

At the Edge of the Orchard Study Guide

At the Edge of the Orchard by Tracy Chevalier

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Plot Summary

NOTE: The following version of the book was used to make this Study Guide: Chevalier, Tracy. *At the Edge of the Orchard*. Penguin Random House LLC, New York, 2016. Kindle AZW file.

Sadie and James Goodenough married and began their family in Connecticut, but the family farm was not large enough to support the extended family and James wound up being the brother to leave. He and Sadie moved west and were literally stuck when they reached Black Swamp, Ohio. Without the will or the ability to traverse any more of the muddy terrain, they settled on a farm and began to eke out a living.

By the spring of 1838, they have buried five of their 10 children. The remaining children include two older boys, Caleb and Nathan, and three younger children, Sal, Margaret, and Robert. Sadie hates their lives there and has become vindictive to the point of hating everything and everyone. She turns to alcohol for comfort, made from some of the family's apple trees. James loves the apple trees and the orchard has become his method of coping with his harsh, disappointing life. He is prone to violence and often beats Sadie and even the children.

There are no kindnesses between Sadie and James, and James constantly fears that Sadie will harm the apple orchard. Robert has learned to graft from spending time with James, and one day James finds a graft on a wild apple tree. Days later, the family goes to the nearby town where they buy supplies and attend the camp meeting. Sadie becomes drunk and has sex with a random man. James finds them in the midst of the act, and he packs up the wagon to return home, planning to leave Sadie behind. After a brief conversation with Robert and Sal, James fears that Sadie might stumble across Robert's grafted tree on her way home, and he knows she will probably destroy it if she finds it. He takes her home with him rather than run that risk.

By fall, the family has endured a bout of swamp fever. When they are back on their feet, James, Robert, and Martha harvest the Golden Pippins. Sadie rushes to the orchard with an ax, intent on destroying the trees. She does not know exactly why, except that the trees have come to represent her harsh life in the swamp and that the family might be free to leave if the trees were gone. As she swings the ax, James steps in the way, intent only on saving his tree. Sadie delivers a mortal blow with the ax. She walks toward James who kicks at her, knocking her onto one of the stakes from the orchard fence. She is impaled, and with her dying breath, she tells Robert that he should leave the swamp, that James is not his father, and that he should not take his sister because she will only slow him down.

Robert runs away, generally westward, and winds up in California where he meets William Lobb, a plant collector who sends seeds and seedlings to England. Robert soon becomes William's right hand. Meanwhile, Robert also reconnects with a former lover, Molly Jones. Martha's life continues to be harsh. She is raped by a neighbor and later by her own brother, who fathers the child she is carrying when she learns that Robert is

in California. She reaches Robert just as Molly announces that she is also carrying a child, and that it is likely Robert's.

Martha dies shortly after giving birth to a son and Molly takes over the baby's care, nursing it when Robert had come to fear that the baby might die. Molly soon gives birth to a daughter. Robert discovers that he is going to have to make a trip to England just an hour before he has to leave. Molly makes him take time to realize that he does not have to spend his life reacting to situations, including running from his childhood memories. Robert realizes that he does want Molly and the babies to accompany him, and they set out for England with Molly teaching Robert that life can be exciting and fun.



Part 1: “Black Swamp, Ohio, Spring 1838,” pages 1-31

Summary

The novel opens with Part 1: “Black Swamp, Ohio, Spring 1838.” James Goodenough and his wife, Sadie, are constantly arguing about whether their apple orchard should have more “eaters,” or “spitters” (3). The eaters are used for eating and the spitters are used for making drinks. Sadie wants more spitters. James wants more eaters.

Sadie is, as usual, suffering from a hangover. John Chapman had been their guest the previous evening. His presence always made her happier. James had gone to bed, but was not able to sleep with John and Sadie talking so nearby. He could have gone to bed with the children, farther from the conversation, but could not bring himself to leave the empty bed so near as an unnecessary temptation. James is no longer sexually attracted to Sadie because she is a mean drunk. But he notices her body when John is visiting. They have had 10 children together.

John Chapman travels the nearby river as part of his route over Ohio. He sells apple saplings and seedlings, and gives away apple seeds. The law is that every homesteader must have 50 fruit trees on their property in order to hold their claim, and John reminds the landowners of that law. James is nearing the 50-tree minimum. He has spent more money on trees than he should have, and could have raised trees from seeds much more cheaply. He did not feel he could wait for the trees to mature because he craved the apples so acutely.

On the day after John's visit, Sadie and James are arguing. James is good at grafting trees and he wants to make some of their apple trees into eaters but Sadie wants to keep them as spitters. She makes multiple arguments, including that John gave the apple trees in question specifically to her. James knows that John never gives away seedlings because they are too valuable.

James is attuned to his trees and takes comfort in planning for the future of the apple orchard, including grafting Gold Pippins, which is an apple he truly loves. He sits at the table, thinking about the trees he is about to graft, and Sadie harasses him over the fact that he is planning for 53 trees rather than the required 50, and predicts he will not reach even 50. James slaps her. She begins to hit back, using her fists. James slaps her again. He tells one of their daughters, Martha, to help Sadie clean up and to call him when supper is ready. James is partial to Martha and he “feared for her each August when the swamp fever arrived” (7). Several of their children have died.

The perspective changes to Sadie's point of view. She says she is used to being slapped and does not really care. Sadie talks about James's love of the apple trees and her own indifference. When the perspective changes back to James, he remembers that



his mother gave him apples as a sweet treat. Sugar was rare but apples were available once the trees were established. That means that apples hold an important place in James's memories, and he struggled during their first years in Black Swamp when the apple trees were not yet producing. Sadie remembers that they lived on James's home property in the east but the farm was not enough to support the entire family. Though James was not the youngest son, the family decided he should go, partly because none of the other wives liked Sadie. She liked James's brother, Charlie, and wished that she had been traveling with him instead of James.

Sadie recounts the trip to Ohio. They had not planned to stop at the Black Swamp but were bogged down in mud to the point that they simply could not go on, and wound up settling in the Black Swamp near the Portage River. She says they battled to clear the trees in order to plant crops and fruit trees, and to build a house. Sadie was pregnant with Robert when they arrived at Black Swamp.

The Golden Pippins are James's favorite variety of apple. He has grafted several of their apple trees with the Gold Pippins, which have a lengthy history with James's family. Robert is very interested in James's work with the apple trees, which should have made him James's favorite son. However, James feels that Robert is always watching him so intensely that he is often on edge with the youngster. Robert was born after their arrival at Black Swamp, and is the only family member never struck by the swamp fever. James favors Martha because the young girl never seems to expect anything of James. James grafts a few trees each year in order to improve their orchard and Robert has learned from helping James.

Sadie remembers meeting John Chapman for the first time, soon after their arrival at Black Swamp. He quickly made his opinion against grafting known, saying it "tampered with God's creation" (21). Sadie likes John because he does not tell her she is wrong for drinking, nor does he hide her liquor. He was also the one who showed her how to use apple cider for treating the swamp fever, though James does not believe it helps. He also taught her to make applejack, a hardened version of apple cider. Sadie remembers the five children who died of swamp fever, leaving her with five living children, but she is not certain she remembers the order of their deaths.

