

Angle of Repose Study Guide

Angle of Repose by Wallace Stegner

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Plot Summary

Angle of Repose by Wallace Stegner is a Pulitzer Prize winning novel about marriage. It is told by a former college professor and historian who looks at his grandparents' lives in search of a reason for the success or failure of a marriage.

Lyman Ward is confined to a wheelchair for he suffers from a bone disease and has had to have his leg amputated. His wife left him, while he was convalescing in the hospital. She left a note informing him she was leaving him for his surgeon. This has left him bitter and defeated. Lyman has moved into his grandparents' home in an effort to go through his grandmother's papers and write a novel about her life. She had a fascinating life as a writer and artist in the middle to late 1800s. What starts as a novel about her life turns into an examination of her marriage.

Lyman's grandparents, Susan and Oliver Ward, had a difficult and troubling marriage, but stayed together for sixty years. Lyman looks at their lives and how they dealt with tragedy, infidelity, long separations, and jealousy to come to an understanding about his own life. He is helped in his endeavors by a young college dropout who has left her husband because of his infidelity. Together they look through his grandmother's papers and learn about themselves, while Susan Ward tells her story through letters she wrote to her best friend.

Lyman learns that marriage is difficult no matter the era or one's age. His grandparents made mistakes and he tries to learn from those mistakes to help him not become bitter toward his ex-wife. Lyman wants to learn to forgive her so that he can release his burden and be a better person.



Part 1 - Chapter 1

Summary

The narrator is introduced. Lyman Ward is an older man who is confined to a wheelchair. He has moved into his grandparents home to sort through his grandmother's papers. Lyman wants to write a book about his grandmother's life. She was an author and artist who settled in the West with her husband when the West was first being settled. His son Rodman is worried about his father being so far from him. They argue that Lyman needs someone to take care of him. Rodman does not think having a couple living in a cottage near the house and preparing Lyman's dinner and helping him bathe and prepare for bed is enough assistance.

Lyman was a history professor who wrote books on the Western frontier. His wife has left him and he has become confined to a wheelchair for he has had to have part of one leg removed.

Analysis

Lyman Ward is trying to recover from his personal tragedies by submersing himself in his grandparents' lives. His son worries that Lyman cannot take care of himself, but only makes Lyman feel smothered and coddled by his son. The two have different personalities and Lyman does not like his son. He finds Rodman pushy and not accepting of his father's independence and need to have something to occupy his time. Rodman has no respect for history and Lyman finds nothing more important than history.

Vocabulary

incompetent, renovate, flux, imitate, cumulative, scruples, familial, antecedents, existential, organic, hydroponic, derision, manifesto, malgre, beneficences, peripheral, fathoms, antiquarian, pious, renunciation, antimacassar, vitality, cicatrices



Part 1 – Chapters 2 & 3

Summary

Chapter 2: Lyman starts going through his grandmother's papers. First are some of her unpublished reminiscences written when Susan Ward was in her eighties. She looks back at her friendship with Augusta Drake. Augusta belonged to the old aristocracy of New York. She spent her girlhood abroad and spoke three languages. Susan met her at the art school she attended in New York. Lyman sees a lesbian relationship between the two young girls.

Susan lives with a friend of her family's in New York. They have receptions one of which is where she meets Oliver Ward. He is going west to gain experience as an engineer and asks if he may write her. She consents, but mentions nothing of him to Augusta.

Chapter 3: Lyman hires a woman to help him organize his grandmother's papers, but finds her tiresome. He takes on his caretaker's, daughter, Ada, to help him. She is home after leaving her husband. Lyman wants her to be discreet with what she learns helping him. In the mornings, he talks into his recorder getting his thoughts down for the day. In the afternoons, he has Shelly come to go through the papers.

Analysis

Lyman starts going through his grandmother's papers. He is surprised by her apparent lesbian relationship with her friend Augusta. The two obviously love one another and corresponded for over fifty years. Lyman has trouble finding someone to help him sort through the papers. Confined to his wheelchair and unable to move his head, he finds it difficult to organize the papers. Fortunately Ada's daughter, Shelly, is home and willing to work for him. He has reservations about her, but gives her a chance.

Vocabulary

delusive, solidity, querulous, anodynes, incipient, stigmata, appall, inexorable, ophidian, reverberate, tedious, contrite, resolute, volition, lament, aversion, petrified, immunity, ambiguous, aghast, frantic, rebuke, subordinate, discreet



Part 1 – Chapters 4 & 5

Summary

Chapter 4: No letters from Oliver Ward to Susan have been saved. Lyman does not know how one evening's acquaintance ripened into a tacit engagement through five years of absence. While Oliver is out west trying to prove himself, Susan is meeting famous people and receiving commissions for her artwork. She is enjoying herself.

Thomas Hudson joins Augusta and Susan in friendship. Lyman feels at this time Susan was not interested in marriage. She had her career, Augusta, and Thomas. Susan's family is relatively poor so she puts a higher value on gentility. Thomas is ambitious and is the assistant editor of Scribner's, a literary journal. When Susan discovers Thomas is in love with Augusta, she does not move to New York as she was planning, but goes home to Milton. Susan may have had thoughts of having Thomas for herself, but she would also be losing Augusta to Thomas. Two days after learning of Augusta and Thomas' engagement, Oliver writes to tell her he is coming home from the West. He stays at Susan's parents' house.

Chapter 5: Susan's parents like Oliver. Oliver asks Susan to marry him. Lyman feels the timing was perfect because Susan was smarting at the split of her friends. Augusta and Thomas promised that their happy threesome would not be split by their marriage, but Susan believed otherwise. Augusta is upset by Susan's engagement. Augusta has not met Oliver and has never heard Susan speak his name. Augusta feels Susan is marrying Oliver to spite her and Thomas. She resents Oliver for taking Susan away from her and refuses to meet him. Augusta never accepts Oliver and she and Susan agree not to talk about him more than necessary.

Analysis

Susan is happy with her life in New York. She has Augusta and Thomas to go to art galleries and restaurants. The three are inseparable until Thomas declares his love for Augusta. Thomas grew up poor and is ambitious so it makes the reader wonder if he chose her for her money. Susan is as poor as he is, so she could not offer him the position in society that Augusta does. The split leaves room for Oliver to come and make his intentions known. Susan is vulnerable and does not know what the future holds. Augusta rails against the marriage for she is jealous of a man she has never met and I am sure no man will ever be good enough for her Susan.

Vocabulary

tacit, litigate, bough, convention, impropriety, aspirant, ostensibly, platonic, imprecision, integrity, condescension, epicene, attenuate, decorous, effusions, neuralgia, turmoil,



excursion, incorrigible, strategic, tableaux, tannic, receptive, defection, paragon,
sublimate, aghast, serge, bombazine, permanence, desolate, abate, disposition, diligent



Part 1 – Chapters 6 & 7

Summary

Chapter 6: Susan and Oliver are wed. Augusta did not attend. She had her first child a month before and said she was not well enough to travel. Susan writes letters to Augusta apologizing for her husband. Lyman finds it aggravating that she speaks of her husband in an unflattering way to her friend. He believes Susan bows down too much to what Augusta thinks and feels. After their marriage and honeymoon, Oliver leaves Susan at her parents' house to prepare a house for them in New Almaden in California. Susan hires a servant to take west with her. The girl was abused by her husband and has a seven-month-old baby and is eager to go west. Oliver finally sends word the house is done, but sends no money for her train fare. Susan must use money from her savings to pay for her and the servant girl's fare. Her parents are against this, but she is eager to go west to see her husband.

Chapter 7: Lyman goes into town to see the doctor. He does this to show his son that he is taking good care of himself. He sees an old friend from high school. Lyman tells him he has a bone disease and is restricted to a wheelchair.

