Leaf by Niggle

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF J. R. R. TOLKIEN

J. R. R. Tolkien was born in Bloemfontein, South Africa in 1892 before leaving for England, the home country of his parents, at the age of three with his mother and brother. His father passed away in Bloemfontein before he could join them. Tolkien spent the rest of his childhood in Worcestershire, England and was brought up as a Catholic by his mother, who died when he was 12 years old. At the age of 16, Tolkien began a relationship with Edith Bratt, whom he married in 1916. During his engagement to Edith, Tolkien completed a degree in English language and literature at Exeter College, Oxford. He delayed enlistment in the British Army, which was at that time fighting in the First World War, but he was eventually commissioned and posted to France. After contracting trench fever in 1916, he was sent back to England and began to create the mythology of his fictional world that would eventually form the setting of *The Silmarillion*, *The Hobbit*, and *The Lord of the Rings*. He became a professor at Oxford in 1925 and completed *The Lord of the Rings* during his tenure before retiring in 1959, having found fame as an author. Tolkien died in 1973 at the age of 81.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

After "Leaf by Niggle" was published in the Dublin Review, it was printed alongside Tolkien's essay, "On Fairy Stories," in the book *Tree and Leaf*. Through both parts of this book, Tolkien demonstrated his theories of fantasy and his approach to writing, which also included his philosophy that true creation could only be the work of God while the creative attempts of humans, which he called "sub-creation," were works that mimicked or praised God's creation. It's also theorized by many scholars that "Leaf by Niggle" is not only an allegory for the journey from mortality to the afterlife, but an allegory of Tolkien's life specifically and his tendency to focus singularly on his creative projects while procrastinating more mundane and practical tasks.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Tolkien wrote "Leaf by Niggle" a few years after the publication of his first book, *The Hobbit*, a fantasy novel for younger readers featuring a three-foot-six protagonist called Bilbo who is perhaps even crankier than Niggle. Tolkien's following three-volume novel, *The Lord of the Rings*, is set in the same fictional universe as *The Hobbit*, as is his posthumously published volume of mythology, *The Silmarillion*. The representation of the afterlife in "Leaf by Niggle" is in some ways similar to the Christian ideas of paradise mentioned in the Bible, particularly in the Book of Revelation. The same year that "Leaf by Niggle" was published, C. S. Lewis, a friend of Tolkien's, published a novel with a similar focus on the afterlife—though with more explicit theological references—called *The Great Divorce*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Leaf by Niggle
- **When Written:** 1938–1939
- **Where Written:** Oxford, England
- **When Published:** 1945
- **Genre:** Short story, Fantasy
- **Setting:** The countryside, the Workhouse, and the land of Niggle's painting
- **Climax:** Niggle's character is judged by the Voices, who send him to the "next stage."
- **Antagonist:** Niggle's acquaintances (particularly Councillor Tompkins), who focus only on productivity and deny the value of art
- **Point of View:** The story is told in first person by an unnamed, omniscient narrator who mostly uses the third-person perspective to narrate Niggle's life.

EXTRA CREDIT

Zero Revisions. Though Niggle labors over each brushstroke of his painting, endlessly perfecting his work (much like a writer working on countless drafts), this particular story came to Tolkien fully formed. In the Note he provided for the first edition, he wrote that he "awoke with [the story] already in mind" and could see the image of Niggle's tree even as he lay in bed.

Allegory or Myth? Tolkien made his dislike for allegory clear and was uncomfortable with readers interpreting his stories symbolically. But "Leaf by Niggle" might be an exception—though in one letter he wrote that the story was more "mythical" than allegorical, in another he wrote that he intended it to be an allegory for purgatory.

PLOT SUMMARY

Niggle knows he must soon go on a long journey, but he's reluctant to prepare for it. He'd rather focus on finishing **his painting**: a vast canvas with a huge tree and a background of forest and **mountains**. But he's finding it hard to concentrate because his neighbor, Parish, keeps asking for favors. The laws

of Niggle's country order him to complete practical tasks and run errands, and Niggle doesn't mean to disobey them, but he finds himself procrastinating the more mundane activities to make time for his painting.

One day, while Niggle works on his canvas, a man called the Driver arrives and orders Niggle to leave with him immediately: it's time to begin his journey. Niggle has not prepared at all and can only take a small bag with him, containing some painting supplies and no clothes or food. The Driver takes him to the station, where he boards a train to the Workhouse. At the Workhouse, Niggle is assigned never-ending tasks involving hard physical labor. When he has worked to the point of exhaustion, the doctor orders absolute rest in the dark of his cell.

Niggle feels he's been lying in the dark forever when he begins to hear two distinct voices. The two voices are debating Niggle's quality of character, and whether he deserves to move on to the "next stage." The First Voice is harsher, detailing Niggle's many failures to help others or complete his tasks, but the Second Voice argues that Niggle made the best effort he could to follow the laws of his country. They decide that Niggle deserves to move on from the Workhouse.

The next morning, Niggle leaves the Workhouse and boards another train. When it stops, he alights to find a bicycle with his name on it. He rides it through the landscape and discovers, to his shock, that it resembles the land of his painting, including the huge tree, the forest, and the mountains in the distance. He feels the urge to tend to the land and to build a cottage and a garden—and he knows he needs Parish's help to do so.

As if summoned by Niggle, Parish appears nearby. Together they begin to cultivate the land and build the cottage. One day, after they have finished their work, Niggle decides he will go on a long walk. Parish goes with him. They walk until they reach the foot of the mountains, where a shepherd comes down to meet them. Niggle knows it is time to follow the shepherd into the mountains; Parish stays behind to wait for his wife.

Back in the old country, some of Niggle's acquaintances argue about the significance of his work. Councillor Tompkins declares Niggle's paintings of the natural world to be useless, but Atkins decides to frame a single leaf from Niggle's tree and frame it, later donating it to the Town Museum. The Museum is burnt down, however, taking with it the final trace of Niggle's life. Meanwhile, the two Voices decide it's time to name the land of Niggle's painting, where they've been sending more and more people to convalesce after their time in the Workhouse. It transpires that the Porter has already decided upon a name: "Niggle's Parish."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Niggle – Niggle is the protagonist of the story. He lives in the countryside and wants to spend all his time painting, but he feels bombarded by the requests of others and the practical tasks he must tend to. He doesn't really fit in with the people around him: his preoccupation with **his painting** means his garden and house are unkempt, and he's not interested in what others deem useful or productive. Niggle isn't altogether unkind or antisocial—he helps his neighbor, Parish, even when it's inconvenient for him—but requests for help often seem to him like inconveniences. Niggle's time in the Workhouse forces him to reflect on his tunnel-visioned mindset, and he regrets being so caught up in his own work that he neglected the world around him. The transformation of his character is evident when he reaches the "next stage," the land that resembles his painting, and dedicates himself to the practical tasks of building a homestead and tending to the land, understanding now that beauty is not only dreamed up but also cultivated physically. Niggle's growth allows him to feel ready to head into **the mountains** with the shepherd at the end of the story, and his positive influence on others is finally proven by the use of his land as a place for many others to convalesce before climbing the mountains themselves.

