients' nervous systems, because the disease in this region typically causes nervous disorders. Ernesto notes that colony still doesn't have a surgeon who knows how to operate on nerves.

The leper colony, in which those who need public resources the most don't get them, is a grim illustration of social inequality. While this is disheartening, it also makes the colony's high morale and internal organization all the more impressive and significant.

When they aren't touring the medical facilities, Ernesto and Alberto go fishing and play football and chess. Besides Dr. Bresciani, they befriend the rest of the medical staff and the nuns who work in the **colony**.

Even though it's a place of exile and poverty, the leper colony is a seemingly happy place, where Ernesto and Alberto feel right at home. This shows Ernesto that the best communities are predicated on justice and principles rather than wealth and power.

41. EL DÍA DE SAN GUEVARA (SAINT GUEVARA'S DAY)

During his stay at the **leper colony**, Ernesto turns 24. He sees this as a big milestone, because he's been alive for almost a quarter century, and he says that life, "all things considered, has not treated me badly." Dr. Bresciani organizes a huge dinner and party in the colony's dining room. Drunk on *pisco*, Ernesto makes a speech in which he thanks his hosts effusively and then says that all South Americans are part of "a single mestizo race" and that divisions between countries are false. He makes a toast to Peru and to "a United Latin America."

The birthday is a turning point in Ernesto's life, marking the end of his youth and the beginning of a more mature adulthood. This maturity is evident in the speech he makes, which doesn't focus on himself but expresses his nascent political ideology. It's notable that this milestone occurs at the leper colony, which is a microcosm of his ideal society. Seeing the equality of people at the colony has inspired him to speak publicly about politics for the first time.

The next day, accompanied by the doctors, Ernesto and Alberto visit a local Indian tribe, the Yaguas. He notes that their way of life combines traditional practices (like the way they construct their huts) with modern influences (like European clothes).

The Yaguas manage to adapt to the modern world while preserving their ancient customs. They are an example of how South American societies could function in the world while limiting foreign influences and maintaining the unique identity of their indigenous people.

After enjoying the hospitality of the colony for a few more days, Ernesto and Alberto prepare to depart. They build a raft on which they plan to sail further down the river. The colony throws them another huge party. The patients cobble together a small orchestra and anxiously give speeches thanking the young doctors for their visit. Alberto also starts giving a speech, but becomes too emotional to finish it. The next day, everyone watches while Ernesto and Alberto cast off down the river in their improvised raft.

Ernesto has achieved his original goal of visiting a leper colony, but he learned different things from what he expected to learn. Instead of confirming his aspirations as a doctor, the colony has solidified and allowed him to express his new commitment to political activism. That he and Alberto depart the colony in a highly unorthodox manner highlights the fact that their lives are also diverging from the conventional paths they had planned.

42. LA KONTIKITA SE REVELA (DEBUT FOR THE LITTLE KONTIKI)

Ernesto and Alberto float down the river towards the Brazilian border, a difficult journey because the mosquitos are so bad and they have trouble steering the raft toward the bank when they want to land. Eventually, both men fall asleep on the boat, which floats into the bank during the night. Ernesto feels a "morbid fatigue and an uneasy exhaustion" at the prospect of traveling onwards with this impractical vessel, but he tells himself that whatever happens, he will be able to deal with it.

Ernesto experiences a rare moment of self-doubt, wondering not only if their improvised boat will make it to Brazil but if he has the strength and energy to carry on with his larger but equally precarious journey. However, he is able to persuade himself to overcome this doubt—he's acquired a lot more mental fortitude during this trip than he had at the outset.

43. QUERIDA VIEJA (DEAR MAMA)

Ernesto transcribes another letter to his mother, written from Bogotá, Colombia. He gives a brief account of his visit to the **leper colony** and the generous hospitality they showed him, noting wryly that he made a "quintessentially Pan-American speech" and praising what he sees as Alberto's better public speaking abilities.

It's ironic that, even as he describes one of the first of many speeches he'll give as a revolutionary leader, Ernesto considers Alberto the more charismatic speaker. He has matured more than Alberto has during the trip, but he still sees his older friend as a big-brother figure.

Then Ernesto describes the rest of the trip on the raft. Ernesto and Alberto spend a few days floating down the river and catching fish, but eventually they fall asleep when they're supposed to be keeping watch and float into Brazil without noticing. They have to catch a boat upriver to Leticia, the city they'd accidentally passed.

Again, while national borders are politically paramount, in this instance the border of Brazil proves so easy to cross Ernesto and Alberto don't even know they've crossed it. This incident underscores Ernesto's speech at the leper colony, when he said that divisions between South American countries were false.

After a few days in Leticia, Ernesto and Alberto fly to Bogotá. There, they sleep on chairs in the hospital rather than paying for "the bourgeois comfort of a hostel." Local leprosy doctors show them around and even offer them permanent jobs, which Alberto considers accepting but Ernesto doesn't.

Until now, Ernesto and Alberto have functioned as a unit, but now their paths begin to diverge. Both are committed to social reform, but Alberto plans to pursue it as a doctor while Ernesto is thinking more about his ideology than any career at all. Besides demonstrating the growing radicalism of his politics, this moment shows Ernesto finally stepping out of the shadow of his charismatic older friend.

Because Ernesto carries a knife, he has an unpleasant altercation with the local police. He tells his mother that there is "more repression of individual freedom" in Colombia than anywhere else he's traveled. Gun-wielding police routinely stop civilians to check their papers, even though many of them are actually illiterate. Ernesto thinks that a Colombian revolution is inevitable.