Analysis

Susan is dismayed she must pay her own train fare out west. It shows Oliver in a bad light for her parents are worried that he cannot or is unwilling to provide her train fare. It is a shaky start to their life together. Oliver will have to explain himself when Susan sees him. The reader learns why Lyman is confined to a wheelchair. He has a bone disease that caused the loss of his leg.

Vocabulary

nemesis, ambitious, deference, desolate, lubricity, sanctuary, reticence, continuity, obliterate, assiduous, diffident, incorrigible, adequate, premonition, monotonous, jargon, acquaintance, interchangeable, stroboscopic, subliminal, rejuvenation, fixation, astride, placate, persecution



Part II – Chapters 1 & 2

Summary

Chapter 1: Susan arrives in New Almaden. It is a mining camp that houses Cornish, Mexican, and Chinese workers. The manager of the mine lives in an area known as the Hacienda. Oliver finds this area too close to too many people. He has built Susan a home away from everyone else. The cottage is built from the sketches she and Oliver mailed back and forth to one another. Susan fears Oliver will spoil her. She believes this even more so when he gives her a dog to protect her when he is not around.

Susan asks him about the train fare. Oliver did not have the money to send her. The manager of the mine changed his mind about paying for the building of their house so all of Oliver's money went into building a home for Susan. Mr. Kendall, the manager of the mine and his wife visit the Wards. Oliver believes it is because Susan is an artist and makes New Almaden look classy. Susan does not care for the Kendalls and believes she will not like the people in New Almaden.

Chapter 2: Susan is happy with Oliver until she receives a letter from Augusta saying her baby has died. Susan then feels like an exile for she cannot go to her friend and comfort her in her time of need. Susan only has Oliver for company so is lonely in her new home. She does not have anything in common with the other wives and they find it more comfortable socializing with Lizzie, Susan's servant, than Susan. Susan is homesick and believes they will be in the west only until Oliver gains experience and then they will return East.

Analysis

Susan is happy when she first arrives in New Almaden. It is like an adventure. She is getting to know Oliver and they are starting their lives together. Susan is lonely in the mining camp because no one shares her interests in art and literature, but she is happy to be with Oliver. This happiness is burst by Augusta's news of the death of her child. Susan then feels the expanse of space that is between her and her friend. What was an adventure turns into exile. She convinces herself she and Oliver will only be out west for a short time and New Almaden will not be her permanent home.

Vocabulary

strenuous, excursion, vigorous, competent, precipice, effete, askew, obscurity, sullen, samovar, solicitous, inevitable, sacque, despotic, echelons, boisterous, charivari, picturesque, verification, simultaneous, diphtheria, implacable, drivel, inexorabilities, furtive, pallid, forebode, idyll, malicious, incongruities, extortion, barbarous, abject



Part II – Chapters 3 & 4

Summary

Chapter 3: Susan has Lizzie deal with any of the men from the camp who bring wood or do chores for them. Susan works on a commission from a publisher to do the drawings for *The Scarlet Letter* to help her pass the time. She uses Lizzie as her model for Hester Prynne. Lizzie is more at home here than Susan is and has made friends with the women in the camp. Oliver brings a new engineer to dinner. He is Austrian and he and Susan spend the evening discussing art and literature. Susan is perturbed that Oliver says little. Oliver later tells her that Kendall wants to make the man Oliver's assistant, but Oliver thinks him better for supper parties than a mine. Oliver had to push him out of the way of falling debris when he paid no attention to the call to move. Oliver teases her claiming the man fell in love with her. Susan is pregnant with their first child.

Chapter 4: Augusta gives birth to a child thus losing her despondency over her first child's death. Susan releases the anxiety she felt for her friend and is happier. They have a few visitors, but spend most of their time alone together. Susan appreciates Oliver doing his job well. Thomas sends a letter requesting Susan write an article about New Almaden for Scribner's. She contends she is not a writer, but takes on the new challenge. She thinks Thomas will publish her story because he is her friend, so she writes another one and sends it to the Atlantic. This will prove to her whether she is actually talented or if Thomas is just humoring her.

Analysis

Susan is enjoying her time in New Almaden. She receives a few guests and gets to talk of art and literature. She is happy being pregnant with her first child. Susan takes on the new challenge of writing with gusto and because she feels Thomas would not give her an honest assessment of her writing to sends another story out to get a second opinion.

Vocabulary

moiré, wallow, illusory, mirage, banal, insolent, aggrieve, nonentity, torpid, stoicism, manifestation, prostrate, apathetic, luxurious, allude, placid, amniotic, effable, exquisite, reverence, apparition, eccentric, transcendental, meticulous, increment, obsolete, attenuate



Part II – Chapters 5 & 6

Summary

Chapter 5: Oliver has been redesigning hoisting equipment to be used in the mine. It is a major achievement and Susan is proud of him. Oliver makes arrangements for her to have someone help her take care of the baby when it comes. His mother has recommended Marian Prouse and he promises Susan it is no extravagance for the comfort of Susan and his child is worth it. Susan's stories are accepted by Thomas and the Atlantic proving to Susan she has talent. Susan gives birth to a boy. She had some trouble so has to stay in bed awhile. Susan balances her work as an artist and caring for her new son.

Chapter 6: Mr. Prager is visiting the mining camp. He is one of the mine's directors and also married to Oliver's cousin. Oliver received his job at the mine due to Mr. Prager's influence. Mr. Prager asks Susan to join him and Oliver in the mine. He feels it will help her as an artist. Susan is reluctant for Mr. Kendall does not like women in the mine. Mr. Prager, however, is insistent and she goes into the mine with the men. She finds it scary, but fascinating. Oliver is well liked by the men, while Kendall is hated. Kendall is standoffish to the men, while Oliver listens to their problems.

Analysis

Oliver is doing well at his job and receiving praise for his work. Susan is also doing well in her work and everything is good for them. Susan is able to work as an artist and writer, while taking care of her son and sees that Oliver is respected by his men and enjoys success. They are both enjoying this time in their lives.

Vocabulary

precedent, patent, extravagance, efficient, hoist, boast, diversion, synthetic, virile, dubious, ribald, unkempt, extract, indulgent, impassive, ambiguous, creosote, obstruction, obscure, conduits, oppressive, tincture, croup, askew, phantasmal, lurid



Part II – Chapter 7

Summary

Susan has become content with her life in New Almaden. Oliver cautions her they may not be in New Almaden much longer. Kendall is trying to push Oliver out. Kendall believes he is too chummy with the men. The men are unhappy and voice their concerns only to Oliver because they trust no one else. Oliver quits when Kendall tries to make him tear down the house of a man he fired. The man had worked for the mine for fourteen years and owned his house. He pays a dollar a year rent to the company. Kendall is tearing his house down as a lesson to others. Oliver refuses to comply and quits.

Susan is to take the baby to Santa Cruz, while Oliver goes to San Francisco to look for work. She is worried about the separation, but he assures her he will be down on weekends. Oliver is too proud to use Susan's money so they can stay together. She is hurt by his stubbornness, but concedes to his will.

Analysis

Oliver and Susan's good fortune takes a turn. Kendall is jealous of Oliver and resolves to push him to quit. He cannot fire him because the directors like Oliver. Kendall knows Oliver will not tear down a man's home so that is what he orders him to do. Oliver feels bad a man lost his job because Kendall has a grudge against Oliver. Oliver and Susan's lives are suddenly in turmoil and they must decide what to do for their future.