Parish – Parish is Niggle's only neighbor in the countryside. At the beginning of the story, he is more of a hassle than a friend to Niggle, constantly asking him to run errands and only valuing **Niggle's painting** as a source of wood and canvas. He has an injured leg and depends on Niggle to complete physical tasks, though at times he appears to use this as an excuse to take advantage of his neighbor. When Niggle ventures into town on Parish's behalf to fetch the builder and the doctor, he (Niggle) becomes too sick to finish his painting. While Parish is a hurdle to Niggle's creativity in the first part of the story, Niggle eventually realizes that Parish's gardening knowledge and practical skills are invaluable, so he calls upon Parish while creating a paradisal land after his time in the Workhouse. Parish's transformation is almost the opposite of Niggle's. When he reaches the land of Niggle's painting, he is finally able to appreciate the beauty that Niggle has imagined, and he spends his time basking in it rather than burying himself in the tasks with which he once filled his days.

Parish's Wife – Parish's wife lives with Parish in the house next to Niggle's home. She refers to Niggle in an offhand way as "that Mr. Niggle" and is perhaps slyer than Parish himself in taking advantage of their neighbor. It's clear that Parish is devoted to her, given that he stays behind to wait for her when Niggle goes into the mountains with the shepherd.

The Inspector of Houses – The Inspector of Houses is an especially tall man who comes to visit Niggle. He, like all visitors, is perceived as a nuisance by Niggle, doubly so because his purpose is to ensure that everyone is working to maintain the houses in the neighborhood. Like everyone else who encounters **Niggle's painting** in its canvas form, he thinks only

of how the materials can be used for construction and repair, further highlighting the fact that in this society, art is barely valued.

The Driver – The Driver is a strict and mysterious figure dressed in black who comes to collect Niggle for his dreaded journey. He is focused only on ensuring that Niggle makes it to the station in time for his train, and he rushes him along without allowing him to gather any important items. A comparison could easily be made between the Driver and the Grim Reaper, a character from many cultures' mythologies who shepherds souls to the afterlife.

The Porter – The Porter first appears on the platform at the station where Niggle gets off the first train. Instead of yelling the name of the stop, he yells Niggle's name, implying he has some knowledge of Niggle and his journey. The second time they meet is when Niggle is leaving the Workhouse and getting on his next train. The Porter acts as a guide more than a typical station porter, and his specific connection to Niggle is quite uncanny, emphasizing the story's fantastical elements.

The Doctor – The doctor tends to Niggle at the Workhouse. When Niggle first arrives, the doctor treats him harshly, prescribing bitter medicine. But at the end of Niggle's time in the Workhouse, the doctor gives him a bottle of tonic, some salve for his hands, and a train ticket. The doctor's character is a vehicle for Tolkien to demonstrate that Niggle's endurance of rough treatment is rewarded by gentleness.

First Voice – The First Voice is one of the two Voices Niggle hears when he is ordered to rest after his long stint of hard labor at the Workhouse. The Voices discuss whether Niggle is ready to move on to the "next stage," something the First Voice, the harsher critic of the two, is doubtful of. The Voice is "more severe than the doctor's" and focuses on the mistakes Niggle made during his life in the countryside. However, it seems to yield to the Second Voice, suggesting that it holds less authority to decide the cases of those in the Workhouse.

Second Voice – The Second Voice is one of the two Voices that discuss Niggle's character and decide whether he deserves to move from the Workhouse to the "next stage." It is gentler than the First Voice and focuses more on Niggle's genuine efforts to abide by the laws of his country and help his neighbor. The First Voice mentions that the job of the Second Voice is to "put the best interpretation on the facts," and it yields to its decision, implying that the Second Voice holds the authority to decide the verdict of each case. This distribution of power implies that, in general, the gentler and more empathetic approach to judging others is perhaps the fairer one.

The Shepherd – The shepherd appears when Niggle ventures to the foot of the **mountains** after he has finished tending to the land of his painting. He offers himself to Niggle as a guide and reveals that he knows about the life Niggle led before arriving in this new land, further emphasizing the mystical element of the story and suggesting that one's actions and attitudes in life bear a degree of importance in the afterlife.

Councillor Tompkins – Councillor Tompkins is an official of high importance from Niggle's town. At the end of the story, he discusses Niggle's life and work with Atkins—another one of the townspeople—and dismisses **Niggle's painting** as "private day-dreaming." Tompkins does not find much value in art except if it has been created to share information or aid productivity, and his authority suggests that this is a view held by many townspeople. His character is further revealed when Atkins reminds him that his second residence is actually Niggle's old house and that, instead of showing gratitude, Tompkins only complains and criticizes. Ultimately, his character betrays the society's dismissive views of art, but at the same time suggests that these views are not themselves virtuous. In other words, brashness and greediness go hand in hand with a disregard for creative endeavors.

Atkins – Atkins is a schoolmaster who, at the end of the story, discusses Niggle with Councillor Tompkins. He is more sympathetic towards Niggle and disagrees with Tompkins when he suggests that Niggle was useless before going to the Workhouse. Atkins finds more to appreciate in **Niggle's painting** than Tompkins does, and he even frames a corner of the painting and donates it to the Town Museum. Atkins's relative gentleness and thoughtfulness suggest that there were people around Niggle who saw him for more than an odd little man. Atkins thus stands in stark contrast to Tompkins, and through him, Tolkien suggests that gentleness and sympathy are qualities also found in someone who finds value in art.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Perkins – Perkins is the third member of the conversation involving Councillor Tompkins and Atkins at the end of the story, appearing only to say that he never knew Niggle painted.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

THE VALUE OF ART

"Leaf by Niggle" examines the different ways that people conceive of art, ultimately underscoring the intrinsic value of beauty. There is a dramatic contrast between the reception of **Niggle's painting** in the old country and the way it is appreciated by those leaving the Workhouse. In Niggle's life as a painter, he is the only one who cares about his creative work. When others notice the huge

canvas, it is because they are looking for building materials to repair Parish's house: they cannot see the painting for what it is. Even in Niggle's imagination, the ideal person to admire and commend his work is actually just another version of himself, implying that he's well aware of the lack of interest others have in art. Because there's no public pension for artists, his attempts to complete his most treasured work are constantly interrupted by the necessity to maintain his land and accept visitors. And after Niggle goes on his journey, his art is dismissed by most of his acquaintances, particularly those with higher standing in society like Councillor Tompkins, who calls Niggle's painting "[p]rivate day-dreaming." Tompkins says he would respect Niggle's work if it had any use, suggesting that in this society, art for the sake of beauty is not seen as having any sort of value. Only Atkins, a schoolmaster with less influence than Tompkins, makes an effort to preserve Niggle's work. He donates a single framed leaf, which hangs in an obscure spot in the town museum until the museum burns down—an act that in itself displays this society's lack of care for creative offerings.

