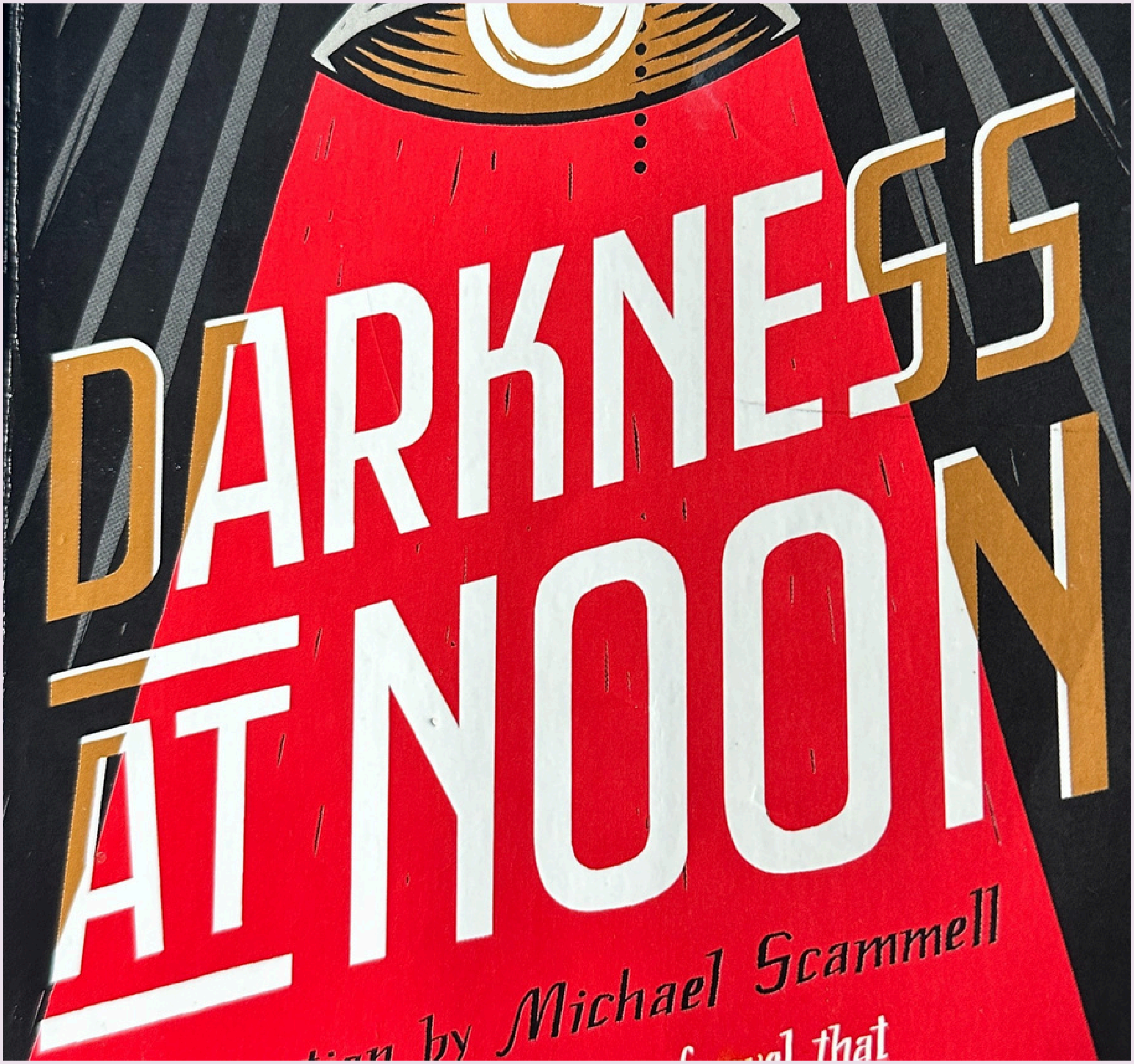
# Darkness at Noon

A Pens and Poison Study Guide


DARKNESS AT NOON
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# Overview

### *Overview*

*Darkness at Noon* is a book about the political dissident Nikolai Salmanovich Rubashov, a high-ranking member of the Party who finds himself imprisoned and accused of treason. We’re never told what party he’s a member of, or even what country the book is set in, but given the author’s own life and the parallels to the Stalinist purges of the 1930s, we can assume that the book is, if not set in, then at least heavily influenced by the Soviet Union and its intense political repression. One of the big giveaways of the Soviet influence is the character of “Number One,” the leader of the Party, whose portrait hangs in virtually every room in the novel. Number One is, of course, a parallel to Joseph Stalin, in much the same way that the pig Napoleon is a stand-in for Stalin in George Orwell’s Animal Farm.

