

Dissapointment in if
on a winter's night a
traveller



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The traditional structure and approach to literature is challenged in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* by Italo Calvino. For this idiosyncratic narrative, the main character is referred to as the reader, and the novel is told in the second person. Every other chapter is the first chapter of a different book, but each comes to an abrupt stop as the book is lost, misprinted or otherwise un-continued; through this desperate attempt to finish the stories, the reader, is taken around the world with *The Other Reader*, another character. In *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, Calvino creates a web of constant desire and disappointment that drags *The Reader* deeper into the predominant plot to chase down the perfect book and way to read.

Calvino creates a universal desire for a perfect, unattainable book through the offhand comments of characters through the novel. In the readers interactions with Professor Uzzi-Tuzzi Ludmilla, the other reader, says books are definite, however the professor comments on page 72 that a perfect book can "only be thought, imagined". By directly countering Ludmilla's idea that books are defined ideas, he suggests that within reading there is some void, and that reading is more than what is on the page. He also suggests that each book is measured against this "imagined" perfect novel, a novel that is unattainable. In one of the final scenes of the novel, a reader at the library states on page 256 that all books "carry an echo, immediately lost" of his desire book and that despite all of his readings at the grand library "none is the story" (page 257). He too has an ideal or perfect novel in mind, and his reading is fueled by this dissatisfaction with all he's read and desire for his unattainable novel. Each is an echo to be measured against the original perfect. A book publisher, Cavedanga also comments on his desire

for the ideal book as he longs for the “ chicken coop of his boyhood” (102), Cavedanga’s daily interactions with the life and death of books have caused him to desire the carefree reading of his childhood again, in which the chicken coop served as his reading spot. He measures his current reading against his past, innocent reading, and seeks to find the same feeling he had as a child that is unattainable due to his work analyzing books. Ludmilla, the other reader, gives many offhand comments on her perfect book she’s searching for including that the book she desires has “ to pile stories on stories (92). As the reader’s ultimate desire is to please her, the romantic interest, the book becomes a chase to find Ludmilla’s perfect book. The entire novel builds up to finding the very book she desires, as each one not “ the one”. Through these offhand comments, Calvino creates each characters ideas of the perfect book and the motivations for their reading, the passion for reading is met with each characters disappointment as their expectations aren’t met.

Calvino’s syntax further draws out anticipation and enhances expectation throughout the novel. Short sentences such as on page 3 when the narrator says “ Relax. Concentrate.” Relieves tension and the sense of urgency. Through the pauses and one word sentences the reading is slowed and read without any urgency. This contrasts directly with alternating syntactic tension, creating a chase as there is relaxation then tension. Incredibly long sentences, such as one found on page 142 discussing the role of books in a household tease along ideas. In the sentence, the possible roles of books are listed, each plausible but not necessary correct. The paragraph length teases along with the anticipation of an answer, a final conclusion and resolution.

This alternating sythatic tension and loose sentances create a chase and relief, the desire and dissatisfaction so prominent throughout the novel. The longest idea of the book is the chapter titles, coming together to form one sentence measuring 70 words ending in the phrase " anxious to hear the story" (258). The sentence itself is about how the end of a novel is like death, but the more important part of this sentence being finished is that is one of the only resolutions of the entire novel. In a way, the chapter titles served as the longest unfinished idea in the whole book, and by tying them all together in the final chapter, Calvino finally satisfies the implied reader's desperate chase. By ending in " anxious to hear the story" Calvino also effective summarizes the whole idea of the book, the constant chase of ideas and the anxiety to hear the end. The alternating lose and tense sentences as well as the chapter titles being one extended sentence further enhance the desire for resolution and the sensation of the chase.

The broken, jarring structure of the novel further enhances the anticipation for a conventional ending and resolution of ideas. The narrator steps back to explain their reasoning, stating that a reader " may feel... cheated" (109) of a proper story. The stories structure of every other chapter being an entirely new book sets up a million paths, but never reaches a conclusion. These repeated unfinished ideas entice the main character and the other reader along their chase for resolutions. The structure is purposefully jarring, in that each story breaks off at the moment of climax or enticement and never returns to finish the idea. Each story is also written in a new style, some like a thriller or mystery, others like a traditional Japanese story. This frustration with incomplete story arcs and ideas leads to a frustration with the narrator

and author and the very novel itself. The narrator breaks up the reading within the stories as well, jarring the natural flow of each chapter with phrases such as “ watch out” on page 12, warning the reader that the story is sucking them in. As a result, each chapter doesn't necessarily read as a story, instead as a narrator describing the story, breaking up the natural flow and what is typically expected of both a narrator and reading experience, creating more frustration. The final line on the final page directly contrasts this lack of resolution and the jarring structure, as the reader says to his new wife, Ludmilla, “ I've almost finished” on page 260, referring to his reading of the novel “ If on a Winters Night a Traveler”. Through this, satisfaction and resolution is finally achieved, as so many stories have built up to this final conclusion. It is the final moment of satisfaction and resolution in a book filled with disappointment and desire. The overarching story comes together as the reader and the other reader become reader and reader and the chase has come to a close. This unique, jarring structure plays against the conventional expectations for reading and purposefully takes them away.

Disappointment in If on a Winters Night a Traveler comments on the true motivations for reading, that people who read come seeking conventional experiences and perfect resolutions. By taking this away, Calvino questions whether resolutions are needed in literature, as life doesn't have perfect resolutions and art should reflect life. Thus, this disappointment and questioning of the typical reading experience truly mirrors life, as life is not conventional. Calvino's unique approach to writing If on a Winter's Night a Traveler brings into question why society reads and what reading means to

society, interrogating the universal desire for the perfect book and the perfect resolution to life.