While Niggle's work is erased from the collective memory of his old country, the complete, animated, inhabitable version of his masterpiece becomes a kind of equivalent to paradise and is used as a place of convalescence for people who complete their time at the Workhouse. Even Parish, once he finds himself in the world of Niggle's creation, expresses delight at its beauty, though he previously only showed interest in the painting because of its raw materials. Niggle finds no reward or acclaim for his creative work before his journey, then, but in the paradisal part of his life, its value is profound. In this way, Tolkien suggests that though capturing beauty and producing art in a world of practical demands is difficult and unrewarding, such efforts are often still worthwhile, since art is invaluable on a spiritual level.

THE AFTERLIFE

Tolkien's depiction of Niggle's journey can be interpreted as an allegory for death and what happens after. The journey looms over Niggle's life, and he is reluctant to prepare for it. Indeed, any preparations he does make are halfhearted and ineffective, and he ends up being forced to make the journey with only a tiny bag of painting supplies—no clothes, food, or anything particularly useful. He's not able to finish **his painting** before the Driver comes to take him to the station. Similarly, the idea of death and all its uncertainty—when it will arrive, how to best prepare, and what will happen after—looms over every person's life. The only certain element is that the "journey"—or death—will arrive at some point.

Niggle's unwillingness to go on his journey is mainly because he wants to have enough time to complete his painting. However, when he is let out of the Workhouse and reaches the "next stage," he sees that the land he has been trying to paint has been fully realized, and it's more alive and beautiful than he ever could have painted it. In turn, Tolkien suggests that death is perhaps not an end point but a pathway to something even more beautiful—and, ultimately, that there's no way to know this until we experience it ourselves.

CREATIVITY VS. PRACTICALITY

Although "Leaf by Niggle" celebrates the inherent value of art, the story also acknowledges the importance of living and working practically within a functioning society. Niggle's priorities as an artist are completely at odds with the expectations and rules of the surrounding society. He doesn't place much value in practical tasks during his life, building a shed for **his painting** on top of what used to be his potato patch and calling his neighbor (Parish) "Old Earthgrubber" for caring so much about gardening. Even in the Workhouse, distinct from Niggle's old country, his assignments of hard labor are intended to help him realize that his preoccupation with painting got in the way of his obligations to others and to the land, which suggests that the laws of the old country are not simply superficial but are real, spiritual virtues that are valued even after death. After what feels like centuries in the Workhouse, Niggle begins to wish he had focused more on the practical tasks required of him during his life, like repairing the tiles on Parish's roof. His endless hours of practical tasks—carpentry, digging, cleaning—in the Workhouse seem to erase his preoccupation with creativity. Even so, he is not truly satisfied by a purely practical existence; even though he is kept busy completing his tasks, he does not find pleasure in his days. The story's depiction of paradise is the idea of creation as a living thing, represented by the land Niggle enters when he is let out of the Workhouse. In the land that resembles an animated, completed form of his painting, he is compelled to carry out practical tasks to build a pleasant life for himself and for Parish. The story therefore suggests that to be fulfilled, one must work both creatively *and* practically, thus cultivating the conditions for beauty and creativity to flourish in the first place.

ACTIONS VS. INTENTIONS

Throughout his mortal life, Niggle struggles to align his true desires with his actions. While he often completes tasks for his neighbors and general errands (as demanded by the laws of his country), he resents the obligation to do so and would always rather be working on **his painting**. He is not hard-hearted, and in fact he cares about the people around him, but only enough to feel that he *should* help them—not enough that he is eager or happy to do so. One of the criticisms the First Voice makes of Niggle when deciding whether to move him to the "next stage" is that he complained about the tasks he was asked to carry out and treated them as "interruptions." In turn, the First Voice essentially suggests that

people should not only be judged on their actions, but also on the strength of their intentions—what matters, in this context, is whether they are genuinely *willing* to help others. However, the Second Voice proposes that Niggle made a reasonable effort to follow his country's laws and that his virtue showed through in his lack of expectation for a reward. It's implied, then, that virtue can be found in a person's overall willingness to do the right thing, no matter how hard they find it or how reluctant they may be. This, the story seems to suggest, might be a more realistic expectation to hold people to, since it accounts for the fact that humans are often flawed but still ultimately capable of doing the right thing.

THE NATURAL WORLD

Throughout "Leaf by Niggle," Tolkien emphasizes the natural world as both an object of beauty and a source of pleasure, though it's often overlooked by those who value productivity. Niggle fixates on **his painting**, which depicts a huge tree with a background of a forest and mountains. The tree, though a painting, seems to grow organically, "sending out innumerable branches, and thrusting out the most fantastic roots." Even though Niggle has built his painting shed on top of the potato patch and doesn't care very much about tending to the earth, nature has nevertheless found a way into his creative practice. Councillor Tompkins mocks Niggle's preoccupation with leaves and flowers, which he refers to in a utilitarian way as the "digestive and genital organs of plants"—yet these are the things that furnish Niggle's Parish and allow many people to recover their health after spending time in the Workhouse. What's more, Niggle himself finds true happiness when the nature he strove to perfect in his painting meets his own care for the earth, and he takes the time to plant real flowers around the roots of his live tree. Tolkien suggests that nature's beauty persists, whatever value humans may ascribe to it, and that it can bring great pleasure if properly tended and appreciated.

SYMBOLS

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

NIGGLE'S PAINTING

Niggle's painting symbolizes the creative process as something that's both organic and laborious. The painting is of a huge tree in a landscape of forests and **mountains**, and the tree seems to have a life of its own, growing larger and housing families of birds. When Niggle attempts to paint the mountains, it's as if he can already see them: the picture exists somewhere out there, and he's just trying to capture it. The painting can be understood to represent creativity as something that grows wild—not simply dreamt up by a single person but inspired by the world around them.

Niggle never completes the painting to look the way he imagines. After he goes on his journey, the canvas meets an unceremonious end, with only a tiny corner of it framed and hung in a museum that is soon burned down. However, its image is fully realized in living form in the land Niggle reaches after the Workhouse, and he is able to complete it by tending to the land. When the painting is brought to life not only for Niggle to enjoy but as a resting place for many who leave the Workhouse, it comes to symbolize the unpredictability and aliveness of the creative process: one cannot always have complete power over the final form of their creation.