### *Arthur Koestler: Short Biography*

Arthur Koestler was born in 1905 in Budapest, Hungary. He studied science and engineering before becoming a journalist; his journalistic career took him across Europe and sparked his interest and involvement in politics.

In the 1930s, Koestler joined the Communist Party, driven by a strong belief in its ideals and the promise of a better, more just society. But his experiences in the Soviet Union and the Spanish Civil War led him to see the stark contrast between the Party's ideology and its actions. In fact, the writer George Orwell, who wrote a similar critique of the Soviet regime, also fought in the Spanish Civil War, on the side of the “Reds,” or Republicans (the Stalinist-backed left-wing side), the same side that Koestler fought on. Both writers emerged from that war with deep criticisms of communism and the internal struggles they witnessed in the Communist party.

Koestler witnessed the brutal realities of totalitarian regimes, and this began to erode his faith in communism. His experience of incarceration and political persecution likely directly influenced the creation of Darkness at Noon and the experiences of his character Rubashov, whose journey partly mirrors Koestler's own. The novel critiques totalitarianism and is a reflection of Koestler's belief in the importance of individual conscience over blind obedience to the state.

# Characters

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**NIKOLAI SALMONOVICH RUBSHOV**

Our protagonist, Rubashov is a high-ranking member of the Party in an unnamed totalitarian state. Rubashov is a dedicated revolutionary and a former hero of the revolution, but he is arrested and imprisoned by the very regime he helped to erect.

**NUMBER ONE**

The anonymous leader of the party likely modeled after the USSR's Joseph Stalin. His portrait hangs in virtually every room in the novel.

**IVANOV**

Rubashov's first interrogator and old friend. A high-ranking official within the Party, Ivanov is both an intellectual and pragmatic character. He attempts to justify the party's harsh methods to Rubashov by invoking the net positive that these methods bring to the people and the state. Despite their past friendship, Ivanov and Rubashov approach each other somewhat coldly, as Ivanov's main goal is to extract a confession from Rubshov.

**GLETKIN**

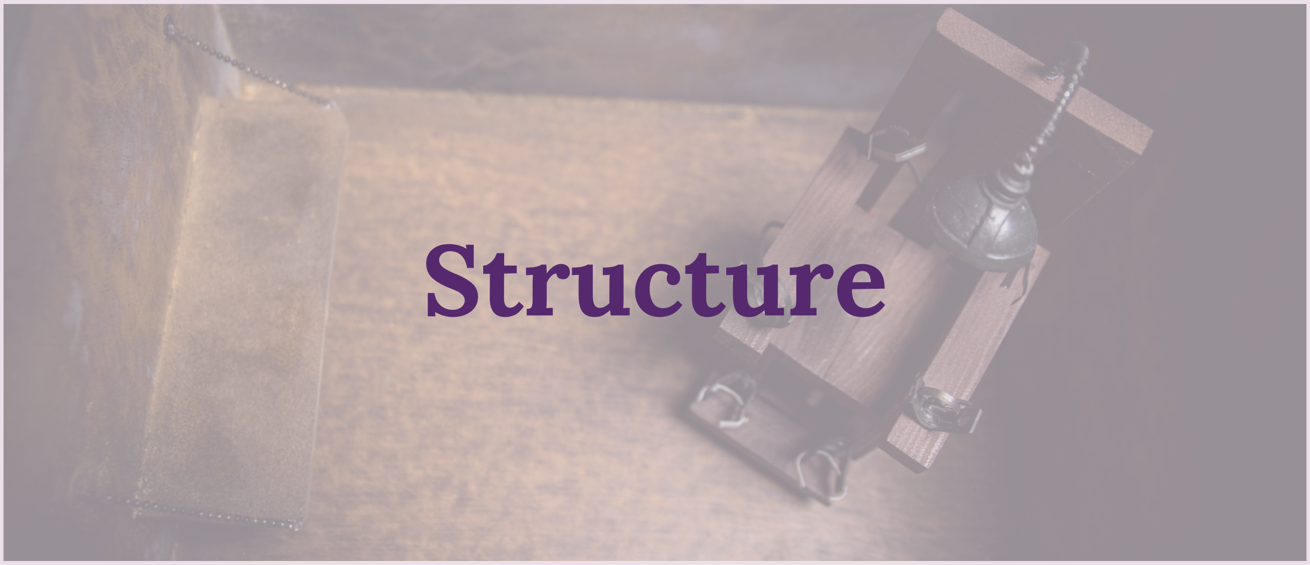
Gletkin is a younger, more zealous Party official who takes over Rubashov's interrogation in the third section of the novel. Unlike Ivanov, who represents the old guard of the revolution, Gletkin embodies the new, more ruthless generation of Party members who have never experienced life before the revolution. Gletkin comes from a lower-class background and is determined to obtain Rubashov's confession through brutal interrogation techniques.