James has a conversation with his daughter, Sal, who is 12 years old and openly insolent toward her father. James wishes she was interested in grafting, but she is not. When he discovers that her younger sister, Martha, is preparing the family's next meal and that Sadie is in bed with a hangover, James instructs Sal to get started in the garden. She ignores him and goes inside where she immediately tells Sadie that James is "butchering your trees," knowing that will anger Sadie (30). Sadie knows that Sal is a tattletale and that she tattles in an effort to make the world a fairer place than it actually is. Sadie goes outside and sees James and Robert focused on their grafting. She says it reminds her of how the other wives of James's family would put their heads together and talk about Sadie.

Sadie wants to throw a fit, but she restrains herself. When John Chapman arrives the next time, he makes it clear that he disapproves of James's grafting. James argues that



grafts are no different than pruning, mulching, and other maintenance chores in the orchard. The conversation turns so that John accuses James of failing to care for his family, including Sadie. By the end of their argument, James agrees to buy some saplings to get John to go away. Sadie, who is eavesdropping, is happy that the men are arguing about her.

Analysis

An important piece of information is revealed about James early in the novel when he talks about his need for the apple trees. He buys seedlings from John Chapman, though he could have gotten seeds for free and grown his own seedlings. He spends money he really does not have because he needs to get apple trees growing on his property as a means of comforting himself for the situation he is in. He has come to a point of having quite a few apple trees, and this soothes him. The apple trees are James's way of coping with the situation. The first important point about this situation is that James needs a means of coping. He seems happier than Sadie, but he is actually miserable, just as she is. The second important point is that he has found a means of coping that is less destructive than Sadie's coping mechanism, which is liquor.

There are several literary devices throughout the novel. In this first chapter, the reader will see metaphors and similes used several times. One of the more interesting examples is seen when Sadie says that they "hunkered down like toads in the stinkin rottin swamp" (16). Later, James says that buds are emerging on his apple trees "like foxes poking their noses from their dens" (26). Contrast is another literary tool and these two metaphors, representing Sadie's perspective compared to James's perspective, is an example of contrast.

The changing perspective is obvious because of the change in tone and in presentation. The novel opens in a third-person perspective focused on James. During that part of the novel, the reader learns about the family and their situation, but from James's point of view. The words are presented fully, a direct contrast to Sadie's tendency to drop the "g" from the end of words. There are several other differences. For example, the novel uses traditional wording and punctuation when the perspective is focused on James, but the tone shifts to sound much more uneducated when it changes to Sadie, including omitting most punctuation such as apostrophes. The novel from James's perspective is presented in third person. When the novel changes to Sadie, the point of view changes to first person. Another major difference is that Sadie seems to be talking directly to the reader whereas James's perspective seems more like a narrator relating events.

James compares grafting apple trees to making a baby, though he believes he has more control over an apple tree graft than over a child. He knows how to choose the best characteristics of various trees, combining them while eliminating the poorer characteristics so that the resulting tree is the best James can make it. He compares that to his children. He notes that his children are "a painful mixture of the things that bothered James about himself and what he hated in Sadie" (18). While James is on this topic, he also notes that Robert seems to be different from the rest of the family. He



talks about the negative traits of most of the children who do not seem to represent the positive characteristics of either of their parents. This line of thought is an important indication about what James thinks of himself as a person and as a father, and is a look into Robert's character, which will be important later in the novel.

Discussion Question 1

Describe James' connection to the apple trees. What do the trees symbolize to James?

Discussion Question 2

What information is revealed about Sadie, James, and their marriage in this section of the novel?

Discussion Question 3

List the members of the Goodenough family, along with their characteristics. Keep the list and add to it as more information is revealed.

Vocabulary

monotonous, persistence, vigorous, subsequent, graft, tenacious, transient, thrive, hubris, nascent, mercurial, infectious, scions, mediocre, methodical, cyclical, scions, cleft, lure, insolent, canny, stewardship



Part 1: “Black Swamp, Ohio, Spring 1838,” pages 31-65

Summary

James carefully watches Sadie, trying to ensure she does not damage the new grafts. One morning in the past he woke to find that her feet were muddy. He rushed outside and found the cow had destroyed seven of his 15 grafts. He did not wake or beat Sadie, but regrafted with scions he had hidden in the woods. He hoped that Sadie might not even notice.

Sadie talks about Martha, who goes about her day humming hymns that she must have learned from a neighbor, Hattie Day, “who knows her hymns and how to lord em over us” (34). Sadie waits until Martha leaves the room for a moment, then grabs the bottle of applejack and drinks it. She says she is not certain why she hides the drinking from Martha. When Martha returns with the apples, Sadie sees she has spitters. Sadie insists that Martha use the eaters, though it would be the last of the apples James had saved from the previous season. That night at dinner, James immediately recognizes the taste and he whips Martha for it. Sadie expects Martha to reveal that Sadie made her use the good apples, but she does not. Sadie admits that Martha's whipping “took the fun out of it,” especially since spitters make better pie (37). James knows that Sadie is behind it and he hates himself for whipping Martha, but he does it anyway and only stops when he sees Robert's grimace. The other children are completely indifferent and have all taken advantage of Martha's willingness to take the blame for wrongs. Sadie makes a comment that makes James know the situation has become an all-out war.

James goes outside. He has built a fence around the apple trees. The fence is a series of spikes aimed outward to keep anyone or anything from entering the orchard. Sadie seems to drop the fight, but James knows that it not in her nature. One spring day, James is walking through the woods in search of places to set snares. He is, as always, amazed by the new leaves emerging. He pauses to get mud out of his boot and sees a wild apple tree that has a perfect graft. He knows Robert must have done it as a means of ensuring that they would have a surviving apple tree if Sadie wrecked the trees in the orchard. James takes time to sit down and enjoy the coming of spring, looking at emerging leaves and flowers with the same amazement he has every year. He decides that he will not say anything to Robert because there are few secrets in the family that live in such small quarters. When he gets home, he sees an empty applejack bottle on one of the orchard fence spikes. He is relieved that there is no damage, but knows this is Sadie's way of stating that she has not forgotten the trees.

Sadie is thrilled that the family is preparing to go to Perrysburg to buy a few items and for the camp meeting, a religious event. She is sick of having only her family and the neighbor, Hattie Day, for companionship. The two older boys, Nathan and Caleb, take turns staying at home while the family spends a few days in town. The three younger



children, Sal, Martha, and Robert, draw straws to see which of them will remain. The children who stay home will milk the cow, tend the fire, and protect the farm from animals and Indians.

Sadie rides for a while on the wagon with James while the children walk behind. Sadie feels the impact of a brief truce in their constant fighting. James says he has thought about going back east because the life here is so difficult. Sadie does not want to be honest with him, and says she does not think about it. She points out that none of their children died the previous season. James says they lost nine apple trees. Sadie is furious, saying he never wanted to leave when their children died, but now wants to leave because of the trees. James says he feels guilty that they have lost so many children and that their surviving children have such a difficult life. Sadie surprises herself by saying they have no reason to go back, and that having five surviving children “aint so bad” (48). She says she would not want to leave behind the graves of her five dead children.