THE MOUNTAINS

The mountains, which feature both in **Niggle's painting** and in the land he enters after leaving the Workhouse, symbolize the unknown that follows death. Niggle struggles to paint the mountains perfectly, not quite able to work out the right slant of light on one of the peaks. Yet he knows that the mountains exist somehow outside of his painting, in the distance. And when he leaves the Workhouse and enters the land that resembles his painting, the mountains are indeed there in the distance. Similarly, it's not clear to humans what might happen when we die: the reality of death definitely exists in the distance, but its exact details are unknown. Furthermore, Niggle's feeling that he is trying to capture the image of the mountains, rather than trying to dream them up himself, suggests that one can strangely intuit certain elements of paradise (or whatever follows death) in everyday life.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Harper Collins edition of *Leaf by Niggle* published in 2016.

Leaf by Niggle Quotes

❝ He had a number of pictures on hand; most of them were too large and ambitious for his skill. He was the sort of painter who can paint leaves better than trees. He used to spend a long time on a single leaf, trying to catch its shape, and its sheen, and the glistening of dewdrops on its edges. Yet he wanted to paint a whole tree, with all of its leaves in the same style, and all of them different.

Related Characters: Niggle

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

This passage describes Niggle's painting habits, suggesting that he is creatively ambitious but not particularly technically gifted. His abilities are better suited to detailed work—that is, painting leaves better than the whole trees they are attached to—but his desire is to paint something both vast and detailed. It's also clear from this passage that Niggle has an eye for natural beauty and is dedicated to capturing it to a standard of perfection, with all its dew and sheen.

The description of Niggle spending a long time on each single leaf emphasizes his tendency to immerse himself in his work, perhaps to the detriment of other tasks that he ignores or forgets about. It's implied that Niggle's goal to paint a tree full of leaves that are similar but different is an unreachable one, and yet his effort and perseverance mean that he won't stop trying to reach this goal.

There was one picture in particular which bothered him. It had begun with a leaf caught in the wind, and it became a tree; and the tree grew, sending out innumerable branches, and thrusting out the most fantastic roots. Strange birds came and settled on the twigs and had to be attended to. Then all round the Tree, and behind it, through the gaps in the leaves and boughs, a country began to open out; and there were glimpses of a forest marching over the land, and of mountains tipped with snow.

Related Characters: Niggle

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is a description of the painting that Niggle devotes himself to finishing before he has to leave on his journey—though that's not something he ends up achieving, at least not in painted form. The suggestion that the picture "bothered" Niggle, and the depiction of it as a growing thing, along with the description of birds coming to live in it, suggest that the painting isn't confined to the canvas or to Niggle's imagination, but somehow has a life of its own.

The painting is ever growing and revealing itself to Niggle, which is surprising because he's the one painting it. Yet it seems like he's drawing from an image that already exists, working hard to see and then paint the land beyond the tree. The land and its creatures also seem like they're from a world outside of Niggle's everyday life—the birds are strange, perhaps exotic, and Tolkien personifies the forest to bring it to life and make it move. This descriptive passage suggests that in his painting, Niggle has access to a world beyond his own, and is faced with the impossible task of transforming that world into a painting.

When Parish looked at Niggle's garden (which was often) he saw mostly weeds; and when he looked at Niggle's picture (which was seldom) he saw only green and grey patches and black lines, which seemed to him nonsensical. He did not mind mentioning the weeds (a neighbourly duty), but he refrained from giving any opinion of the pictures. He thought this was very kind, and he did not realise that, even if it was kind, it was not kind enough. Help with the weeds (and perhaps praise for the pictures) would have been better.

Related Characters: Niggle, Parish

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 14-15

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Niggle's neighbor, Parish, has come to visit him in order to request a favor. Niggle has a difficult relationship with Parish, because they don't see eye to eye about the value of art, nor do they share a love of gardening: Niggle is caught up in his painting, and Parish finds it hard to look past Niggle's unkempt garden to even notice his huge painting.

There are plenty of phrases in parentheses here, which makes the narration sound a bit cheeky and sly—a clue as to how Niggle feels about Parish's behavior. Though Parish thinks he's being subtle and respectful by not saying anything about Niggle's painting, Niggle is bothered by Parish's willful ignorance about his art and annoyed by the fact that Parish only criticizes his garden without offering to

help with it.

The description of what Parish sees when he looks at Niggle's painting—patches and lines in green and grey with no form or beauty—is probably how most of Niggle's acquaintances feel about the painting, too, given none of them say anything to him about it either. It's a sign of how little this society values art—they cannot even understand what is being depicted—but also of Niggle's limited ability as an artist.

"At any rate, poor Niggle got no pleasure out of life, not what he had been used to call pleasure. He was certainly not amused. But it could not be denied that he began to have a feeling of—well satisfaction: bread rather than jam.

Related Characters: Niggle

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 24-25

Explanation and Analysis

This passage describes Niggle's mindset after spending a long time in the Workhouse—such a long and tedious time that he can no longer tell how many months, years, or even centuries have passed.

After being assigned a huge load of physical labor and focusing on practical tasks for an indescribably long period of time, this passage reveals that Niggle is enjoying his life less than he was in the old country. The difference between the two lifestyles is that, in the old country, Niggle was able to put off practical tasks to make time for his painting. It's clear that his painting was the "jam" of his life—the pleasure, and the thing that gave his days variety (or flavor!).

For a long time now, though, his days have been empty of painting and full of hammering, digging, and fixing. These are the kinds of tasks that he was expected to complete in his life in the old country, but it becomes obvious during his time in the Workhouse, where he has had no way to procrastinate, that if he spent his life this way, he wouldn't have enjoyed it much.

The passage does suggest, however, that this kind of life isn't exactly *awful* for Niggle. He does feel satisfied, and can survive this way, on the "bread" of his efficiency and practical skill. It's implied that perhaps a life that balances the two kinds of work, the creative and practical, might be the happiest kind of life for Niggle: a life of bread *and* jam.

"What was the matter with him?" said a Second Voice, a voice that you might have called gentle, though it was not soft—it was a voice of authority, and sounded at once hopeful and sad. "What was the matter with Niggle? His heart was in the right place."

"Yes, but it did not function properly," said the First Voice.

Related Characters: First Voice, Second Voice (speaker), Niggle

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

This passage depicts the two Voices discussing Niggle's life and his worthiness to move forward to the "next stage." The two Voices have different tones and attitudes: while the First Voice is harsh and critical, the Second Voice is gentler and more sympathetic to Niggle.