**ORLOVA**

Orlova is Rubashov's former secretary and lover. She is a loyal Party member whom Rubashov ultimately sacrifices in order to save his own fate.

**NO. 402**

A fellow prisoner who communicates with Rubashov through the cell wall. No. 402 is a former aristocrat who is skeptical of Rubashov.



# Structure

## *Structure*

The novel is divided into three parts—three separate interrogations that Rubashov undergoes. The first part of the novel sets the stage for Rubashov's arrest and initial imprisonment—in fact, the "interrogation" itself doesn't occur until the very end of the section.

### PART 1

During part 1, Rubashov is interrogated by his old comrade Ivanov. Ivanov represents the old guard of the Party and shares a long history with Rubashov. As I was reading, I was actually surprised at some of the dialogue—to me, it felt more like philosophical discourse than an interrogation. Philosophical discourse and also psychological manipulation: in this section, Ivanov tries to persuade Rubashov to confess to the charges against him by arguing that doing so will not only be for the greater good of the Party but will also help him get off with a more mild sentence. Their encounter is marked by both nostalgia and a clash of ideals, as both men reflect on the revolution they once believed in.

### PART 2

During the second part of the book, we reach the second "interrogation," again between Ivanov and Rubashov. In this section, we meet Gletkin, who confers with Ivanov and has a slightly different philosophy with respect to Rubashov's interrogation. Gletkin believes in a more cold-hearted approach to the interrogation and urges Ivanov to resort to physical torture. Ivanov refuses and instead visits Rubashov in his cell to carry on their previous conversation. In part two, we learn about the death of Bogrov, another political prisoner, who was sentenced for a disagreement regarding optimal submarine size. Bogrov is an old roommate of Rubashov's; he is dragged in front of Rubashov's cell before his execution, and his last word is "Rubashov." This image begins to haunt Rubashov, and he reflects on the innocent lives that he has sacrificed for the sake of the Party, concentrating particularly on an old lover of his named Orlova, whose death he allowed in order to save his own guts. Orlova takes on a new vividness in his mind, and her death is humanized.

# Structure Cont'd

Horrified, Rubashov begins to develop a clear conscience and value system that was absent from his earlier character. As Ivanov comes into Rubashov's cell, he begins to mock Rubashov for these Christian values and argues that this sort of morality—what he calls "anti-vivisectional morality"—is no good for the progression of history. In his optimal vivisectional morality, human experiments are justified for the greater good of the Party and the state. Their conversation then alights on Dostoyevsky's famous novel *Crime and Punishment*. Rubashov argues that the psychological downfall of the novel's protagonist, Rodya Raskolnikov, demonstrates exactly the sort of morality system he has come to uphold, where each human life is valuable. Ivanov scorns this "Christian-humantiarian" thinking and leaves with the conviction that Rubashov is bound to capitulate and give him the confession that he has been after, for Rubashov is a "logical" person.