When they arrive in Perrysburg, James warns Sadie that they will not have money for any extras. She lists the things they need, including sugar and to have shoes mended. James says they cannot buy anything like ribbons, and that she will have to buy brown sugar because it is cheaper, and that they can put off the shoes until their fall trip to town. James has to leave his plow at the blacksmith's shop for repairs. James sells his furs for less than he expected, mainly because he is not good at arguing for a good deal. He goes to meet Sadie at the store, planning to tell her that they cannot buy even brown sugar.

Sadie has surrounded herself with women. She goes on a rant about James and his apples, telling the story of using the eating apples in a pie. Their neighbor, Hattie Day, moves away from the group after hearing the story. Sadie can never stand to be ignored and she follows Hattie, asking what Hattie would do if her husband was so focused on apples. Hattie says their lives are hard, and that she would let him have that one pleasure. James watches the conversation and is surprised when he feels sorry for Sadie. He tells her that she can get white sugar and even some ribbons. He feels it is worth the cost to see her “rare grateful smile” and knows that he will never shun her, even when other women do (53).

Sadie meets up with lots of people and enjoys the camp meeting, honing in on preachers that she especially likes. Over the course of the evening, she drinks a lot and winds up having sex with a strange man. James finds her in the midst of the act, and he is furious. He hitches up the wagon and pulls out of town, but Robert points out that they have not picked up their plow from the blacksmith. James knows that he cannot make another trip back to town to get it, so he turns back and waits for the shop to open. While they wait, Robert and James talk about the apple tree Robert grafted. Through the conversation, James realizes that Sadie, who does not really know the way home, might stumble on the tree if she takes the wrong trail toward their farm. He sends Robert to get Sadie. When Robert reaches Sadie, she is crying and feeling sorry for herself. She allows him to “take my head and lead me away like I was a child” (65).



Analysis

The essential conflict of this part of the novel is set up with James's and Sadie's all-out war over the fruit trees. They each have motivations and emotions, and neither is willing to work toward combined goals. Instead, they are hateful and vindictive, which often turns to violence. While Sadie's actions seem to be more vindictive than James's, it is also clear that James no longer shows any love for Sadie and he has come to care only about the apple orchard. It could be said that he has become as addicted to the success of the apple orchard as Sadie is to the liquor she brews. By this point, their relationship has deteriorated so far that they no longer have any concern for each other or for the family as a whole. An example is seen the morning after James discovers Sadie opened the gate and let the cow destroy the trees. He feels that she looks "happier and more peaceful" than she has a right to be (33).

The author depends on imagery and personification to set tones and describe situations. An example of these literary tools is seen when Sadie is talking about Martha's shy attitude. She says that Martha was "the only weak one" (34) who had not died from swamp fever. She also talks about Martha's tendency to hum hymns "to block out the sound of Deaths footsteps behind her" (34). The author personifies death through Sadie's thoughts, but also prompts the reader to imagine Martha, shyly going about her day with Death lurking near, waiting for the right moment to strike. The author's decision to ignore traditional punctuation, such as the apostrophe that would normally appear in "Death's footsteps," is an effective tool for making the reader continue to understand Sadie's lack of education and her country slang. Death is also one of the novel's themes, and the personification makes the reader feel the pending doom as the family does.

James describes Sadie's actions and attitudes, and it seems likely that she is suffering from mental illness, probably exacerbated by the hardships of their lives. He says she is sometimes happy and full of life, as she was when he met her when Sadie was just a girl. More often, she is angry and filled with bitterness, which could be partly caused by the liquor she consumes on a regular basis. She begins a task and then tackles it with all her energy. For example, she might decide to air all the family's blankets, and she will stretch out a line and begin dragging blankets outside. But she will invariably try to carry too many and wind up dragging some through the mud so that one of the girls has to stop and wash them. By that time, Sadie will move on to another task, such as scrubbing the surfaces in the cabin, but she will use so much vinegar that the family cannot stand to be inside. These erratic focuses are indicative of mental disorders, which were completely undiagnosed during this time of history. The fact that Sadie is becoming more and more dependent on alcohol makes the symptoms more serious and pronounced. The fact that she cannot see the symptoms in herself or figure out how to address them is another symptom.

James clearly has a love of nature that goes beyond his apple trees, though the orchard is his personal focus. He passes that love on to Robert through their time working on grafts together, and those lessons set Robert's future in motion, though he does not



know it at the time. This love of nature is one of the novel's themes, and is an important part of Robert's future.

Sadie's contempt for everything and everyone has become abundantly clear by the time the family is preparing to go to Perrysburg for the camp meeting. She does not even have compassion or love for her children, which most readers will consider a reprehensible character flaw. She berates Martha for being so shy and so willing to accept blame, even though she was glad that Martha did not tell on Sadie for being responsible for using the last of the eating apples in a pie. When the three younger children draw straws to decide who will remain at home, Martha draws the short straw, meaning she will not go to town. Robert offers to stay in her place, which infuriates Sadie. She should have been proud of Robert's willingness to let Martha have the trip, but she sees his gesture as weakness instead of an honorable act. Robert offers to bring her back some candy, pointing out that he will sell some squirrel tails to earn a little money. Sadie berates Martha's decision that she would prefer lemon candy over peppermint. She also notes that Sal never has to stay home because she is a cheater, but Sadie does not address that either. Her entire attitude is merely contemptuous and she has no interest in trying to help her children develop positive traits.

Sadie makes no explanation for arguing with James against returning to their family homes in Connecticut, but the reader can assume that she will argue with James about anything, regardless of how she actually feels about it.

Sadie has mentioned James's brother Charles on several occasions, including that she had sex with him before the family left Connecticut. She has also hinted that there was something special about Robert. These are events of foreshadowing that set the reader up to discover that Sadie believes Charles is Robert's biological father.

The perspective changes rapidly between James and Sadie, and each has its own points and focuses. An example is seen when James thinks about the anticipation he feels about an upcoming trip to Perrysburg compared to the reality once they get there. The town is relatively small by modern standards, but feels crowded to James. He hates the smells and feel of the town, even though he also hates the mud and the work on their farm.

While Sadie is outgoing and wants to be the center of attention, James is shy and quiet to the point of reticence. He shows this in one of the scenes in which he is talking with other men gathered in Perrysburg. He seldom contributes anything at all to the conversations, but this time he speaks up, saying that he lost nine apple trees the previous year. He briefly joins the conversation for a moment, talking about trees and grafts, but then drops back out. That brief interaction fills him with happiness for hours to come. That is an aspect of his character and the author uses that scene for subtle character development.

Sadie lets herself go as soon as she arrives at the camp meeting, and she has to admit that her actions are not really religious as much as they are self-serving, allowing her to let her hair down. That same attitude is in place when she has sex with the random



man. An important part of her character is seen in her attitude when she gets up the next morning. She is rumbled and has lost her bonnet, and it would be obvious to anyone who sees her that she has not been behaving as an honorable wife and mother should. She says that other people are able to misbehave and get away with it, but that she always gets caught.