After the two Voices evaluate Niggle's life, it appears that he failed in some way, and it's implied that that's the reason he ended up in the Workhouse. But his failure is a mystery to the Second Voice, who suggests that Niggle tried his best and acted with good intentions. The First Voice's claim that Niggle's heart didn't work the way it should have suggests that the Voices do not only judge a person based on their intentions, but whether those intentions led to the right actions. Niggle may have wanted to be a helpful, caring, and useful person in his society, but sometimes he was not able to complete the tasks required of him—and this could be something that prevents him from moving on to the "next stage," depending on the Voices' judgment.

"Could you tell me about Parish?" said Niggle. "I would like to see him again. I hope he is not very ill? Can you cure his leg? It used to give him a wretched time. And please don't worry about him and me. He was a very good neighbour, and let me have excellent potatoes, very cheap, which saved me a lot of time."

"Did he?" said the First Voice. "I am glad to hear it."

There was another silence. Niggle heard the voices receding. "Well, I agree," he heard the First Voice say in the distance. "Let him go on to the next stage. Tomorrow, if you like."

Related Characters: Niggle, First Voice (speaker), Parish, Second Voice

Related Themes:

Page Number: 28-29

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the First Voice has noticed that Niggle was listening to their conversation and has asked for Niggle's opinion. Instead of trying to argue in his own favor or defend himself against their criticisms, Niggle asks the Voices about Parish.

It's a surprising passage, because when they were neighbors, Niggle didn't think much of Parish except to decide that he was a bother, and though he ran errands for him—sometimes extravagant ones—he was never completely happy about it. But after such a long time in the Workhouse, Niggle's care and concern for his neighbor has begun to show through. This suggests that his punishment, or imprisonment, in the Workhouse has had the intended effect of forcing Niggle to look outside of himself and his painting obsession.

It's this revelation of concern for Parish that seems to tip the Voices' judgment in Niggle's favor. After he asks after Parish, the Voices decide that he is ready to leave the Workhouse and receive some "gentle treatment."

> Before him stood the Tree, his Tree, finished. If you could say that of a Tree that was alive, its leaves opening, its branches growing and bending in the wind that Niggle had so often felt or guessed, and had so often failed to catch. He gazed at the Tree, and slowly he lifted his arms and opened them wide.
>
> "It's a gift!" he said. He was referring to his art, and also to the result; but he was using the word quite literally.

Related Characters: Niggle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Niggle is seeing the tree he devoted his time and attention to as a painter in a tangible, living form for the first time, after cycling through the landscape of the new country he's arrived in after leaving the Workhouse.

This is the moment when Niggle feels his creativity come to fruition. The image that he yearned and struggled to capture is right in front of him, and exactly as he imagined it. This confirms that Niggle was working on a painting that he could never really finish, because its true, complete form is as a living landscape.

Niggle's sense of familiarity is a sign that he did achieve something as an artist—he was able to envision, and in some way recreate, a beautiful image. He recognizes in this moment, however, that his art was only a piece of the living thing he sees in front of him: its animated form is something he is given or rewarded with, a result of his artistic efforts but not the product of his sole effort.

> You could go on and on, but perhaps not for ever. There were the Mountains in the background. They did get nearer, very slowly. They did not seem to belong to the picture, or only as a link to something else, a glimpse through the trees of something different, a further stage: another picture.

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

This passage describes the landscape Niggle has found himself in. It resembles his painting, and the experience of walking through it is almost like being in a painting rather than a real place—the beauty of things in the distance, their distant quality, remains no matter how close Niggle gets to them.

The mountains are the exception to this rule. Niggle senses that the mountains don't truly belong in the world of his painting, or even in the world that his painting has produced. They have an air of a different world, and their importance is emphasized by the fact that they seem to grow nearer to Niggle, which suggests that one day, he will climb them. It's unclear what it's like in the mountains, or what happens to someone when they walk in that direction, but it's implied that they represent a vital and inevitable stage of Niggle's journey.

One day Niggle was busy planting a quickset hedge, and Parish was lying on the grass near by, looking attentively at a beautiful and shapely little yellow flower growing in the green turf. Niggle had put a lot of them among the roots of his Tree long ago. Suddenly Parish looked up: his face was glistening in the sun, and he was smiling.

Related Characters: Niggle, Parish

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

This passage describes the way that Niggle and Parish coexist in the new land they live in together. It's evident that their roles have reversed. Niggle is now the one focused on planting, building, and caring for the physical world in practical ways; meanwhile, Parish has begun to pay attention to the beauty around him, and takes the time to rest and appreciate the little details—the ones that Niggle was more likely to have focused on in their old life as neighbors.

Just as the new land has been a gift for Niggle, it seems like it's a gift for Parish as well. His joy at being in such a beautiful place is clear from his earnest expression and his almost childish way of lazing around in the grass. It's implied that while Niggle's time in the Workhouse enabled him to appreciate the value of practical tasks and tending to the world around him, Parish's time there may have allowed him a better understanding of how beauty and art can make a life happier and more exciting. The two can now live in harmony, perhaps because they have a better understanding of each other's previous preoccupations and have found a happy middle ground.

"Of course, painting has uses," said Tompkins. "But you couldn't make use of his painting. There is plenty of scope for bold young men not afraid of new ideas and new methods. None for this old-fashioned stuff. Private daydreaming. He could not have designed a telling poster to save his life. Always fiddling with leaves and flowers. I asked him why, once. He said he thought they were pretty. Can you believe it? He said *pretty*! 'What, digestive and genital organs of plants?' I said to him; and he had nothing to answer. Silly footler."

Related Characters: Councillor Tompkins (speaker), Niggle

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 40-41

Explanation and Analysis

This passage appears after Niggle has left his new country to go into the mountains with the shepherd, and functions as almost a kind of flashback to the life he led in his old country. Councillor Tompkins, an influential figure in Niggle's old town, is making it clear how he felt about Niggle and his painting. His criticism of Niggle is based on the idea that art is useless unless it can be used for informational purposes. Therefore, in Tompkins's opinion, Niggle was a silly time-waster whose obsession with painting the details of plants meant that he was not a useful part of society.

Tompkins's dialogue implies that he cannot believe Niggle thought leaves and flowers were pretty, or perhaps that he couldn't understand the importance of beauty. His opinion on art is presumably held by most people in Niggle's society—but the reader has already witnessed Niggle living in the beautiful world of his painting before reading what Tompkins has to say. Subsequently, Tompkins's opinion seems rather silly and short-sighted. He has no idea of the reward that creativity can bring, because he is focused only on judging whether someone has used their time productively in the short-term. In the end, it seems, such pragmatism isn't what matters most.

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.