**PART 3**

In Part 3, we begin to see a dramatic shift in tone. During the third interrogation, Rubashov faces a different, more intense interrogation—this time not with Ivanov but with Gletkin. Gletkin embodies the new generation of the Party—he is cold, ruthless, and unwavering. Unlike Ivanov, Gletkin uses physical torture and relentless psychological pressure to break Rubashov.

Throughout the interrogation scene, an observation that Rubashov makes to a fellow prisoner rings clear: "We have replaced decency with logical consistency." Gletkin's insistence on absolute obedience and his lack of a personal connection to Rubashov underscore the regime's dehumanization of its opponents and the shift from ideological debate to sheer force. Gletkin deprives Rubashov of sleep and keeps him under an intense, blinding light. He brings out a fellow inmate, Harelip, who accuses Rubashov of planning the assassination of Number One—a false accusation that is clearly meant to save Harelip's own life. Rubashov recognizes Harelip as the son of an old professor friend of his and wonders about the lengths the Party will go to to extract confessions. He soon learns that his previous interrogator, Ivanov, has been shot to death for disagreements with the Party.

# Structure Cont'd

By the end of the third part of the novel, Gletkin has convinced Rubashov to sign his confession. By this point, Rubashov, physically and mentally exhausted, has no choice but to sign himself away to the Party. At this stage, we see a clear parallel to the Soviet show trials of the late 1930s, which inspired Koestler to write the novel. Rubashov's fate echoes that of Nikolai Bukharin, a Bolshevik leader whom Koestler admired and one of Stalin's most prominent ideological rivals. Bukharin himself confessed to crimes that he had not committed and was sentenced to death on March 13, 1938.

## THE GRAMMATICAL FICTION

In the final section of the novel, called "The Grammatical Fiction"—a term that refers to a concept where an individual's personal thoughts and beliefs are influenced by the ideology imposed on them by a totalitarian regime, a world in which the idea of "I" (think Ayn Rand's *Anthem*) is a grammatical fiction—Rubashov gives his final confession. Here, he comes to terms with the futility of his previous beliefs and the corrupt nature of the Party he once served. This section is deeply introspective: Rubashov wonders whether it is worth eliminating "senseless suffering" if it means an increase in "purposeful suffering" and concludes that such an experiment does not hold up when applied to mankind. Rubashov thinks that the equation prescribed by the Party does not seem to add up: under the party system, the definition of the individual becomes one million divided by one million and denies subjective consciousness. This sort of mathematical precision when applied to human beings echoes the ruminations of Dostoyevsky's Underground Man, who is responding to Nikolai Chernyshevsky's idea of human mathematical precision in his utopian socialist work *What Is to Be Done?* The title was later borrowed by Lenin in an early pamphlet on the Revolution. Within the revolutionary spirit, human beings are reduced to the sort of mathematical precision that both Rubashov and the Underground Man refute. Human beings are not works of logical calculus. Rubashov concludes that reason alone is a "faulty compass" that culminates in great darkness.

# Themes

## *Themes*

The Grammatical Fiction section does a great job of summarizing some of the themes that we see play out in the overall trajectory of the novel.

### INDIVIDUAL VS. COLLECTIVE

The most important theme that we see throughout the novel is the idea of the individual versus the collective, which is embodied in the idea of the grammatical fiction itself. Throughout the novel, Rubashov begins to realize the importance of the individual, and he pronounces the word “I” for the first time toward the end of the book. Rubashov eventually realizes that the Party, which he once viewed as infallible, is deeply flawed, yet following his interrogations, he has no choice but to capitulate to it.

### MORALITY

We see Rubashov becoming painfully aware of a sort of old-guard morality system in his appeal to Raskolnikov’s moral conscience in *Crime and Punishment*.

While Ivanov believes in what he calls “vivisectional morality,” where all human beings are meant to be experimented on for the welfare of the state, Rubashov starts to believe in the value of each individual life through an appeal to a Judeo-Christian moral conscience.