In Columbia, the imbalance of power between people and their rulers has grown so much it approaches the ridiculous—evidenced by police officers who can't read well enough to do their jobs. This is the first time Ernesto explicitly predicts—and in fact seems to hope for—an actual revolution to address political injustice.

44. HACIA CARACAS (TOWARDS CARACAS)

After dealing with various bureaucratic processes and enduring many unnecessary police searches, Ernesto and Alberto cross into Venezuela, which is more prosperous than Columbia. They hitch a ride in a van going towards Caracas, which takes a long time due to dangerous mountain terrain and several police checkpoints. Ernesto has another asthma attack during the journey, from which he only recovers after Alberto gives him an injection of adrenaline.

Again, national borders and the bureaucracies that accompany them don't serve any purpose besides inconveniencing ordinary people. Current border lines are a relic of the conquistadors, who carved up South America for the benefit of European powers. As such, Ernesto characterizes them negatively.

45. ESTE EXTRAÑO SIGLO VEINTE (THIS STRANGE TWENTIETH CENTURY)

Ernesto acquires a French inhaler to help with his asthma but loses Alberto, with whom he parts ways in Caracas. Without his traveling companion, he feels lonely and "unguarded." He misses having Alberto around to share his observations and experiences. Despite his sadness, Ernesto acknowledges that their long journey together has come to a necessary end. Alberto needs to look for a job, and Ernesto wants to return home and finish his studies.

Losing Alberto is a bittersweet moment, but it shows how Ernesto has matured. He's an adult now, and can stand on his own. That the parting seems very natural perhaps suggests that the two have grown apart in some ways. Ernesto is increasingly committed to his political ideology, while Alberto is more concerned with practical issues like finding a job.


Alone for the first time, Ernesto explores the outskirts of Caracas. The slums here are populated by two rival ethnic groups, those of Portuguese and those of African descent. Although both groups live in dire poverty, they are prejudiced and hostile to each other. They are further separated by their "different ways of approaching life." Ernesto says that black people are "dreamers" and as a result often lazy, while Europeans have "a tradition of work and saving." He doesn't give much evidence for these generalizations, attributing them to essential racial character.

Ernesto's characterization of black people is, of course, based entirely on offensive stereotypes rather than fact or experience. This passage shows that, even as Ernesto has matured and become politicized in the course of his trans-continental journey, many of his views are still naïve and uninformed, and his picture of justice is not expansive or radical enough to include everybody equally.

Ernesto peeks into one of the tiny huts where a mother is cooking dinner for several ragged children. He tries to take photographs of them, but they are suspicious and throw stones to drive him away. On the way back to Caracas, Ernesto notes that even though the houses and infrastructure are atrocious, many families have bought refrigerators, radios, or cars.

Capitalism has done nothing good for Caracas. People buy material goods because they want to feel bourgeois, but they're just giving their money to foreign corporations. The corporations are themselves in league with corrupt governments who don't provide basic services, keeping the proletariat trapped in poverty.

46. ANOTACIÓN AL MARGEN (A NOTE IN THE MARGIN)

Ernesto has left Caracas and is staying the night in a mountain village. He feels that "everything solid [has] melted away" and he is engulfed by darkness. In this village, he meets a stranger. Although Ernesto only gives a vague description of this man and his practical circumstances, he seems to be some sort of political activist. Ernesto notes that he "escaped the knife of dogmatism" as a young man in Europe and is now wandering among countries, waiting for revolution to occur.

The phrase about solid things melting is a direct reference to the writings of Karl Marx, demonstrating the extent to which Communist thinking has influenced Ernesto's thinking. The geographic isolation Ernesto describes mirrors his psychological isolation, as he has distanced himself from most of the values and social standards he took for granted at the beginning of this trip. He's ready to embrace a new set of principles, and the stranger helps him articulate them. Ernesto's description implies that the stranger may have lived through an earlier Communist revolution somewhere in Europe.

The stranger gives a long speech about revolution, which Ernesto transcribes verbatim onto the page. He says that while revolution is inevitable and will allow the people to take power in every country, it requires the sacrifice of many innocent lives. "Revolution is impersonal," he says, so he prioritizes an ultimate ideological goal over individual lives.

The otherworldly stranger's sudden entrance and dramatic guidance are akin to a religious apparition, but the only religion he's peddling is revolution. This shows that Ernesto is coming to view revolution as something sacred. In fact, it's so sacred that it justifies the sacrifice of innocent lives. To Ernesto, an ideology that will serve the greater good is more important than any one individual's life.

After saying goodbye to the stranger, Ernesto experiences what he describes as a personal "revelation." He, too, now views revolution as inevitable and declares that he will be "with the people" when it comes. Ernesto imagines this revolution as a cataclysmic conflict in which he will play an active and violent part, "savoring the acrid smell of gunpowder and blood [and] the enemy's death." In the final sentence, Ernesto imagines himself sharing in the "bestial howl of the triumphant proletariat" when this battle is won.

Ernesto is now completely committed to the struggle for violent political revolution. The extreme language he uses to describe this conclusion shows that his personality as an individual is totally subsumed by his ideology. The final passage of the novel represents the culmination of Ernesto's political development. It also shows his complete transformation as a person, from a precocious, middle-class student to a radical thinker primed to become a revolutionary.

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