Discussion Question 1

As the author reveals more information about Sadie, does she become a more sympathetic character? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

What is the significance of the wild apple tree Robert grafts?

Discussion Question 3

Describe Sadie's attitude toward and about her children. What would make a woman behave that way?

Vocabulary

squelching, civility, apocalyptic, profoundly, grateful, fret, macadamize, content, haggler, pragmatism, tarnished, sidled, prudent, smirking, correspondences, redemption, regeneration, congregationalist, hovering, snivel



Part 2: “America, 1840-1856”

Summary

The second section of the novel is titled “Part 2: America, 1840-1856.” This section consists of a series of letters from Robert to his family. The first is dated January 1, 1840, and Robert announces that he has “learnt” to write (69). He is in Canada, has worked on a ship on Lake Erie, and hopes that no one else has died of the fever. The next letter is dated January 1, 1841, and Robert is in Detroit. He says they can write to him at the Winston Hotel, where he is a dishwasher. The third letter is dated January 1, 1842. He is traveling with a man named Jonah Parks who sells “medisin” (71). He says they can write to him in care of Jonah Parks to “almost any town in Indiana” (71). He wishes for news of the family and says he saw John Chapman, who said he no longer travels in Ohio and was not able to tell Robert anything about his family.

The next letter is dated January 1, 1844. Robert says he spent time in jail because of his affiliation with Mr. Parks, and has now moved farther west, to Wisconsin. The next letter is from Missouri Territory on January 1, 1847. He wonders how his siblings are and how their lives have changed in the eight years he has been gone.

The next letter is from Texas on January 1, 1849. Robert announces his plans to go to California. The next is dated January 1, 1850, from California. He is working in the mining camps and says that everyone is looking for gold. He wishes for news from home. The next letter is dated January 1, 1851, and Robert says he has had enough mining, and now plans to leave. The next is dated January 1, 1853, and Robert is in Sacramento. He says mining “breaks a mans spirit to chase gold” (80). He is now working on farms and mentions the huge redwood trees in California.

The next letter is dated January 1, 1854. Robert says he has begun work for William Lobb, who is a plant agent. William collects seeds, plants, and trees to send to England and Robert says this job is “better than I ever expected” (83). By this time, Robert has been to Calaveras Grove where he has seen trees similar to the giant redwoods, but even larger. He ends the letter by saying he hopes his family has not forgotten about him. The final letter is dated January 1, 1856. Robert has been gone from Black Swamp for 17 years and says he has never heard from anyone. He believes his family might have forgotten him, and says this is his final letter.

Analysis

Robert writes all the letters to his siblings with no mention of his parents, which is an example of foreshadowing. The details of what happened to make Robert leave are revealed in the next section of the novel.



Robert writes in a very halting manner with many mistakes and misspellings. The quality of the writing improves over the years, though he never comes across as an educated man.

The use of letters serves as a means of condensing a great deal of Robert's life into a few pages of text. The author conveys the idea that Robert is lonely at times, and that he misses his family despite the fact that he seems unwilling or unable to return to Black Swamp.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think the author uses letters to convey an overview of the almost two decades after Robert leaves the swamp?

Discussion Question 2

Describe some of Robert's jobs, and what that might indicate about his life. How did Robert secure work at such a young age?

Discussion Question 3

Who is William Lobb? Why would a plant agent feel like a wonderful career for Robert?

Vocabulary

agent, collecting, grateful, redwoods, ranches, spirit, flakes, overland



Part 3: “California, 1853-1856,” pages 85-123

Summary

In Part 3, the story reverts back in time from the final letter Robert wrote in the previous section. In 1853 in California, Robert is working on farms and ranches in the area near Sacramento. He has heard about some trees that are “even bigger than redwoods,” and decides he wants to see them for himself (87). Robert is not certain that the stories are true, especially since he knows the redwoods grow nearer the coast than the mountainous region of these stories. He hears the stories from multiple sources, and decides to go, following directions and the stories to Calaveras Grove. Robert arrives and discovers the stories are true.

He finds the developers have used drilling rigs normally used by miners to gouge holes into one of the huge trees until it fell. They are planning to use the stump as a dance floor. Robert swears he will never set foot on it. A man offers Robert a job, but Robert declines. The man says he is the second today to “turn your nose up at good money” (93). The other man, later identified as William Lobb, is measuring the downed tree and collecting cones. He informs Robert that this is not a redwood, but a sequoia. He describes the differences between the trees. William introduces himself and asks Robert if he plans to help collect cones. He shows Robert how to tell if animals have been eating at the cones, which makes them unusable. He later retrieves his shotgun and begins shooting limbs out of standing trees, giving them more cones to collect. Next, they collect small seedlings.

A man named Billie Lapham, one of the developers, arrives and asks what Robert and William are doing. Billie's first worry is that Robert and William are going to grow their own grove of sequoias to compete with Billie's resort. William points out it would take hundreds of years for the trees to reach maturity. Robert quickly realizes he has to negotiate their situation and he promises to pay Billie five dollars for the right to pick up cones and dig up seedlings. Billie agrees, then realizes that he has claim on the only property where Robert and William can collect, but Robert reminds him that they have a deal and he stands by his word.

That night, the two men camp some distance from the developed property. William explains the seeds and seedlings he collects are sent to England to meet the demand for “new and different” kinds of trees and plants (106). The conversation turns to apples and Robert is dismayed to learn that Golden Pippins, his father's favorite, is a common variety in England. William, however, is delighted to learn that Robert's family had Golden Pippins growing on their Ohio farm, and says he would almost make the trip to Ohio just for a chance to taste one of the apples.



Over the next days, William teaches Robert more about collecting plants and seeds. Robert soaks up the knowledge as William lists names of the plants they encounter. They take a boat to San Francisco where William sets Robert up with a room at his boarding house, run by Mrs. Bienenstock. There, William teaches Robert more, including how to keep seeds from germinating until the correct time and how to prepare them for shipping.

One day, Robert goes to see the ocean. He has traveled west from Ohio and now accepts that he cannot go farther west, but he hates the idea of turning back toward the east. He also realizes that he cannot outrun a serious mistake in his past and that he has to “find a way to live with himself out here, or go back east and face what he had done” (118).

William reveals that he is not the only collector at work in the region, which makes it important that he rush his delivery. He shows Robert how to build a Ward's case for transporting the seedlings. Made of wood and glass, the case would remain closed for the entire trip to England and the plants would survive from the condensation on the glass. Then William announces that he is traveling to England with the shipment. Robert believes this is an end to his employment, but Mrs. Bienenstock gives him a list of plants and seeds William wants him to collect and announces that William left money for Robert's salary until William's return. The list is fairly extensive and includes a map of places where Robert might find the items.

Analysis

Robert's desire to see the huge sequoias is a sign of his love of nature, as is the fact that he refuses to ever step onto the huge stump of the one the developers chopped down. A man on the site offers Robert a job, but he refuses, knowing that he wants no part of this development. He would prefer to have the trees remain in their natural habitat and natural state.