Vocabulary

inhumane, diffuse, erode, monosyllables, mulish, toady, grouse, despicable, peremptory, revelation, indignation, compromise, impeccable, laconic, renunciation



Part III – Chapters 1 & 2

Summary

Chapter 1: Shelly Rasmussen is taking an interest in the book project and Lyman finds it disconcerting. She finds the Victorian culture amusing for their prudish behavior. Lyman finds Shelly provocative and believes her husband is not the only one who cheated in their marriage. Ada disturbs their work to tell Shelly her husband has come looking for her. Lyman offers Shelly refuge in his house if she wants to avoid her husband. Shelly accepts his offer. Larry Rasmussen has an odd sense of humor and Shelly is worried what he might do.

Shelly walks in on Ada giving Lyman his bath. He is mortified, but Shelly thinks nothing of it. Lyman decides he does not like Shelly's scrutiny of his grandmother and will not let her see all of the letters his grandmother wrote.

Chapter 2: Susan and Ollie are staying in Santa Cruz in Mrs. Elliot's boardinghouse while Oliver tries to find another job. Susan is paying for the board with the money she is making from her writing and drawings. Oliver tells her there is a job in Bolivia. Susan would not be able to take Ollie along and she does not want to leave her baby behind. She hates being separated from Oliver so much, but she does not want to be separated from her baby either. Oliver is trying to make hydraulic cement because no one in America can make it and it has to be shipped from England. If he can figure it out, it would make them lots of money.

Analysis

Lyman thinks of his grandmother as a perfect lady and does not like Shelly's 1970's mentality looking at her and snickering. She finds Susan Ward prudish and does not understand during the Victorian era women did not have the rights and freedoms they do in 1970.

Oliver and Susan are once again trying to find a way for Oliver to support the family. He is considering the cement industry because he has had no success finding anything in the mining industry. Susan will not go to Bolivia, which could be a good opportunity for him. She lays all of their hopes on the cement without thinking of Oliver's future and occupation, only focusing on how it affects her and her son.

Vocabulary

ribald, liberated, reticence, disconcert, amenable, acquiescence, resignation, indoctrination, maniacal, opulent, contemplate, promontory, tumultuous, inventiveness, incremental, millstone, magnanimity, hydraulic, cooperage, indulgent, exhortation



Part III – Chapters 3, 4, & 5

Summary

Chapter 3: Susan is finding it difficult to live at Mrs. Elliot's boardinghouse. She finds Mrs. Elliot bossy and does not like how she treats Mr. Elliot. Susan finds it appalling Mr. Elliot washes the dishes after the evening meal. Oliver claims Mr. Eliot married a woman smarter than himself and Oliver knows how he feels. Susan scoffs because he thinks she is smarter than he is. Oliver has managed to create hydraulic cement, but cannot find anyone to back his invention.

Chapter 4: Mrs. Elliot tells Susan Oliver should not pursue the cement business, but should take a job building things. It is his strong suit. Susan is affronted by the woman's suggestion and tells her he makes his own decisions. Mrs. Elliot says if that were true he would be in the Andes. Susan was the one who decided against it. Mrs. Elliot says Susan needs to go where Oliver's work takes him and make him feel what he does is worthwhile. Oliver enjoyed solving the problem of making the cement not trying to sell it. Mrs. Elliot claims Susan is too much an artist and lady and makes Oliver feel inferior and what Susan does is more important than what he does. Mrs. Elliot does not want Susan to discourage Oliver from doing what he is good at for her selfish benefit. Susan is infuriated by Mrs. Elliot's implications.

Chapter 5: Susan writes to Augusta. Susan is not happy in Santa Cruz and feels the West is inferior to the East. She does not care for any of the people. She is only happy when Oliver is there and that is not often. He has not found anyone to back him in the cement business. Oliver will have to find a job in a mine and Susan is going home to Milton to stay with her parents, while he works in places where she cannot go.

Analysis

Susan is a hindrance to Oliver's career. He thinks what she does is more important and that she is smarter than he, so he defers to her. She does not consider what is best for his career only what she wants, so he suffers, while her career flourishes. This makes him feel even more inferior because he has no job to support his family and she will not let him do what he wants.

Vocabulary

whiffle, infallibility, diffident, abash, appease, pliancy, recoil, vague, quintessential, perilous, indolent, clout, impromptu, ironic, eccentric, dominate, edible, harangue, coddle, craggy, peculiar, eternity, superiority, transplant, serene, immense, oblige, console, injustice, vignette, surly, insoluble



Part III – Chapters 6 & 7

Summary

Chapter 6: Oliver did not patent his cement formula so others could eventually claim it and profit from it. He feels he has failed her and does not like it she has to pay her own train fare home. Susan had to leave Lizzie and Marian behind in the West. Lizzie marries a rancher and has five children. Marian goes to the Sandwich Islands and marries a sugar planter and lives on a beach.

Susan plans how to make her coming home seem like more of a triumph than a complete failure. She will tell her family Oliver's opportunity to go to Deadwood could not be missed and she seized the opportunity to visit home. She arrives home weary, but happy to be there. All it lacks she says is Augusta. Augusta, however has taken Thomas abroad because he has had a breakdown from working too hard. They will be gone at least a year.

Chapter 7: Lyman has a simple routine that he sticks to. He has the same breakfast every day. He occasionally feels sorry for himself stuck in his wheelchair, but stamps down these feelings. He cannot afford to have them. Lyman passes his mornings on his own and after lunch lies down for half an hour for a change of position. Between one and one thirty, Shelly arrives to work.

Shelly has moved back to her parents' house. She has talked to her husband and believes he is all right about her leaving him. One day a delivery truck arrives with twenty-four canaries for Shelly. Larry sent them to her, charged to her credit card, which he stole from her purse when she last saw him. Lyman decides people deserve the people they marry whether they be good or bad.

Analysis

Susan heads home in defeat, but will not let her family know that. She tries to come up with a story to appease her family and not make Oliver seem like he cannot take care of his family. Susan is disappointed Augusta is not there.

Shelly's husband shows he has not forgiven her for leaving. His joke of sending her twenty-four canaries show his odd sense of humor, but stealing her card to pay for it shows a malicious side. He does not like the fact she has left and will keep charging things to her card to remind her he is there.



Vocabulary

argillaceous, calcareous, equivalent, exploitation, afflict, covet, frantic, impatience, amid, exclamations, acquaint, cynical, convalescent, sustain, invariable, petrify, impetuous, Calvinist, endure, intrusion, cannibal, ascetic



Part IV – Chapters 1 & 2

Summary

Chapter 1: Rodman comes to see Lyman. He asks Ada how Lyman is doing and questions his sanity. Ada took care of Lyman's father who had mental problems near the end of his life. Lyman talks to Rodman about his book. He contends the book is about marriage. Lyman wants to know what kept his grandparents together for sixty years. Rodman tells Lyman his ex-wife has been asking about him. Rodman believes she would like to see Lyman. Lyman will not see her.

Chapter 2: Susan goes to Leadville in Colorado where Oliver has found a new position. She has left Ollie with her parents because he has had malaria. Leadville is more sinister than the other mining towns they have occupied. Oliver must carry a gun because of claim jumpers. The high altitude is not easy on the horses and they frequently die of lung fever. One of the horses pulling Susan and Oliver's buggy gets this and Susan is horrified how Oliver presses it onward. They arrive in Leadville with Susan scared and upset and Oliver silent.

Analysis

Talking with Rodman, Lyman realizes what fascinates him about his grandparents is how their marriage lasted through all of the ordeals they encountered. He wants to know what kept them together when life was so hard. His own marriage could not survive through his personal tragedies so he looks to them for answers. Lyman will not see his ex-wife. He does not blame her and slightly understands why she left, but he has nothing to say to her so will not see her.