LEAF BY NIGGLE

Niggle is reluctant to prepare for a long journey he knows he'll have to set out on. He would rather spend all his time painting. But the laws of his country dictate that he must spend his time on other tasks, and his neighbor, Parish, keeps requesting his help with various errands. Every now and then, Niggle remembers he needs to pack for his journey and tries to prepare—but he's not very thorough, and he doesn't make much progress.

Niggle's reluctance to pack for his journey, and the halfhearted effort he makes when he does try to pack, suggest that the journey is both scary and unclear. Niggle doesn't want to go, partly because he wants to paint, but also because he's not really sure what the journey will entail, or how he should prepare for it.

Niggle has a number of paintings he hasn't finished, mostly because they require a level of skill he doesn't have. One painting particularly preoccupies him: a **painting** that began with a single leaf and has now grown into a landscape with a huge tree and a vast background of a forest and **mountains**. To house this painting, he has built a shed on the patch of land where he used to plant potatoes. He decides that this tree is his one "real picture"—the one he needs to complete before he goes on his long journey.

The fact that many of Niggle's paintings go unfinished implies that he's not a particularly exceptional painter. But he obviously takes painting very seriously, because the placement of his shed is a clue that he cares about his painting much more than he cares about practical tasks like gardening. The description of the tree as having grown from a single leaf suggests that it's an organic, living thing as much as it is a painted picture.

One day, Niggle stands back from his **painting**, trying to decide what he thinks of it. He feels at once that it is both beautiful and "wholly unsatisfactory." What he wants most is for someone to praise the painting and provide him with a public pension so that he can complete his work without needing to tend to other tasks. There is, of course, no public pension for Niggle to work on his art. Just as he begins to focus on completing the tree, more and more interruptions spring up in the form of errands, visitors, and favors for Parish, who has a bad leg.

Niggle has conflicting feelings about his work: while he thinks he has done a good job, no effort he makes will be good enough. This suggests that the image he is trying to capture on his canvas is so beautiful or vast that it is nearly impossible to be painted. That there is no public pension for artists is a further clue that the society Niggle lives in places very little value upon art.

Niggle wishes he could refuse his visitors and turn down Parish's requests, but he finds himself unable to say no to anyone. He halfheartedly carries out his duties and welcomes his visitors, who comment on the state of his neglected garden. Hardly any of Niggle's acquaintances are aware of his **painting**, though even if they were, they probably wouldn't find it very impressive. They begin to wonder when he'll finally leave for his journey.

Niggle is so torn between completing his painting and being a good host and citizen that he seems unable to do either very well. His life is essentially split into two unsatisfying halves: the half that involves doing his social duty, and the half that he spends alone on his painting. These two isolated halves of Niggle's life are separated even more by the fact that none of his acquaintances appreciate his painting.

One day at the beginning of autumn, Niggle is in his shed, working on his **painting**. As he attempts to perfect the light on the peak of a distant **mountain** on the canvas, he considers his imminent journey. He has only just enough time to finish his painting. Even then, parts of it will barely resemble his vision. He hears a knock at the door: it's Parish. Niggle doesn't like Parish much: he asks for too many favors and doesn't think much of Niggle's painting. (Parish places more value on gardening—something Niggle doesn't spend much time on.) But Parish is Niggle's "only real neighbor," and Niggle feels obligated to help him.

Niggle can't get the light on the mountain right because he already has an image, however fleeting, of how it should look. This implies that the mountains exist somewhere outside of the painting, and Niggle is not making them up but attempting to depict them accurately. Parish presents a strong contrast to Niggle, caring little about painting and a lot about gardening—the opposite of Niggle. His presence is always a reminder that Niggle has tasks to do that he would rather put off.

Parish explains that his wife has fallen ill and his house has been damaged by the stormy weather. He asks for Niggle's help to fetch the doctor and the builder. Parish only seems to notice Niggle's **painting** when he mentions his need for wood and canvas to patch the hole in his roof. Niggle, ignoring the request for materials, nevertheless offers to go into town to ask for the doctor and the builder, sacrificing precious painting time.

Parish pays special notice to Niggle's painting materials when he mentions fixing his roof, suggesting that he cares much more about the practical uses of things than the attempt to create something beautiful with them. This also emphasizes that Parish doesn't think of Niggle as a painter, but rather sees him as someone who happens to live next door and is useful as a helper.

Niggle rides into town on his bicycle to ask for the doctor and builder. It's wet and windy, and the sun is going down. As he rides, he sees visions of his **painting** and feels waves of frustration at losing his chance to finish it. Now that he has left the shed, he can envision how to paint the mountaintop perfectly—but he worries he won't have time to make it happen.

The terrible weather on Niggle's journey highlights the degree of effort he is making in order to help his neighbor, however reluctant he is to do so. Also, the fact that he can only clearly visualize the way his painting should look when he is far away from it is a hint that the image exists in a much larger and more substantial form than just on his canvas.

Niggle returns home from his errand with a fever from the cold rain. The next day, the doctor visits not only Parish's wife but Niggle, too. While Niggle is sick, he imagines leaves sprouting in his mind and on the ceiling. Parish doesn't visit him, and neither does Parish's wife, who recovered quickly from her cold and is now busy cleaning up the flooded house. Left to himself, Niggle has to crawl out of bed to find something to eat.

Niggle's illness further emphasizes the sacrifice he made in going to get help for Parish and his wife. Parish doesn't reciprocate Niggle's thoughtfulness, and it's clearer than ever that Niggle is quite a solitary man, having to look after himself even when he is sick. Niggle's vision of leaves sprouting emphasizes the hold his painting has on his mind: he is obsessed with completing it.

After about a week, Niggle is well enough to get up. He goes out to the shed to continue his **painting**, but as soon as he begins, there's a knock on the door. The Inspector of Houses has arrived and tells Niggle that his neighbor's house is not in an acceptable state. He says that Niggle should have helped to repair Parish's house with the canvas, wood, and paint he's using for his art, and adds that the law places priority on houses rather than on paintings.

The appearance of the Inspector makes it clear that the authorities in Niggle's country are much more concerned with the details of buildings and infrastructure than they are with matters of art and creativity. The Inspector suggests, much like Parish did, that Niggle should use his painting tools in a more practical way—in effect, he should sacrifice his art in order to be more useful to society.

When Niggle begins to protest, another man enters the shed. He is almost identical to the Inspector and introduces himself as the Driver. He tells Niggle he has come to collect him for his journey, which starts today. Niggle begins to feel ill again and weeps when he realizes he will not be able to finish his **painting**. As he leaves with the Driver, the Inspector mentions that they will at last "make some use" of the canvas that Niggle has now "finished with."