The author uses the scene from the first time Billy Lapham meets William and Robert to further develop some of the characters, and the author introduces at least a little humor. Billy and his brother own the land, and they are trying to make it into a tourist destination. When William and Robert make it clear that they do not approve of cutting down the tree, Billy argues that there are “educational reasons” for cutting the tree (100). He argues that Robert and William are stealing valuable seedlings from him, but William counters, saying the seedlings will die because they cannot compete with the tall, well established trees for sunlight. Billy then argues that William is trying to grow a grove of his own, which would be competition for Billy's site. William counters, saying neither of them will live long enough to see these seedlings grow to giant adulthood. Billy then makes another comment about the redwoods, but William counters that as well, saying the “California Academy of Sciences decided it is a different genus from redwoods and have named it a giant sequoia” (102). Billy is very upset by this news, and argues that he has already placed advertisements in newspapers, as if that could change the minds of the scientists. Within minutes, William walks away and Robert has



to negotiate for the right to gather more cones and seedlings. From the details of this scene, the reader learns that Billy is in favor of developing the property, but does not fully approve of cutting down the tree, and that he worries about his investment. It also becomes clear that Robert is already enamored with William and is willing to take on the duty of negotiating for the right to gather the cones and seeds.

When Robert was a child, James would quiz him about the origins of the Gold Pippin trees. The strain James has come from his family's home in England, and Robert grew up believing that the variety was rare and perhaps that only his father's family had even grown that kind of apple tree. When William says the Gold Pippin is not the most common variety in England, but is one of the most common, Robert feels a pang of disappointment. Though the reader will soon learn that Robert had a very brief childhood with his family, the idea of family remains important to him.

Robert is in a problematic emotional state when he reaches the California coast and sees the ocean. This is the first time the reader learns that Robert has always moved westward because he is running away from something. Robert's traveling is one example of a person's method of coping, which is one of the novel's themes.

There is a significant piece of foreshadowing in this section. Though it refers back to Robert's past, the details are not revealed until the next part, which reverts back to Black Swamp in 1838. While Robert hints that there is a reason he is to blame for the events, the reader will discover that idea comes from the fact that the event – which results in both his parents dying – is viewed from Robert's perspective as a child. The demons he faces are related to the fact that he believes his parents set out to murder each other. The guilt is caused by his belief that he abandoned Martha, and that he should have taken her with him.

Discussion Question 1

What is the significance of the giant sequoias in Robert's life?

Discussion Question 2

How do Robert's interactions with William Lobb impact Robert's life?

Discussion Question 3

Why has Robert moved always toward the west, and why he is so overcome with emotion when he reaches the ocean on the California coast?



Vocabulary

doggedly, pursued, interjected, substantiated, mammoth, balked, caprices, tawny, sentinels, ludicrous, discernible, insouciance, consummate, braggart, stolid, rudiments, sanguine, burgeoning, differentially



Part 3: “California, 1853-1856,” pages 123-153

Summary

For more than a year, Robert collects the plants on William's list. By spring, Robert has collected, packed, and shipped three sets of “specimens” (124). He spends a lot of time alone, which he does not mind, and sometimes goes to visit Mrs. Bienenstock just for the company. One day he encounters a woman named Molly Jones. She had taught Robert about sex five years earlier on a Texas ranch. She had never pushed Robert to talk about his past, which he liked, but she had talked freely about her own. When they meet up in California, Molly says she has decided to make her living by providing food for the miners.

Robert tells her about his job and she is amazed that people in England are willing to pay for the trees that Robert ships halfway around the world. Robert talks more about trees during the few minutes of this meeting, including a description of the sequoias.

For just a moment, Robert thinks he sees desperation in Molly's eyes that could have been relief at seeing a familiar face. Robert hates that look and ultimately wants Molly to be the kind of person who does not need anything from Robert. They part, but three weeks later, Robert travels to the mining camp at French Creek where she has settled and he sees that same “flash of desperation” (130). They have sex and he remains three days. When he packs up to leave, Molly says he could stay with her, but he promises to visit again. Molly is hoping to find a man to marry, but Robert “became Molly's backup plan” (132).

William Lobb returns to California. He praises Robert's work and updates him on their situation. William is angry that their employer, James Veitch, is making a huge profit on the trees William brings to England. William picks up teaching Robert about plants, focusing sometimes on flowers. William continues to complain about James Veitch, saying that his nursery would have no interesting inventory without William's work. William, meanwhile, is ill, and Robert picks up a heavier load. As months pass, William eventually remains at the boarding house all the time with Robert doing all the collecting and stopping periodically to visit Molly. One day, Robert finds another grove of sequoias. He keeps the location a secret, fearing that someone else will develop it.

Robert and Billie Lapham have become friends, and Robert likes Billie's wife, Nancy. She has TB but always smiles at Robert and the resort's guests, and sometimes manages small chores. When Robert stops in for a visit one day, Billie announces that he has sold out his share of the sequoia resort to his partner, Smith Haynes, in order to take Nancy to a nearby town where she can receive better medical care and to get away from Haynes, who is not kind to Nancy.



During one visit, Billie announces that a woman is looking for Robert, and Robert guesses that it must be Nancy. Nancy is in bed and Robert knows she is very ill. They talk for a few minutes before Nancy brings the conversation to a woman who is looking for Robert, and Robert discovers that it is not Nancy at all. Nancy makes it clear that she and Billie have worried that Robert might be lonely, and she says he should have told her that he has a woman. Robert believes they are talking about Molly, and he is embarrassed to think of Molly seated in Nancy's small bedroom "with her curves and her laugh and her desperation" (148). He is also upset with himself, feeling that he is being disloyal to Molly.

Nancy says this woman has been sleeping in the barn because she does not have enough money for a room. She then makes a reference to the woman's condition, which puts Robert in a panic. He goes to the barn but a worker says the woman has gone for a walk to look at the trees. He makes a gesture that makes it clear the woman is pregnant. Robert has not seen Molly for four months, and he ponders the situation, including that she must have been pregnant when he was there last. Robert sees a woman seated among the trees, and when she struggles to stand, he realizes the pregnant woman is his sister, Martha.

Analysis

From the moment of their meeting, the relationship between Robert and Molly has been an important part of Robert's life, and probably more important to Robert than to Molly though Robert does not see it that way. When they reconnect in California, Robert is happy that Molly is self-sufficient and does not need anything from him. Later, when Molly turns up pregnant and does need him, Robert is upset. In this way, he is a very selfish person and is not open to the possibility that there might be a give-and-take relationship possible with Molly. This is an interesting aspect of Robert's character, and seems out of sync with the rest of his personality. However, when the reader learns the details of what happened between Robert's parents, his lack of interest in a marriage or partnership of any kind will become more understandable.

Nancy seems, on the surface, to be a very minor character in the novel. However, she plays an important role in Robert's life as he grows into maturity. She provides a stable influence, and she is a role model for what a wife and mother could be. Robert has never known anyone like her, and she is a sharp contrast to his own mother.

The language throughout most of the novel is fairly common, but there are a few instances of slang words with sexual meanings and curse words. The average adult reader will not find these words overly offensive, and they seem to be the author's way of making conversations, thoughts, and scenes seem believable.