Susan and Oliver's relationship takes a hit in Leadville. It is a rough place to live and from the beginning she sees life here will not be easy. This scares her and makes her wonder if she has made a mistake coming to Leadville.

Vocabulary

subsist, clarity, conspirator, decibels, contrite, imitation, affidavit, peripheral, pensive, realist, incurable, effeminate, inviolability, vehement, vestibule, pandemonium, indifferent, bedlam, timorous, delirious, dismay, precipices, exhilarate, improbable, furrow, deprive, taciturnity



Part IV – Chapters 3 & 4

Summary

Chapter 3: Oliver circumvents the town of Leadville because a ruckus is happening in the town. Susan says he protects her too much, but he admits that Leadville is no New Almaden. Their new home is a log cabin. His assistant Frank has built a fire so the house will be warm for their arrival. Frank is from New York and came out west to be an engineer. The cabin is only one room and Susan must curtain off their cots from the main room. There are not many women in Leadville. It is a hard town where they have vigilante law and lots of crime. Oliver wants to keep Susan well away from it. In their cabin she will be lonely, but safe.

Chapter 4: Oliver and Susan discuss bringing Ollie to Leadville. Oliver is against it, but she is determined once they get settled. Susan writes a letter to Augusta praising Frank. She admires he is not tempted by drink or loose women. She is nine years older than he, but admits she flirts with him a little. Frank and Oliver are very alike. Ian Price, Oliver's clerk, finishes out her circle of friends in Leadville. He is English and rather helpless so Susan mothers him. He likes to sit in the rocker by the fire and read. The four spend their evenings together in the cabin reading or talking.

The US Geological Survey party comes to Leadville and Susan and Oliver's cabin becomes the center of entertainment. These are important men and their camp draws a stream of celebrities who are entertained by Susan. Their small cabin is often overrun by people and Susan enjoys the company.

Analysis

Leadville is a harsh town, but Susan has Oliver and his assistants to protect her from its harshness. Oliver notices Frank's close relationship with Susan, but does not speak against it. He is used to men falling in love with his wife. Susan, however, praises Frank too much to Augusta and enjoys his company more than a married woman should. Susan is not starved for company as Oliver believed she would be. The arrival of the survey party makes their Leadville cabin a center of entertainment for many dignitaries.

Vocabulary

kiln, serene, parody, exertion, inarticulate, effete, vigilante, rebuke, incessant, intimations, euphoria, vicarious, immaculate, niche, vivacity, efficient, disposition, disheveled, extravagant, indispensable, devastate, duffer, fathom, obliterate, quirt, attenuate



Part IV – Chapters 5 & 6

Summary

Chapter 5: Susan believes Oliver does not put himself forward enough. She wants him to speak up when they have company. Susan wants the men to get to know Oliver and not think he is a nobody. Oliver tells her he has been asked to join the survey party so they must know him well enough. She is happy for him because she knows he will enjoy it.

Chapter 6: Shelly asks why Lyman does not describe his grandparents' sex life. She claims he is making up part of his novel so why not spice it up a little for the modern reader. Lyman refuses because he believes the sexual relations are intimate and private and does not want to think of his grandparents in such a way. Shelly does not understand Susan's inhibitions because she is looking at them from a 1970's point of view, which is different from the Victorian view.

Lyman tells Shelly Susan found out if Oliver took the survey job he would be traveling around and she would either have to follow him or go back to Milton. Susan was worried her son would not have a secure home to grow up in. They hesitated to make a decision then Oliver was offered the job of manager of the Adelaide mine in Leadville. He accepted because it would be better for his family.

Analysis

Susan is happy until she realizes Oliver's new job will take him away from his family. It is his dream job, but he declines it to take the manager's job at the mine. He does it for Susan. Lyman treats his grandparents' intimacy as a private issue and will not take Shelly's advice to spice up his novel. He does not have her attitude of sexual promiscuity and will not view his grandmother in this way.

Vocabulary

imperturbable, ethical, bustle, incriminate, levity, supposition, integrity, precarious, impeccable, probity, climax, ermine, iniquity, tantalize, liberate, decorous, hypocritical, locution, compulsion, verbalize, submissive, emancipate, extrapolate, uncouth, piquancy



Part IV – Chapters 7 & 8

Summary

Chapter 7: Oliver and Susan add rooms onto their cabin in preparation for Ollie coming to live with them. Susan travels East to bring Ollie home. She spends the winter in Milton reacquainting herself with her son. Before returning to Leadville, Susan comes to terms with the fact the West is her home now and she clears out her stored belongings in her parents' home. Bessie and John would like to go West with Susan, but must stay and care for Bessie and Susan's parents.

Chapter 8: Susan and Ollie arrive in Leadville. Susan accidentally kisses Frank thinking he is Oliver since he has on a similar coat and she cannot see his face. Ollie takes immediately to Oliver making Susan jealous for he took awhile to warm up to her. Oliver is having trouble with another mining outfit trying to jump his claim. Frank stood off men who tried to blast an opening in the side of their mine and enter it. They arrive at the cabin to find Pricey has not started a fire as was expected. Frank and Oliver go looking for him. They come back carrying Pricey between them.

Analysis

Susan is making Leadville into a home for her family. She realizes the West is now her home and is willing to give up her past to concentrate on the future so she clears her belongings out of her parents' house. Arriving in Leadville, she discovers it has gotten more dangerous since she has left. Frank's stand-off with armed men and the beating of Pricey show her how dangerous it has become.

Vocabulary

brevity, unresolved, imbecile, indefinite, furrow, inarticulate, mopey, infantile, effusive, haughty, ague, profuse, furtive, lucid, delude, immoral, palaver, liquefy, dirge, callous, inert



Part V – Chapters 1 & 2

Summary

Chapter 1: Lyman's mother died when he was two and his father was a difficult man. His grandparents raised him. Lyman felt his grandmother blamed herself for his father's taciturn attitude. Susan helped Lyman with his homework. He felt it was because his father was not properly prepared for schooling in the East and was seen as an inferior Western child. When Lyman was to write a report on Mexico for school, she told him she had been to Mexico and loved it. She had wanted to stay.

Oliver and Susan Ward go to Mexico so Oliver can inspect a mine for the syndicate. Susan sketches many scenes and people. The journey was a hard and long one. Susan feels she has never been anywhere until now.

Chapter 2: Susan and Oliver stay with Don Gustavo. Susan watches the daily life of the house's inhabitants with pleasure. She finds it graceful and civilized. Oliver is worried about what he will have to report to the syndicate. If he has to give an unfavorable report, he believes his job will be in jeopardy. He asks Susan if she would like to stay in Mexico if the report is favorable. He believes he will be offered the job to run the mine if the mine is profitable. Oliver asks her to consider possibly staying in Mexico.

Analysis

Susan likes Mexico because it is civilized and has a culture that respects the past. To her Mexico is as exotic as Rome or Paris. Susan loves the order of Gustavo's household and the grace of the women. She is happy to consider staying in Mexico.

Vocabulary

defer, taciturnity, formidable, intense, proportion, earnest, virtue, calamitous, dictate, incurable, gentility, quell, vehemence, jingoism, diligence, improvise, opulent, arcade, crypt, anoint, demoralize, conspiratorial, censoriousness, bolster, speculative, dispute, litigation



Part V – Chapters 3 & 4

Summary

Chapter 3: Susan is amazed at the differences between inspecting a mine in Mexico compared to Colorado. Where Oliver wears buckskin and takes a packhorse carrying bedrolls, bread, a pick, shovel, and a geologist's hammer, here in Mexico Gustavo has servants, supply mules and horses carrying food, wine, dishes, a bed, etc. It is not an uncivilized journey, but a journey with all the comforts of home. The women line up so the men can bid them farewell as they leave. Oliver is uncomfortable with all the pomp and circumstance.