The epigraph to the third interrogation is a quote from Matthew that succinctly sums up the morality theme that runs through the third section:

*“But let your communication be,* Yea, yea*;* Nay, nay*: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil.”*

In this passage in the New Testament, Jesus explains that "yes" and "no" should be binding words—if you say you will do something, you should do it. The epigraph highlights the duplicitous nature of political discourse within a totalitarian regime.

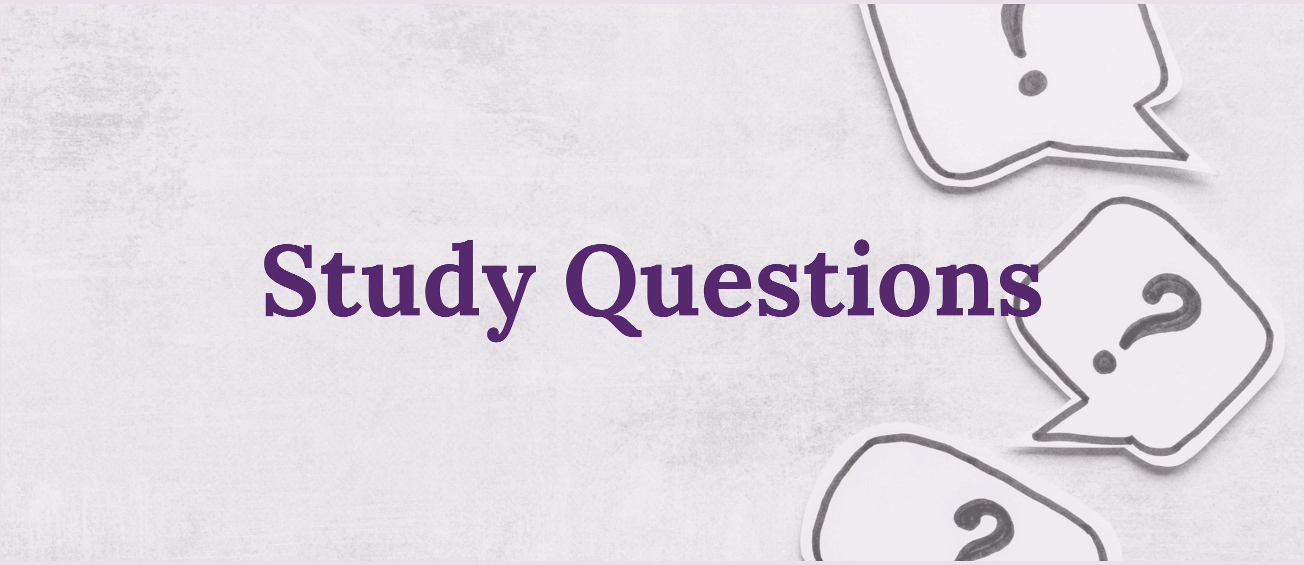
Rubashov faces moral complexity and ethical decay—there are no more clear moral boundaries for what the party believes in.

# Themes Cont’d

The party system denotes the erosion of the concepts of good and evil that have long been present in a historical Western morality system. Without an understanding of good and evil, or perhaps with a deliberate scorning of these concepts, the party is free to undertake whatever malicious actions it sees fit.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL MANIPULATION

The dynamic between Rubashov and his interrogators, Ivanov and Gletkin, is central to the novel. Ivanov, an old friend, represents the old guard of the revolution, while Gletkin embodies the new, ruthless generation. Ivanov's interrogative approach is more philosophical, relying on psychological manipulation, whereas Gletkin uses physical torture and relentless pressure. This contrast highlights the shift in the Party's methods and the increasing dehumanization within the system. Both methods ultimately leave Rubashov feeling helpless and ready to give in.



# Study Questions

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1. How might Rubashov’s journey relate to our time?
2. Why must Rubashov confess to uncommitted crimes, and how does he reconcile himself to this?
3. What is the significance of the title *Darkness at Noon*?
4. Why does Little Löwy commit suicide?
5. Why does Harelip betray Rubashov?
6. Why does Rubashov betray Orlova?
7. Why is Ivanov shot to death?
8. Why doesn't Koestler ever identify the USSR in the book?
9. What is the significance of the “Grammatical Fiction”?