Robert talks about the fact that the developers at Claveras Grove named the giant sequoias and posted signs identifying them by title. For example, one large tree with a smaller one nearby are named Mother and Son. The fact that the developers name the



trees and that Robert hates that practice are each examples of the comparisons between people and trees, which is one of the novel's themes.

Discussion Question 1

Describe what you know about Robert up to this point, including his positive and negative characteristics.

Discussion Question 2

Who are Nancy and Billie Lapham? Describe Robert's relationship with Nancy. Why does she say she and Billie have worried about Robert?

Discussion Question 3

Who is Molly? What is her connection with Robert? Predict how their relationship will change in the future.

Vocabulary

charlatan, volatile, pensive, slaked, minutiae, extracting, pittance, flamboyant, unwarranted, robust, commiserate, disdain, provoke, bosom, proprietor, effacious, foliage, entwined



Part 4: “Black Swamp Ohio, Fall 1838”

Summary

The story reverts back to Black Swamp, in the months after the first section of this novel. This section picks up just after the events described about James and Sadie Goodenough and their constant bickering over the apple trees. The section opens with the family suffering their seasonal fight with swamp fever. This time, James and Sadie are both in bed, as are three of the other children, leaving Robert and Martha to take care of all the work on the farm. It is a serious time of the year with crops ready for harvest. Robert is only nine, but is doing the work of an adult. Hattie Day steps in to help Martha with the canning and John Day has been helping with the outside work. James feels they are accepting too much help from the Days, who have their own farm to run and no children to help, but there are no options.

The relationship between Sadie and James changed after the incident at camp meeting. Sadie makes certain she is never alone with James. She has done more work recently, including clearing a spot for a winter potato crop, but admits that she is doing so try to get her children to stop looking at her with such deep judgment. She has stopped drinking because she is out of applejack and her tolerance for cider is too high to get drunk. Now, with the fever raging, she moans and calls out “Charlie,” the name of James’s brother, but she admits that she is doing it just to hurt James because he would not help her clear the stumps from her potato garden.

While Hattie is helping Robert and Martha can food, James is pleased to hear the children laugh but he feels jealous that Hattie is so efficient. Sadie is furious but James tells her they need Hattie's help. James is the first to be well enough to work. He checks the apple trees and sets the day for picking the crop. When Sadie is finally out of bed, James finds her seated outside the house. He asks why she isn't working. She says the only reason to have children is to work, which prompts James to slap her. She welcomes the slap because she has come to hate it when they are getting along.

Sal, Robert, Martha, and James pick the spitters first. When they are finished, Robert climbs an apple tree and directs Martha on how to climb up as well. James and the two children share one of the Golden Pippins, which are not yet ready to harvest. James becomes angry with Sadie because she does not core the apples she sets out to dry, though he hates that their argument spoils the good mood Martha and Robert shared earlier. She says she thought Martha would like the apples that way because they are pretty with their star-shaped core intact.

John Chapman arrives and Sadie becomes animated at his arrival. She is still feeling ashamed of her action at the camp meeting, but does not tell him about it. They stay up late, drinking the apple jack he brought. Sadie suggests she could go with him when he leaves. He says he travels alone. He then asks Sadie why she hates the trees so much. She says the apple trees James plants have thrived here, and that she never will. John



points out that trees have to fight for survival in the forest, and Sadie points to James, saying she is fighting as well. Later, Sadie throws all the drying apple rings on the floor. The next morning, John is gone and the rings have been placed on a sheet. Sadie says she never asked who picked them up.

After John leaves, Sadie drinks to excess and James plans to ensure that John does not have applejack with him on his next visit. Sadie accuses James of pouring out the last of the liquor, but he says she drank it. James, Robert, and Martha are harvesting the Golden Pippins when Sadie arrives at the orchard with an ax. They fight brutally. She takes a swing at one of the Golden Pippin trees, but James jumps in the way and she hits him in the side. It is clear that his lung is collapsed and that he is dying. She walks back toward him, not really sure what she plans to do next, and he grabs her ankle so that she falls backward, driving a spike from the deer fence directly through her chest. It does not hurt a lot in the first moment, and she thinks that she really hoped that chopping down the trees would release them from Black Swamp so they could go somewhere else to start over.

As she is dying, Sadie sees Robert. She admits to herself that she has more love for him than for any of her other children. She says James's brother, Charles is Robert's father. At the look on his face, she says he is "probably your father" because she wants to "soften the blow" (184). She then says that he has to get out of Black Swamp, and urges him to find some prairie land. Robert immediately looks toward Martha. Sadie says Martha will "jest hold you up," and urges him not to wait, but to leave immediately (194). Sadie has the satisfaction of seeing him leave as she dies.

Analysis

By the fall, Sadie has become so vindictive and filled with hate that she no longer cares about anything or anyone. She has been headed in this direction for a long time, but has now reached a breaking point. James is jealous when he hears Robert and Martha laughing with Hattie Day, but Sadie is furious. One specific item fully shows her vindictiveness. While Hattie and the children are preserving the food, Hattie discovers that the Days have an abundance of eggs because several members of the family have been too ill to eat.

Hattie suggests they pickle the eggs so they do not ruin. When they are putting the eggs in jars, Hattie says she sometimes puts beet juice in her pickled eggs, just to make them more attractive in the jar. Sadie yells out that she does not want that, but then she tries to get out of bed, falls, and passes out. While she is out, Hattie and Martha put beet juice in one of the jars. When Sadie is well and finds the jar, she shouts at Martha, accusing her of disobeying even though Martha says she did it just because it looks pretty. Sadie then shoves the jar off the table, fully on purpose, so that it breaks, and she tells Martha to clean up "that pretty mess" (171). Sadie's attitude is quickly going downhill and neither she nor James have any inclination to try to resolve their issues. At one point, Sadie even sets out to anger James because she feels that they have been



united in their dislike of Hattie's presence. She literally cannot stand for them to have a shared interest or to stand together on any issue.

The use of Sadie as a first person perspective is a powerful tool throughout the novel, and it is especially effective as Sadie is dying. She admits that she wanted to chop down the trees, seeing them as the reason they were forced to remain in Black Swamp. Sadie does not have a plan other than to get out of this situation. She also does not have a plan when she moves toward James while he is on the ground with the ax embedded in his side. She says that she might have been hoping that he would not die if she removed the ax, or that she might have moved on to cut down more trees. There is no reason for her to tell Robert about his parentage, but she immediately knows that he is devastated by the news, and she tells him she cannot be certain whether his father is James or Charles, as if that is supposed to make him feel better. The final statement of the chapter is still from Sadie's perspective. She tells James to leave immediately, and to go alone so he can travel away from Black Swamp faster. This is what Sadie wants to do, and she foists that desire off onto Robert in a moment of tragedy. Sadie sees that Robert is leaving, "And so did I" (184). The fact that she is the person who informs the reader of her own death is an interesting use of perspective, and it makes an impact that would have been lessened if the news came from any other character.