Chapter 4: Susan writes to Augusta about the splendor of Mexico. Susan is happy to stay in this place. She admires how proficiently Gustavo's house is run by his sister-in-law. Emelita, Gustavo's sister-in-law, helps Susan to find a house for her family. Susan prepares in case she is able to stay in Mexico. Susan cannot go out by herself to sketch for it is not permitted for women to be out alone. The society is very protective of women and especially those of the higher classes.

Analysis

Susan and Oliver find Mexico different from their own culture. Every occasion is an event and even an expedition to inspect a mine shaft is not taken lightly. Every care must be taken to provide the guests with all the comforts they may need or would find at home. Susan enjoys the lifestyle and looks at suitable homes in case she and Oliver will be allowed to stay. She likes the civility of the culture and prefers it over the unruly west.

Vocabulary

docile, prestige, coerce, seethe, serape, ornate, gaudy, continuity, potency, subservient, justification, trousseau, adjurations, collaborator, grandeur, deprive, disconcert, countenance, eccentricities, inability, thwart, cloister, smitten, peevish, placate, discretion, inference, cavalier, indiscretions



Part V – Chapters 5 & 6

Summary

Chapter 5: Oliver returns from his expedition. The mine in his opinion will not be profitable so their chances of staying in Mexico are slim. Because he will turn in a negative report, he does not believe he will be able to return to his job in Leadville. Oliver does not know what they will do. Susan feels bad luck follows them. Oliver's honesty keeps losing him jobs. Susan blames him and feels she and Ollie must unduly suffer the consequences of his honesty.

Chapter 6: The rest of their stay with Gustavo is chilly because of Oliver's negative view of the mine. Packing her belongings, Susan thinks of her talk with Frank when she was leaving Leadville for Mexico. Frank felt she would not be back. He told her he loved her and kissed her passionately. Susan and Oliver leave Mexico. Her dream of living in the graceful civilized place dashed as every other dream of settling down she and Oliver have had.

Analysis

Susan is upset her husband is so open and honest. She believes if he was not they would have a better life. She believes he thinks only of himself and not his family when he makes decisions. Susan finds him unfeeling when in reality he is just being who he is. He cannot be dishonest and will not be for a price. Susan has a feeling of being Oliver's captive as they leave Mexico. She must follow him no matter where it leads her.

Vocabulary

coherent, quandary, corroboration, sulky, resistant, monosyllabic, emboss, mulish, offensive, deliberate, hospitality, atone, styptic, diminutive, hewn, somber, intoxicate, essence, temperament, ennoble, errant, feudal, thrive



Part VI – Chapters 1 & 2

Summary

Chapter 1: Susan Ward visits Thomas and Augusta Hudson in New York. Thomas praises her work. He admires her for depicting her life through words and art. Susan sees her life as not important compared to Thomas and Augusta's. Augusta questions Susan's relationship with Frank. Susan brushes it off. Augusta still ignores Oliver's existence. Susan feels slighted by her friend's inability to accept her marriage. Augusta asks if Susan is happy about her pregnancy and Susan says she is, but she has not told Oliver about it. Susan admits to Augusta she wants to stay longer in the East with Augusta.

Chapter 2: Oliver comes to see Susan in Milton. Susan has had the baby and named her Elizabeth after her sister. He asks why she did not tell him she was pregnant. He is upset because he got a letter saying she had had the baby and he did not even know she was pregnant. Susan cannot tell him she did not want him there because he would disrupt her intimacy with Thomas and Augusta and her life at home with her parents. Susan throws the blame back at him for not telling her of his new scheme to try to bring water to 300,000 acres of desert in Idaho. Oliver believes it is a worthwhile project that will finally set their future. Susan is skeptical. She does not want to leave the east. She feels leaving for the west is no longer adventurous, but an obligation to her husband.

Analysis

Susan Ward is torn between her love of family and friends and her husband. She does not want to leave behind the people and the creature comforts of the East. Susan did not tell Oliver she was pregnant because he would come to see her and she did not want him to intrude on her and this aspect of her life and undoubtedly he would only try to take her away from it. Susan must decide which is more important to her. She does not see going west as temporary any longer, but as her future and she feels exiled from her past life and her family and friends.

Vocabulary

indisposed, indiscretion, lugubrious, incongruity, accumulative, vivacious, flippant, tedious, repulsive, antagonist, leper, adequate, oppression, clairvoyant, engulf, persuade, conviction, domesticity, pliable, idiotic, smite, coax, triangulate, sensible, aggrieve, compatible



Part VII – Chapters 1 & 2

Summary

Chapter 1: Susan writes to Augusta telling her of her life in the canyon. Susan is working on a novel. Oliver's work is steady. She tries not to think of what she left behind. There are some Army wives and Eastern ladies to whom she likes to talk. Susan does not care for the town ladies. Oliver has invited Frank Sargent to join his team as his assistant. He also has another young assistant named Wiley. Susan is happy Oliver is content in his job.

Chapter 2: Susan and her family have moved into the canyon. The backers for the project have lost interest and they have no money to continue. The project must be postponed until new backers can be found. Oliver is on standby salary and Frank and Wiley are staying with no salary at all. The camp consists of a shack, a cook tent, Wiley and Frank's tent on the beach, and an abandoned miner's cabin downriver. The Ward family live in the shack. Susan worries about the governess she obtained for the children. She is from England and used to teach the children of an American diplomat. She worries about bringing her to a shack in the canyon, but she settles in nicely.

Analysis

Susan does not believe in Oliver's dream of providing a waterway to open the western desert for settlers. She is not happy in Boise, but prefers the canyon once they move there. Susan is not surprised when the backers desert the project. She worries about the family living in the shack in the camp with the governess. There is not much room for all of them.

Vocabulary

stimulations, inexorable, relinquishment, belittle, pretentious, visitation, shareholders, companionable, reconcile, indication, allude, ardent, lament, sympathy, correspondence, wade, inconclusive, dismal, recitation, illegible, topographical, aversion, primitive



Part VII – Chapters 3 & 4

Summary

Chapter 3: The Ward family ends up staying five years in the canyon camp. They spend the time planning around the fire. All they can do is wait and see what will happen. Winter is coming and they need a place to stay. It is suggested that they build a house. Susan offers to front the money. She will retain the title and when the project is back on track she will sell the house to the company for a construction headquarters for twice what it costs. They spend their time building the house together. They build it out of rock from the quarry and Oliver makes cement. The house has three bedrooms, plenty of space for the Ward family and their governess. Susan is once again pregnant.

Chapter 4: Wiley and Frank have to leave for they cannot live without pay indefinitely. Frank talks about not coming back. He believes it is time to put everything into the past. Frank does not like to see Susan pregnant. It shows she belongs to another man. He cannot stay feeling for her the way he does.

In midsummer of 1885, Susan is close to the end of her pregnancy. She is feeling restless and wanders through the house. She sees Ollie crossing a bridge the men built across the river. It is not a stable bridge and he is not allowed to cross by himself. He is holding a package, which falls into the river. Susan yells for Oliver who runs to help the boy as Ollie falls to his knees on the bridge. The package was for the nurse who was brought in to help Susan with childbirth. It contained whiskey. Susan has Oliver take her away at once. After Oliver leaves, Susan goes into labor. Ollie must cross the bridge to get help. His father is very proud of him. A double rainbow forms in the sky as Susan and Oliver's second daughter, Agnes, is born.

Analysis

Frank loves Susan and cannot stay and watch another man's child grow inside her. He loves her and wants her for himself. He tries to tell her he cannot be around her any longer, but she tries to trivialize his feelings because she wants him around. Everything is about her and how she feels rather than about anyone else.