The Inspector's words as Niggle leaves his shed hint at the fact that Niggle and his painting were not thought of very highly by those around them: the painting was taking up space and using resources that could have had more practical uses. Now that Niggle is leaving, they can finally do what they wished with his belongings.

The Driver tells Niggle he should have prepared for the journey earlier, and he gives him no time to pack. Niggle takes a little bag from the hall as he leaves, which contains only some paints and sketches. They arrive at the train station, and almost as soon as Niggle boards the train, it enters a dark tunnel and he falls asleep.

Niggle's failure to properly prepare, and the ill-suited choice he makes of a bag to take with him, highlight the fact that he has no idea what kind of journey he is about to go on. The train moving into the dark tunnel suggests it is entering a new, more ominous world.

Niggle wakes up to find that the train has stopped in a large station. Instead of calling out the name of the stop, the Porter yells Niggle's name. In his hurry to leave the train, Niggle forgets his little bag on board, and when he turns around to get it, he finds the train has already gone. The Porter tells him he is headed to the Workhouse. Niggle, still feeling unwell, faints on the platform.

The feeling of confusion upon Niggle's arrival at the station is highlighted by his hurry to leave the train, and his forgetfulness. To add to this, the Porter yelling Niggle's name is unusual and mysterious, suggesting Niggle has entered a world in which he and his life will be paid close attention.

Niggle is taken to the Workhouse Infirmary. The medicine he takes is bitter, and his only interactions are with "unfriendly, silent, and strict" officials and attendants and a "severe" doctor. Niggle is given tedious and difficult tasks, he's not allowed outside, and even the windows look inwards—he feels he is in a prison rather than a hospital. It seems like whole centuries are passing. For the first long stretch of time, he dwells on the past, regretting his reluctance to help Parish and the fact that he didn't finish his **painting** in time. Eventually, though, he forgets the details of his past life and focuses only on his Workhouse tasks.

The details of Niggle's time in the Workhouse add up to a harsh experience, and imply that he is undergoing a period of punishment. Niggle does not know when the punishment will end, and eventually he has been laboring in the Workhouse for so long that he can no longer tell how many years have passed. It seems that the intention of this punishment is to make him forget his obsession with painting and the failures of his life in the old country, which he does as he comes to accept the seemingly endless life he now lives.

Niggle becomes more efficient in the completion of his tasks, and he experiences a kind of satisfaction in place of pleasure, in a "bread rather than jam" way. But as soon as he begins to get some proper rest, the officials change his schedule, assigning him work more tedious and difficult than before. Niggle works until he is completely exhausted, with no thanks from anyone. The doctor visits and orders him to rest in the dark.

Niggle's mindset is described as "bread rather than jam," which suggests that without being able to paint or do anything he enjoys—instead spending his time on practical tasks—he is satisfied enough to survive, but there is no flavor, or excitement, in his days.

When Niggle has been lying in the dark long enough to have completely lost track of how much time has passed, he hears voices nearby—perhaps in a room next door. They sound like the voices of a medical board or a court, and they're discussing "The Niggle case." There are two distinct voices. The First Voice is harsher, while the Second Voice is gentler but still commanding, "at once hopeful and sad."

The distance of the voices suggests Niggle is not really invited to this conversation: it's more like he's eavesdropping. This gives the conversation of the Two Voices an even more mysterious feeling. The different attitudes of the Voices suggest that the trial they're conducting is, in a way, unbiased—or at least approximately balanced.

The Voices are trying to decide what should happen to Niggle—if he should stay on in the Workhouse or move to the "next stage." The verdict seems to rest on the question of what Niggle did wrong in his life to turn out relatively unremarkable, unsuccessful, and unprepared for his journey. The First Voice argues that Niggle's heart "did not function properly" and his head "was not screwed on tight enough," partly because of the way he neglected the tasks demanded of him by the law. The First Voice therefore suggests that he should stay at the Workhouse longer.

The First Voice's arguments suggest that this judgment takes into account Niggle's attitude toward his tasks, and that his attitude and private thoughts were witnessed and recorded over the course of his life. The First Voice is ruthless in its judgment, and seems to hold Niggle to an impossible standard of perfection.

The Second Voice is more sympathetic to Niggle, referencing the unique charm of his paintings and his tendency, however reluctant, to help Parish with his errands without expecting any reward. The Second Voice proposes that Niggle be given "gentle treatment," in large part because of the sacrifice he made when he rode to town for Parish instead of completing **his painting**.

The Second Voice's argument implies that there was indeed value in Niggle's creative endeavors, and that unique artistic expression is a positive trait. The Voice's main argument, though, suggests that self-sacrifice, however grumpy or reluctant, is a very significant sign that a person deserves "gentle treatment."

When Niggle hears that he may be given "gentle treatment," he blushes and hides in his blanket, feeling that he doesn't deserve the praise the Second Voice has given him. The First Voice notices Niggle's reaction and realizes he has been listening to the debate. He asks Niggle if he has anything to say, to which Niggle responds by asking about Parish, expressing concern for his leg and a desire to see him again. When he finishes speaking, the two Voices move away from him, and he hears them agree to allow him to move to the "next stage."

Niggle's reaction to the Second Voice's compliments is the clearest display of his vulnerability throughout the story. It's a sign that his time at the Workhouse has helped to remove layers of pride, self-absorption, and crankiness, and this is further proven by Niggle's refusal to talk about himself when questioned, instead displaying his concern for his neighbor.

The next morning, Niggle wakes up to a more pleasant situation. His cell is lit by the sun, there are comfortable clothes (not a uniform) laid out for him, and the doctor treats his sore hands, giving him a bottle of tonic and a ticket for the train. Niggle leaves the Workhouse and, to his surprise, finds himself alone on a windswept hill. He descends the hill towards the train station.

Before this day, Niggle's cell window didn't even face the outdoors, so the fact that sunshine is coming through it now is another suggestion that the Workhouse is at least slightly fantastical. The change in treatment is so sudden that it implies Niggle was only being treated harshly as a test: now that he has passed it, his gentle treatment has begun.

At the station, the Porter recognizes Niggle immediately and directs him to a clean, bright train with only one car. The car is empty. Niggle asks the Porter what the train's destination is, but the Porter only tells him, "You'll find it all right." Niggle boards the train, which seems to arrive at his stop very soon after leaving.

This train's brightness and cleanliness imply that it will be headed to a pleasant destination, and that the train has appeared for Niggle alone. It's a sign that the next part of his journey will be happier than the last.

Niggle climbs the flight of steps from the train to the top of a hill, where he sees what looks like his old bicycle, which is labeled with his name. It's a beautiful day, and he jumps on his bike and rides off down the hill. The landscape feels strangely familiar, as if it's from his own dream. He looks up to see a tree—the tree from his **painting**—and is so shocked that he falls off his bike.