The reader has to remember that Robert is only nine years old when his parents kill each other. He sees the entire scene and then he is hit with the news that James is "probably" not his biological father (184). Sadie then tells him to leave. Robert and Martha are close, and they serve as something of a buffer for each other against the harsh lives they live. Robert, however, walks away at this moment and he never goes back, as seen from the letters in a previous section of the novel. He has apparently never forgiven himself for leaving Martha, though he never really addresses the guilt he feels or even fully confirms that this is why he has always traveled west, trying to get as far from Ohio as he can.

Discussion Question 1

Describe some of the hardships faced by various members of the Goodenough family.

Discussion Question 2

What is the significance of Hattie Day using beet juice in the pickled eggs?

Discussion Question 3

How do James and Sadie die? Describe how their deaths might affect the children.



Vocabulary

chaste, festooned, whorls, ornery, folly, trundled, consequences, unblemished, mortal, scattering, reeling, quills, stroke, gait



Part 5: “Black Swamp, Ohio, 1844-1856”

Summary

This section of the novel is again comprised of letters. The first letter is dated June 25, 1844, from Martha to Robert. Martha condenses the events of the years following Robert's and Sadie's deaths. The children ate what the family had already harvested that first year, but the children were not able to manage the farm as well the second year. Some neighbors pitched in, including the Days. John Chapman heard the news on one of his visits, and has never returned again. One of their older brothers, Nathan, died of the fever. Sal moved to Toledo and is living a disreputable life. After that, Martha went to live with the Days. They have provided for her. Martha got Robert's letter because Hattie Day happened to see it at the post office on a trip to town.

The next letter is dated January 1, 1845. Martha describes a hard life with the Days and hopes Robert will send money so that she can join him. She has seen Sal, who now has a son named Paul. She says Caleb burned Robert's previous letter, and that she has recently picked apples from the tree that Robert grafted. The next letter is dated August 15, 1845. Martha says both Hattie and John Day are suffering from the fever, leaving all the work to her. Caleb still lives on the Goodenough farm, and has a woman living with him. She says she has begun to save money with the plan that she will eventually travel to join Robert. The next is dated January 1, 1846. Martha is continuing to save and hopes her letter will catch up to Robert. On May 2, 1846, Martha writes to the manager of the Gilbert Hotel, asking them to pass along a letter to Robert.

The next letter is dated May 15, 1847. Martha says her previous letters to Robert have been returned and she learned that he traveled farther west. She is still working for the Days. Caleb has a son and Sal has two children. Martha has almost five dollars saved, but knows it is not enough to reach Robert.

The next letter is dated July 7, 1848, and Martha writes to the general at Fort Leavenworth, asking him to forward a letter to Robert. The next is dated January 1, 1859. Sal died the previous summer. The Days were not willing to take in her two children, who are now in an orphanage. She wishes she and Robert could take them in. Caleb's woman left him, taking their child. She has more than seven dollars saved for the trip, and is only waiting for Robert to write, telling her where she should go.

The next letter is dated March 11, 1855. Martha says that Hattie Day died, and then Martha became pregnant by John. The baby was born early and died. Since it became clear that John would not leave her alone, she has moved back to the farm with Caleb, though the conditions are horrible.

The final letter is dated February 2, 1856. Martha knows that Robert lives at Mrs. Bienenstock's boarding house and is on her way to him. Caleb had hidden all Robert's letters, but Martha found them, which is how she knows where he is now. She says that



Caleb was “unkind,” but she had no option but to remain with him until she found Robert's letters (207). She says she is writing just in case the letter finds its way to California before she arrives.

Analysis

The use of letters to describe Martha's life and the aftereffects of James and Sadie's deaths is an example of contrast, a literary tool seen several times over the course of this novel. The first set of letters was from Robert to his siblings in the years after he leaves Black Swamp. This set is from Martha to Robert, answering some of his questions and providing the reader with information that is not revealed anywhere else in the novel.

The reader should remember that Martha has had very limited social contact with anyone other than her immediate family and the Days, which makes some of her attitudes seem overly naïve. For example, she uses a veritable code to say that Sal has become a prostitute. She says that John Day was “unkind” to describe the fact that he raped and impregnated her, and she uses the word “unkind” again to describe the fact that Caleb did the same (205 and 207).

Martha is described as a shy girl, willing to let anyone take advantage of her kindness. Both her parents notice her shyness, and Sadie believes it is equivalent to weakness. She is also raped by John Day and her own brother, Caleb. However, when Martha discovers where Robert is, she leaves the only home she can remember and sets out to find him. It means she is traveling across the country, alone and pregnant, during a time when travel is dangerous and uncertain. This should change the reader's image of Martha.

Discussion Question 1

Describe Martha's life after Robert left Black Swamp. With whom did she live? What were her circumstances like?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you believe the author includes Martha's letters as a section of the novel rather than having her tell Robert about her life in person?

Discussion Question 3

List three themes seen up to this point in the novel, with at least two examples of how the author explores these themes through character, setting, symbolism, etc.

Vocabulary

territory, iron, joy, general, pretend, handkerchief



Part 6: “California, 1856,” pages 212-250

Summary

Martha has Robert read through the letters she wrote, which were all returned, saying they can explain better than she. She says she took money from Caleb to pay for her trip after finding all of Robert's letters, including his address at Mrs. Bienenstock's boarding house. It was Mrs. Bienenstock who directed her to Calaveras Grove, giving her money for the steamboat. Martha reveals that she is having some pain related to the pregnancy, meaning the baby will be born soon but not immediately. Robert asks what they should do, referring to plans for the future, but she says Nancy has already said Martha should travel with them to the nearby town of Murphys to have the baby. Robert realizes he should “concentrate on the next few days for now, and leave the future to sort itself out” (216).

Martha spends some time with Nancy and Billie, who welcome her as a friend now that they know she is Robert's sister instead of his lover. Martha reveals that she brought Robert several Golden Pippin apple seeds, which delights him. Robert sets out to gather cones and seedlings, and is working when a boy brings the message that he has to return to the hotel. He finds Martha in tears and Nancy reassuring her that Robert had not left her behind. Robert also reassures her and understands that Martha cannot possibly know she can depend on him.

They travel as a group down the mountain from Calaveras Grove to the small town of Murphys. Nancy and Martha ride in a wagon together, and all the Lapham's possessions are in another wagon while Billie and Robert are on horseback. Billie continues to make optimistic comments about Nancy's health, believing that she will recover once they settle in at Murphys. He then asks Robert if Molly will be alright, pointing out her small size. He says doctors advised Nancy against having children because she is also a small woman. Robert is frightened at this new thought. Billie plans to ride ahead to ensure that a doctor is available as soon as the women arrive in town.

Before Billie gets on his way, they encounter a wagon headed toward Calaveras Grove and Robert is surprised to see that Molly is in the wagon, and that she is also pregnant. Molly demands introductions and explanations. Nancy introduces herself and Billie, and Robert finally manages to explain that Martha is his sister. Molly is clearly relieved. Molly makes it clear that she wants Robert to go with her, but he makes it clear that he needs to go with Martha. Molly recovers and tells him that she will go to the grove, and will wait until he is ready to join her.

