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Italo Calvino

*Invisible Cities*

Talking Notes

Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* explores imaginary cities through different points of views – such as memory, desire, and eyes – defying the laws of physics and rationality. This work of literature is based upon Marco Polo’s explorations and his descriptions of foreign cities to Kublai-Khan. The cities described in the work may be more a more metaphorical and poetic version of the cities Marco Polo explored. Beautifully described, the cities reflect human thought, behavior, faith, and mortality.

Discussion Questions:

How does the title – *Invisible Cities –* and the class theme – Memory – relate to the text?

Calvino tries to convey that cities are all somewhat remembered and built upon people’s imagination, which causes different aspects of a city to become “invisible.” For example, as mentioned in the description of Tamara, one may “leave Tamara without having discovered it” because he/she is “only recording the names with which she defines herself and all her parts” (14). In this way, memory constructs the city within the mind based upon a few aspects experienced by the person. While the whole, complete Tamara is undiscovered and “invisible,” our mind tricks us to believe that we have truly understood a city just by visiting, when in reality, the city will actually be somewhat fabricated in our mind by our memories.

How does Calvino comment on human thought and perception though *Invisible Cities*?

Calvino’s description of Raissa shows how cities, in general, can be “happy” or “sad” based upon one’s perception. Because the people of Raissa only perceive the city as “unhappy” (148), they fail to notice the happiness in the simple act of a “successful transaction” or “a great lady in love” (148). Cities are multi-faceted, and if people choose to only focus on one facet, they will fail to see all the others. The people only perceive the city as “unhappy,” which makes sense because humans naturally evolved to focus on the negative more than the positive. Because we are human, we fail to see more positivity, just as how the “unhappy city contains a happy city unaware of its own existence” (149).

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Pico Iyer

*Where Worlds Collide*

Pico Iyer’s *Where Worlds Collide* analyzes Los Angeles International Airport as one of the epicenters of globalization. Iyer describes LAX as a microcosm of America since they are both culturally diverse places filled with an abundance of different immigrants, languages, foods, and customs. Immigrants who arrive at the airport collide with other immigrants who bring the same “American Dream” with them. The airport is also a world of itself, an “interaction of exoticism and familiarity” (3).

Discussion Questions:

How does Iyer use irony to convey his message?

Iyer uses Ironic situations to show the difficulties immigrants must face when they arrive in a new country with idealized expectations. For example, Mexicans who arrive at Los Angeles Airport filled with hope and dreams are only to be discouraged by writing in the restrooms that say “Mexicans Go Home” (1). Those who fled third world countries realize that they have fled to a country filled with other third world cultures. An Ethiopian waitress, who would never go back to Ethiopia because the Tigreans killed her family, has Tigreans “working just down the corridor”(7) from her. Tibetans fleeing from their Chinese-occupied homeland “arrive to have Chinese faces everywhere”(7). It is ironic how these immigrants never actually become completely unattached to what they are fleeing from. Iyer suggests that immigrants are always faced with new difficulties and that coming to America does not necessarily lead to a happy ending.

How is the airport, a place *Where Worlds Collide,* significant*?*

The diverse group of immigrants in Los Angeles is reflected in its airport, where different immigrant groups coming from different cultures arrive in pursuit of the “American Dream.” Even many employees at the airport are immigrants. Passengers can be found eating different ethnic foods such as “Dutch chocolate” or “Japanese Coffee”(4). Clocks show different times from different destinations. The airport is not only a collision of different cultures and worlds – it is, in a sense, a world itself. One could eat, sleep, and survive in the airport, and travelers can enter a “twilight zone of consciousness, not really sure of who or where they are” (4) because of the presence of different foreign cultures or simply because of the tiredness from traveling.