Niggle can recognize the landscape as he moves through it, even though it's from his two-dimensional painting. This suggests, once again, that his painting was not simply imagined, but a depiction of a real place that already existed—or at least, Niggle was so immersed in it that it became real to him.

Niggle exclaims that the tree is a "gift." Its leaves are a mixture of the leaves he actually painted and ones he only imagined, along with leaves he hadn't even had *time* to imagine. Some of the most beautiful leaves appear to have been created "in collaboration" with Parish. Niggle notices that the tree is home to birds' nests, and some of the birds are flying into the forest (the forest from his **painting**), beyond which are the **mountains** Niggle painted and imagined.

The painting is a "gift" because it has truly become its own being, now living and made of elements Niggle did not even work on himself. It is as though the time and effort he spent on painting the tree has been rewarded and added to, and now he has been given the opportunity to witness his painting come to life.

Niggle walks into the forest, realizing that even as he walks into the distance, it retains the quality of being distant "without turning into mere surroundings." However, the **mountains** in the distance slowly get closer, and they seem to signify the start of another picture: "a further stage." Niggle explores the forest, noticing everything in detail, and he plans how to begin working on the land.

Though everything in the distance remains distant and endlessly explorable, the mountains are unique in the fact that they appear to grow closer. This suggests that the mountains represent an altogether different kind of place, a place Niggle must reach at some point.

Niggle realizes that he does not know much about tending to land and needs Parish's help. As he settles down to begin working, he sees Parish in the distance. Niggle calls out to Parish, who walks towards him with his spade, still limping a little from his bad leg. They begin to work happily together, agreeing wordlessly where to build the house and garden and walking around arm in arm. It becomes apparent that Niggle is strangely more invested in the practical tasks of building and gardening while Parish spends more time wandering around, looking at the trees. Parish thanks Niggle for "putting in a word" for him so that he could pass into Niggle's forest. Niggle says that it's the Second Voice who deserves thanks.

This is the moment in which Niggle realizes Parish's value. Niggle's time as a painter and his time in the Workhouse come together, and he understands that in order to support the growth and completion of this beautiful place, he must learn how to tend to it practically—something he never valued in his time in the old country. Conversely, when Parish appears, he has made the opposite realization, and is now aware of the beauty that surrounds him when previously he spent all his time working busily.

At first, Niggle and Parish occasionally disagree and grow tired. They each find they've been given a tonic, which, when taken with water from the spring, renews their energy. They each only need a few doses of tonic before they stop using it. Parish's limp disappears.

The tonic appears to be a miraculous kind of medicine, allowing both Niggle and Parish to fully recover from their long periods of hard work, and curing Parish's limp that once profoundly affected his quality of life.

Niggle finds himself looking to the **mountains** more and more. On the evening that he and Parish complete their work on the land, they go for a long walk and reach the foot of the mountains. A shepherd walks down the slope to them and asks if they want a guide to lead them. Niggle feels that he wants to, and should, go on, but Parish does not yet feel ready: he wants to wait for his wife.

The draw of the mountains is inevitable, and they are the next step for Niggle, who feels that he is ready and must go on. However, it's not a scary prospect to go into the mountains, emphasized by the presence of the shepherd who offers his services as a guide.

Parish asks the shepherd what the country they're in is called. The shepherd tells him it's called Niggle's Country. When Parish is surprised that the land has come from Niggle's imagination, the shepherd tells him that Niggle had been working on **his painting** of it for as long as they knew each other, but Parish had not paid it any attention. Niggle forgives Parish for his ignorance: he was not particularly kind himself when they were neighbors.

Parish's surprise is representative of his disregard for Niggle's creative preoccupation in the old country: no matter how many times Parish must have seen the huge canvas, he cannot recognize the image for its beauty until he finds himself in the midst of its living form. This further cements Parish's character as one who lives in the physical world, rather than one who dwells in his imagination like Niggle can.

Niggle bids Parish farewell and looks back at the blossoming tree one last time before turning to walk into the **mountains** with the shepherd.

Niggle's last act before venturing into the unknown is to look at the tree that he devoted his life and afterlife to, emphasizing once again that this creation and vision was central to his existence.

Back in Niggle's old country, a few of Niggle's acquaintances discuss the importance of his life. Councillor Tompkins thinks Niggle was worthless and useless, while Atkins, a schoolmaster, questions what Tompkins means by the word "use." Tompkins replies, "No practical or economic use." If he were in charge, he would have "put [Niggle] away" early on. Atkins asks Tompkins whether he thinks painting has any value, and Tompkins replies that paintings might have value if they're useful, but paintings like Niggle's are nothing more than "private day-dreaming."

The conversation between Niggle's acquaintances is another reminder that neither Niggle nor his painting were appreciated or understood by the society he lived in. Their conversation once again highlights the harsh reality of that society, especially as a particularly influential figure is claiming that he'd rather have people like Niggle—who procrastinated and spent their time creatively—sent away than to have them wasting resources that could be used practically.

Perkins, another acquaintance, joins the conversation to break up an impending argument. When he asks who they're talking about, Tompkins tells him it's someone unimportant—but Atkins points out that Niggle's old house is now Tompkins's second residence, so perhaps Niggle does not deserve to be disregarded. When Perkins learns who they're discussing, he mentions that he didn't know Niggle was a painter. Their conversation is probably the last time Niggle is mentioned in his old country, but Atkins frames a single leaf from **Niggle's painting** and gives it to the town museum. It hangs for a while in an inconspicuous place until the museum burns down, taking with it the last trace of Niggle's life.

Perkins's ignorance of Niggle's identity as a painter highlights yet again the fact that Niggle did not have a particularly wide social circle, or at least that his painting did not have a wide reputation. This is also suggested by the demise of Niggle's painting—reduced to a tiny piece of its once-vast canvas and then burnt down with the rest of the Town Museum, it's merely one of many pieces of art that are not valued by this society.

Meanwhile, the two Voices discuss the success of Niggle's Country as a place of convalescence for many people before they journey into the **mountains**. It has been so effective that the Second Voice has sent increasing numbers through the region. The First Voice suggests that they decide on an official name for the place, and the Second Voice replies that the Porter has already chosen one: "Niggle's Parish." He tells the First Voice that when Niggle and Parish learned about the Porter's choice, they laughed so loudly that "[t]he Mountains rang with it!"

Niggle's importance is ultimately realized and celebrated in the naming of the land that resembles his painting, which implies that his time and effort spent on the painting and on the land itself were rewarded. However, the description of Niggle and Parish laughing about the name implies that the two of them are no longer caught up in their own importance, and are completely satisfied with the lives they've lived.

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