Susan does not want the nurse around her after she finds out that she drinks. Ollie risks his parents' wrath when he goes across the bridge, but he is concerned for his mother. His father is proud of him and will not tell his mother he crossed the bridge on his own.

Vocabulary

reclamation, hindsight, initiative, tuft, pinnacle, appease, subdue, transitory, laden, dubious, melancholy, gird, demean, authentic, antithesis, cyclic, reiterative, vacillate,

amenity, fluctuation, recurrent, exuberant, expedition, sullen, intimation, interpose,
brutality, gabble, constriction, improvisation



Part VII – Chapters 5 & 6

Summary

Chapter 5: Two years later, the Wards are still in the canyon. Oliver comes home drunk and Susan has him sleep in the shack. He has taken to drinking. The canal project has no future and their shares of the stock are worthless. No one will buy them from Oliver so he drinks. Susan is ashamed of him.

Chapter 6: Lyman does not like writing about these years of his grandparents' lives. He feels there is a slow corrosion of affection and loyalty that kept Oliver and Susan Ward together. He is ashamed that his grandfather took to drinking. His grandmother had to work extra to provide for her family. She was too busy to care for her children. Oliver turned down offers of employment to stay in the canyon. Susan felt her children were growing up like savages. All their hope is gone. Oliver finally takes a position with the US Geological Survey. Susan tries to get Oliver to give up drinking and chastises him for not being like Frank and not touching liquor. Oliver believes she wishes he was Frank.

Analysis

Oliver takes up drinking because he feels upset about his life and the lack of progress he is making in his life. Susan sees it as a weakness and is ashamed of him. Lyman does not like to see the deterioration of his grandparents' marriage. He wants to believe they were happy. Oliver tries to stick with the canal project, but for his family he must take another job. Oliver is jealous of how Susan feels about Frank and she finds him lacking compared to Frank.

Vocabulary

attributable, abortive, clarity, prospective, rumination, isolation, consolation, roil, ethereal, pallor, exhilarate, firmament, palpable, minimal, corrosion, sodden, sottish, cumulative, infallible, balky, aghast, impatience, humiliate, keen



Part VII – Chapter 7

Summary

Shelly tells Lyman his grandfather still drank in his old age. Her father, Ed would take him to see an underground mine he owned in Yuba. On the trip he would drink until he went to sleep. Shelly can tell Lyman liked his grandfather. He trusted him more than he ever trusted anyone. Shelly sees that Oliver understood human weakness and did not blame people. Lyman is keeping some of his grandmother's letters to himself because he does not want Shelly to see them. He questions why he is trying to understand his grandparents' lives.

Lyman thinks of his life with his ex-wife. He wonders if it was all a waste. His wife left him for the surgeon who cut off his leg. She left a note on his hospital bedside table telling him she was leaving. The doctor disappeared one day when they were at a cabin by the lake and his body was not found until the following summer. They found his bones in a ravine. Lyman can not forgive her. He does not want to see her.

Susan and Oliver Ward close up their canyon home. Frank comes to get his stuff before it is put into storage. Agnes tells Frank she does not like him. Lyman wonders what Susan and Frank would have said to each other, while waiting for Oliver and Ollie to return from town. They go on a walk. He tells her to have faith in Oliver and his ideas. Frank embraces her and kisses her. She says they must not do anymore of this. They walk together with their hands wound tightly together. They come upon Oliver and Ollie in the buggy and Susan quickly drops Frank's hand.

Analysis

Lyman admires his grandparents and wants to understand them, but wonders why. Will what he learns help him understand himself and the destruction of his own marriage? His wife left him at the lowest point in his life for someone he trusted to help him through the ordeal of losing his leg. Like Susan, Ellen is tempted by a man who is connected in a way to her husband. Susan tries to fight the temptation, but Ellen surrenders to it.

Vocabulary

opportune, rhetorical, idle, speculative, extrapolating, exasperation, implacable, chronic, drouth, magnanimity, torque, lode, woe



Part VIII – Chapters 1 & 2

Summary

Chapter 1: Susan takes her children to Victoria to stay while Oliver travels for his survey job. Susan calls Ollie her manly boy, Betsy is seven and a little mother and housekeeper, and Agnes charms them, makes them laugh and awes them. She has invisible playmates, sings songs she makes up herself, and draws pictures with confidence and imagination beyond her three years of age. Susan supports her children with her writing and drawing.

Susan receives a telegram from Oliver. The canal project has found a new backer and is back up and running. Wiley is back and in charge of the project, while Oliver finishes with the survey. Susan and the children return to Idaho. Oliver has built them a ranch away from the construction site. Susan is upset when she learns Oliver sold some of his canal stock to her sister Bessie and her husband, John. They used the money from the sale of her parents' house to buy the stock. Oliver filed a claim for them and they will come to live in Idaho. Everyone has returned who was with them in the canyon, even Frank. Oliver never questions her about Frank and she wishes he would so they could have it out and not have this tension between them. She hates his silence and wants them to talk out their problems.

Chapter 2: Lyman questions himself about his drinking. His drinking has become more and wonders if it is because of the pain or if reading his grandmother's letters are driving him to drink. Lyman is now isolated where before he used to have his classes and friends. He feels he is like his grandfather. The drink makes him a smoother talker. Lyman decides to stop drinking.

Analysis

Susan separates herself from Oliver. Their marriage is strained and she wonders if it can be fixed. She puts all of this aside to work to support her children. The telegram from Oliver telling her the canal project is starting again makes her uneasy. She does not know what kind of reception to expect and delays going back to Idaho as long as she can. Susan finds Oliver's silence unbearable when she does go back to Idaho. She wants to have everything out with him and clear the air between them, but he is not a talker. He silently watches her as he mentions Frank, but says nothing making her wonder if he is testing her by bringing Frank back into their lives.

Lyman sees himself like his grandfather. The fact his drinking has increased as he works on his project makes him uneasy. He challenges himself to quit drinking and knows he will be better for it.



Vocabulary

unreality, diligent, brood, impersonal, confessional, genteel, opposition, dissolute, deprivation, deference, revive, contradictory, proclamation, optimism, dyslectic, impertinent, dissipation, infer, isolation, infirmity, absence, binge, physiological, reticence, retention, felicity, symbolic, aggrieve, delusions



Part VIII – Chapters 3 & 4

Summary

Chapter 3: Susan sends Ollie to St. Paul's, a school in the East. He does not want to go, but Susan believes it is best for him. The men work hard on the canal systems. Susan thinks too hard. Susan cannot bring herself to call on the women of Boise. She refuses because she doesn't have suitable clothes and she is not of Boise and does not want to be. She lives her life as if waiting for something.

Frank is going East to visit his parents so Susan gives him a letter to deliver to Augusta so that Augusta may meet him. Augusta likes him and Frank talks to her of his torment between his loyalty to Oliver and his love for Susan. Susan feels his torment. Susan watches Oliver to see if he is drinking and wonders if he watches her. They are polite to one another.

The Governor christens the first canal as water is turned into it. They have a party at their ranch with many state dignitaries. The lawyer Oliver has been using for the canal's business dealings upsets the plans of John and Bessie moving to Idaho. He did not submit their claim on the land, but submitted it in his own name. He claims Oliver told him they were not interested so he claimed the land for himself. Oliver knows they he gave Burns, the lawyer, copies of the claims to file for him because he was so busy he could not do it himself. Oliver takes the blame for losing John and Bessie's claim.

Chapter 4: Oliver has tried to get Burns to sell him one of the claims to him for John and Bessie, but he will not. There is no land left to claim that will be near the water. Oliver and Susan discuss giving them some of their thousand acres, but the water has not yet reached it so it cannot be farmed. Oliver asks her if she has had faith in him. He apologizes to her for trusting people. He believes if you cannot put your trust in people, what kind of life is that.

Analysis

Susan and Oliver are at odds over the land claim for her sister and her husband. Susan does not like it her sister has been dragged into the misfortune her family is in. The canal stock is worthless and Bessie and John's claim has been taken. She feels she has ruined them. Oliver takes the full blame on himself and feels Susan has no faith in him or his ability to provide for his family. Oliver resents she works to provide for his family and does not hesitate to remind him of it. Oliver is a trusting person and believes it is better to be trusting and proven wrong than not to trust anyone at all.

Vocabulary

mirage, diminish, obscure, abreast, evict, scorch, melancholy, infuriate, chaotic, equanimity, sufferance, interim, hysterical, allusion, prestige, efface, allegorical, reconstruct, pervasive, absorption, replica, provocative, imbrications, balustrade, assets, indrawn, bleak



Part VIII – Chapter 5

Summary

Oliver has taken the children and the governess into town to watch the Fourth of July fireworks. Susan has not gone for she pleads she is tired. She changes into her dressing gown and sits on the hammock to watch the fireworks alone. Susan feels adrift and hopeless. Frank drops in. Susan tells him that Oliver is not there, but he has not come to see Oliver. He had hoped she would be alone. He never sees her alone. Frank tries to convince her to leave with him. Ollie, he contends, is old enough to be all right and the girls are young enough not to question. For her, he would betray his friend.

Lyman wonders about the relationship between Susan and Frank. He does not know if they had a sexual relationship, but he knows that Frank loved his grandmother and she him. He wonders what she would have done alone with the man, but doubts they had sex. His grandmother was a virtuous Victorian woman. Lyman feels that during this era passion and kisses would bring her enough guilt.

Oliver finds Frank's gloves on the porch railing when he returns from town. Susan tries to act innocent. She feels guilty and everything Oliver says feels like an accusation.

Analysis

Frank is becoming desperate to be with Susan. She loves him, but will not disgrace herself or her family. His wanting her to run away with him shows how desperate he is and to what lengths he will go to be with her. Susan wants him around, but to offer her comfort from her troubles, not to whisk her away from them. Her relationship with Oliver is slowly collapsing and no matter how hard he tries to make her rest and have fun with her family, she resists. Susan wants to be miserable and will not let herself relax.

Vocabulary

tendrils, incriminate, silhouette, erratic, arid, surly, adrift, oratory, injunction, pandemonium, pyrotechnics, jackknife, avenger, immaculate, inarticulate, demoralize, jubilee, exhilaration, probability, indulgent, rusticate, lurid, manifesto, evident, liberate, communality, archaic, matrilineal, phalansteries

Part VIII – Chapter 6

Summary

Lyman feels his days at the cottage with his grandmother's letters are coming to an end. Shelly comes to him and shows him a slip of paper. It is a manifesto for a commune society her husband has given her. She is considering joining. Lyman does not see it as the solution to society. The people see society as corrupt and greedy, but isolating themselves from society will not change it.

Analysis

Shelly wants Lyman's approval of the commune. She respects his opinion. Shelly's husband is very charming and convinces her the communal life is for them, but she has grown to respect her employer and values his opinions more. Shelly has matured working for Lyman and sees she must think for herself and decide what is important to her.

Vocabulary

rictus, dubious, promiscuity, anarchy, harangue, geodesic

Part VIII – Chapter 7

Summary

Lyman is not sure exactly what happened in the ensuing months, but he does know Susan took Ollie to St. Paul's in August a month before school was to start. She leaves him with the headmaster. Lyman feels she did this because Ollie looked at her accusingly and her guilt became more pronounced. Why he wonders did her son look at her this way? Of what was she guilty? Ollie would not see his mother for ten years. It was as if he were shunning her. He would see his father when his father would make trips East or they would meet in places away from his parents' home.

Susan feels a great guilt and instead of going to New York and taking rooms as she had planned to work on her writing and drawing, she and Betsy get on a train going back West. Her guilt makes her return to the Mesa ranch. Oliver is not there. He has left and will not return to the ranch. Susan feels she must stay in the west as her repentance.

Reading newspaper accounts, Lyman pieces together Susan took Agnes, her youngest daughter, on a walk with her to meet Frank. While she and Frank sat together, they lost track of Agnes. They call out trying to find her and Oliver and Ollie come upon them and start looking for Agnes as well. Ollie finds her face down drowned in the Susan canal. Four days later, after Agnes' funeral Frank is found dead in his cabin. He committed suicide because of the guilt he felt over Agnes' death. Lyman concludes Oliver and Ollie blamed Susan for Agnes' death and believed she had an inappropriate relationship with Frank.

Susan never blamed Oliver for leaving her in her grief and guilt. She felt she was to blame for his suffering and did not question his judgment. Oliver invites Susan and Betsy to join him in California when he is made superintendent at the Zodiac mine. His cousin, Mary, and her husband Conrad Prager influence him to do this, but there is no love between the two. Susan and Oliver's relationship is over. Zodiac cottage is where they live out the rest of their days and the cottage that Lyman sits in reading his grandmother's letters and reconstructing her life.

Analysis

Lyman does not want to think badly of his grandparents, but they did not have the picture perfect life he wants to imagine. Susan may have had an affair with Frank and she definitely feels guilty for the death of her daughter. Oliver feels betrayed by his wife and friend and blames them for the death of his five-year-old daughter. His actions are out of pain. They both tried to deal with the situation as best as they could and they did it in their own ways. Lyman is not sure what exactly happened. He can only surmise from newspaper accounts and what his grandmother has said in her letters. She mentions nothing of Agnes' death in her letters only of Ollie's reaction to her and how



guilty she feels. Ollie only silently stares at her. He is his father's son who does not talk about his feelings. Susan puts herself away from both of them and finds her own way to repent for her sins.

Vocabulary

stoicism, anecdote, avidity, taciturnity, catastrophe, corroborate, aversion, rout, piteous, indifferent, calamity, expiate, ardent, opulent



Part IX – Chapter 1

Summary

Lyman Ward has a dream that his ex-wife comes to see him and he realizes how much his marriage chronicles what happened to his grandparents. Oliver Ward saw his wife's infidelity and the cause of their daughter's death and would never forgive her. Lyman never saw his grandparents touch or smile at one another. They stayed together, but did not love one another. Lyman sees his wife's infidelity made him hate her especially for leaving him after the loss of his leg. Lyman does not want to be bitter like his grandfather and live the rest of his life unhappily so he considers seeing his wife and forgiving her.

Analysis

Lyman sees the comparison of his own marriage to his grandparents. Where his wife divorced him, his grandparents stuck it out and were miserable. They did not love each other. They did not show any affection toward one another. They stayed together because that is what was expected of them. Lyman realizes Susan was not happy for probably the last fifty years of her life. He does not want to be miserable so he considers letting the past go and trying to be a bigger man than his grandfather and forgiving his ex-wife.

Vocabulary

immobility, kinetic, portentous, cant, provocation, liberation, accentuate, citified, slovenly, solidarity, bereft, spastic, tumescent, insolent, succubus, insouciant, infallible, satyriasis



Characters

Lyman Ward

Lyman Ward is the narrator of the book. He has a bone disease and is confined to a wheelchair. Lyman is writing a book about his grandparents to keep his mind off his divorce and the loss of his leg.

Susan Burling Ward

Susan Burling Ward is Lyman's grandmother. She was an artist and writer.

Oliver Ward

Oliver Ward is Lyman's grandfather. He is an engineer who lets his career decisions be dictated by his wife.

Ollie Ward

Ollie Ward is Lyman's father and Susan and Oliver's son. He had mental issues in his later years and Lyman fears he will be like him.

Betsy Ward

Betsy Ward is Susan and Oliver's daughter.

Agnes Ward

Agnes Ward and is Susan and Oliver's daughter. She drowned when she was five years old.

Augusta Hudson

Augusta Hudson is Susan Ward's best friend and perhaps when she was young her lover. Their letters help tell Susan and Oliver's story.

Thomas Hudson

Thomas Hudson is Augusta's husband and Susan's friend. Susan had a crush on him when they were younger.



Frank Sargent

Frank Sargent is Oliver's assistant and friend. He is in love with Susan and asks her to run away with him. He kills himself because he blames himself for Agnes' death.

Ian Price (Pricey)

Pricey is Oliver's clerk. He loves to read. He is beaten up by men attempting to jump a claim. Oliver sends him back to his home in England because he is seriously injured and cannot take care of himself.

Rodman Ward

Rodman Ward is Lyman's son. He worries about his father being on his own. He wants to protect his father.

Ada

Ada is Lyman's caregiver. She makes his lunch and dinner and baths him.

Shelly Rasmussen

Shelly Rasmussen is Ada's daughter. She works for Lyman helping him sort through his grandmother's papers.

Conrad Prager

Conrad Prager is married to Oliver Ward's cousin Mary. He is a director of the mine at New Almaden and helps get Oliver a job there.



Objects/Places

Wheelchair

Lyman Ward is confined to a wheelchair. He sees it as a prison, which he cannot escape, yet it also allows him freedom. Without it he would not be able to move.

Mines

The book is populated with many different mines. They are seen as unstable, unsafe and uncivilized.

Rose garden

Oliver Ward's rose garden starts as a way to bring civilization to his wife in the barren places that they live. His rose garden at Zodiac Cottage, however, is for him and the memory of his daughter. He commemorates her by developing a new rose and naming it after her.

Mexico

Mexico represents a new beginning in a civilized place that Susan can enjoy.

West

The West is seen as uncivilized and inferior to the East. The people who settle the West are seen as uncouth.

East

The East is seen as civilized. The society of the East is superior to the West and the people more intelligent and successful.

Zodiac Cottage

Zodiac cottage is where Lyman has gone to heal from his tragedies. He sees it as safe and a place to get away from the world.



Themes

Marriage

Marriage is a strong theme in the novel. Lyman is writing the novel about his grandparents to understand them and how their marriage lasted for sixty years. They had many hardships, but overcame them for the sake of their marriage. Lyman's own marriage has ended in divorce. His wife left him for the surgeon who cut off his leg. Lyman wants to understand how his marriage ended and his grandparents stayed together through tragedy. Looking at his grandparents marriage, helps Lyman to forgive his wife and start healing his wounds.

Loyalty/Trust

Trust is important in Oliver Ward's life. He believes that if you cannot put trust in people the world is not worth living in. Susan finds him too trusting. Oliver is a loyal man who will stick with a company even without pay if he believes in what he is doing. Frank is loyal to Oliver and Susan. He stays on projects not because of the projects, but to be near the Wards. He loves Susan deeply, but out of loyalty to Oliver will not act upon it at first.

Infidelity

Infidelity is a theme in the novel. Three marriages are affected by it. Susan and Oliver's marriage is ruined by Frank and Susan's relationship. Whether or not they had a sexual relationship is unknown, but Susan has feelings for Frank and this leads to the destruction of her marriage. Oliver stays with her, but there marriage is a loveless one with no touching or words of kindness. Lyman's wife leaves him for his surgeon when Lyman can use her support the most. Shelly Rasmussen leaves her husband because he cheated on her with multiple women.



Style

Point of View

The story is told in parts in first person. Lyman tells his story in first person so the reader sees everyone as he sees them. Susan's letters are also in first person for these are the personal letters she wrote to her best friend detailing her life. Lyman's novel he is writing about his grandparents is written in third person from his grandmother's point of view. Everything in his book, is from her perspective for he knows her thoughts from her letters and papers, but can only guess his grandfather's thoughts and feelings so projects these through his grandmother's thoughts.

Setting

The novel has many settings. In the portions of the book set in 1970 with Lyman, the book is set in California just outside Nevada City. Lyman lives on his grandparents' estate called Zodiac cottage. In the part of the book set in the late 1800s, the setting takes place in Milton, NY, New York City, a mining camp in New Almaden, California, the town of Santa Cruz, California, a mining camp in Leadville, Colorado, Mexico, mining camp in Idaho, and a ranch in Idaho. Susan and Oliver Ward move often and each place offers a unique experience for them.

Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is complex. Lyman is a college professor and historian so he is well-educated and his writing reflects this. The letters of Susan Ward are written by a well-educated proper woman in the Victorian age and she writes with the eye of an artist. Her words paint pictures in the readers' minds.

Structure

The main plot of the novel is Lyman's story of his grandparents and their marriage. Their marriage is the central part of the story and what happens because of it. Lyman's life is the subplot of the book. He is looking at his grandparents' lives to try to make sense of his own. Shelly's own marriage is another subplot that shows marriage throughout several generations and how time and circumstances affect the bonds of marriage. Another subplot is Lyman's relationship with his ex-wife and son.



Quotes

As you said it was too good for mere dirt; you tried to apply it to your own wandering and uneasy life. (Part I, Chapter 1)

Having no future of my own, why shouldn't I look forward to yours? (Part 1, Chapter 1)

What is more eyebrow-raising is the suggestion of lesbianism in this friendship, a suggestion that is some early letters is uncomfortably explicit. (Part I, Chapter 2)

I couldn't stand the thought of this place sitting here all ready for you and you not in it. (Part II, Chapter 1)

Thy dress should be a background for thy face. (Part II, Chapter 2)

But they ought to know you! You sit so silent they'll all think you're nobody, and it isn't true. (Part IV, Chapter 5)

You owe it to yourself to make a good impression. (Part IV, Chapter 5)

I know who you are, and who I am, and who Oliver is, and what a gentleman does in the circumstances. (Part V, Chapter 6)

Why must you act as if I had married a leper or a cad or a ne'er-do-well? (Part VI, Chapter 1)

What kind of wife is it who half wants her husband's bad luck to continue so that she can stay longer near someone else? (Part VI, Chapter 1)

I believe in trusting people, do you see? At least till they prove they can't be trusted. What kind of life is it when you can't? (Part VIII, Chapter 4)

What do you mean, 'Angle of Repose?' she asked me when I dreamed we were talking about Grandmother's life, and I said it was the angle at which a man or woman finally lies down. (Part IX, Chapter 1)

Wisdom, I said oh so glibly the other day when I was pontificating on Shelly's confusions, is knowing what you have to accept. (Part IX, Chapter 1)



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

What do you think of Susan and Oliver Ward's marriage? Do you think they would have been better off marrying other people? Did Susan truly love Oliver or was he a distraction from Augusta?

Topic 2

What are your views on the inferiority and superiority of the West and East? Do you think that those who settled the West were inferior to those in the East?

Topic 3

Do you think Susan is judgmental of people? She did not grow up rich, but sees poor people as inferior. Do you think her relationship with Augusta influenced her in a negative or positive way?

Topic 4

What do you think of Susan and Frank's relationship? Were they inappropriate? Are they to blame for the death of Agnes?

Topic 5

Is there a connection between the marriages of Oliver and Susan Ward and Lyman and Ellen Ward? Are there any similarities? Any differences?

Topic 6

Does examining his grandparents' lives help Lyman to understand his own? What does he learn about himself by learning about his grandparents? Will it affect his life in a positive or negative way? Why?