After they part, Nancy and Martha demand that Robert explain about Molly. He answers their questions. Martha is in labor now, and she points out that her child and Molly's child will be cousins. With that statement, Robert suddenly feels that the situation is more in his control.



When they reach town, a doctor and a woman are waiting to help Martha have her baby. Robert wanders to the edge of town and Billie finds him there to announce that Martha has a healthy baby boy. Robert rejoins Martha, who asks for help choosing a name. She suggests James, like their father. Robert balks, saying that James was Martha's father, but not his. Martha counters, saying she believes their mother was, typically, fighting to the last" (230). Martha continues with the idea of naming the baby James, but says they will call him Jimmy. Robert has a vague memory of the name Jimmy on one of the series of grave markers in Black Swamp, and of his mother, who had "shouted at god and the swamp fever for taking her oldest boy" (231). Robert realizes that this new baby, named Jimmy, might be a way of answering that other Jimmy's death.

Later, Robert and Martha talk more about their plans. Martha now says that she and Caleb had a physical fight, and that "there was a lot of blood," though she is not certain whether she killed him (232). Either way, she says she will never return to Ohio. Robert says they will live somewhere remote where they will not be in the public eye and Martha will not have to fear that someone will come looking for her. She says that he has to join Molly the next day, ask her to marry him, and be certain that Molly will not mind sharing a home with Martha and her baby. Robert feels everything is moving quickly, but realizes that Martha is doing what all mothers should do – looking out for the future of their children.

The next morning, Billie and Nancy settle in to look after Martha while Robert goes to see Molly. They go for a walk together, looking at the trees. Robert asks if the baby is his, and Molly makes it clear that she is not entirely certain, but believes it is. Robert knows he will not get any other answer from her. When Molly accuses Robert of being unhappy that she is there, he stops her, pointing out that he has reunited with Martha after some 18 years of not even knowing if she was alive. Molly then asks about Robert's parents, and he explains their deaths. Molly assures Robert that they did not set out to kill each other, and that their deaths were literally a tragic accident.

Robert also says that he cannot forgive himself for leaving Martha behind, and Molly understands that is why Robert is so anxious to be with Martha now. They talk for a little longer and Molly urges Robert to go back to Martha, saying she will join them in Murphys soon. Robert rushes back toward Murphys, feeling an increasing sense of dread. Martha is in a puddle of blood on the bed, having died just moments before Robert's arrival. She had unexpected bleeding and bled to death. Robert allows the hotel manager and the sheriff to make arrangements for Martha's burial but he is faced with the problem of trying to care for Jimmy. Over the next couple of days, Robert tries every trick anyone suggests, but it soon becomes clear that Jimmy is growing weak.

Robert mounts his horse with Jimmy swaddled in the crook of his arm, and heads up the mountain. When he sees Molly, he suddenly realizes that he had been waiting in the hope that Molly would come to town to help care for Jimmy. Molly asks about Martha, but Robert begins to cry, making Molly understand what happened. As Jimmy cries, Molly says her breasts hurt, making it clear that he has an effect on her. She hold Jimmy and lets him suck, saying she has not had milk yet, but that she has heard of an

infant's presence making the milk come sooner. It takes a half hour for her to begin producing milk for Jimmy.

Analysis

Martha does not spell out the situation with Caleb, but it is not difficult to understand that he raped her and is the father of her unborn child. Robert is understandably furious.

Robert has to face the responsibility of taking care of Martha, and he reacts to it differently than he has to other situations, including the possibility of Molly trying to begin a relationship with him. When he asks Martha what they are going to do, he is talking about a long-term solution to their living arrangements. She has been through problematic situations since Robert left home almost 20 years earlier, and she is not nearly as worried about the long-term plans as Robert. He admits that a small part of him wants to pull away from Martha, but he is actually pleased to have that connection again and he really does want to foster that relationship. In many ways, these feelings set him up to be ready for a relationship with Molly. It is also noteworthy that Martha fears Robert will leave her behind. These are important aspects of their characters, and the authors have used specific situations and conversations to develop those characters to this level.

Robert sees Molly as a flighty woman without the ability to take things seriously. However, Molly is actually a woman who has had a difficult life, and who is able to see life more clearly than many people. For example, she immediately understands that Robert's need to be near Martha is fueled by his memory of leaving her behind when he ran away from home on the day of his parents' deaths. While Martha seems dependent on Robert, Molly can see that Robert needs to be with Martha as a way of coping with this unexpected reunion. That kind of understanding is vital for their future relationship.

Different characters react differently to the trees, and the comparison between people and trees is one of the novel's themes. The reactions of Molly, Martha, and Robert during the first scenes of this section are examples of that theme. The developers have named many of the giant sequoias. One is called the Old Bachelor and a small grouping is called The Orphans. When Martha walks among the trees, she chooses to sit down near The Orphans, and that makes Robert happy because he compares himself and Martha – orphaned at a young age – to those trees. When Molly and Robert go for a walk, Molly chooses to sit at The Bachelor. Robert is not as pleased with her choice, but that tree could symbolize Robert's lifestyle, which he sees slipping away with all these new responsibilities.

Robert faces a series of problems when he is trying to feed Jimmy. First, there are few women in these small towns and there are none nearby who are currently producing milk for their own babies. There are also no baby bottles because women simply nursed their babies or used surrogates for nursing during this time. Robert tries dribbling some milk in Jimmy's mouth, but, in a further complication, Jimmy does not tolerate the cow's



milk. All these things are problems that mainly exist because of the time and place setting, which is vital to many aspects of the novel.

Discussion Question 1

How has Robert's life changed in the course of a few days in this section of the novel? Describe his reactions to these changes.

Discussion Question 2

How and why does Martha find Robert? What has her life been like since Robert's departure?

Discussion Question 3

Describe what you know about Molly, especially how her actions and reactions in this section change the details of her character.

Vocabulary

frail, eagerness, concentrate, fatigue, hysteria, stately, procession, envisage, convalesce, bemused, mesmerized, dignity, intact, oblivious, rasped, pragmatic, practicalities, resilience



Part 6: “California, 1856,” pages 250-290

Summary

Molly seems to settle into the hotel at Murphys. She takes over the room they share and has someone build a cradle for Jimmy. Robert does not know what to do. He has to return to San Francisco with his collections, but cannot imagine Molly and two babies in Mrs. Bienenstock's boarding house. When Robert gets a letter from William Lobb, he tells Molly he has to return to San Francisco. He is surprised that she is excited about the trip. She says that she cannot allow him to go to San Francisco without them because William will keep him too busy to come back to Murphys. Robert says he needs to leave the following day. Molly immediately sets to work and soon has everything packed and ready to travel.

The next day, they load the wagon. Nancy gets dressed and sits on the porch to see them off. Robert takes time to visit with her and Nancy predicts that they will not see each other again, though Robert promises he will stop in any time he goes to Calaveras Grove. Nancy tries to qualify her statement, hinting that she feels there will be something other than her imminent death keeping them apart. Looking back on the scene from the future, Robert realizes Nancy was correct.

Molly is thrilled with the chance to ride a steamboat to San Francisco. When Robert begins to talk about his need to get to work as soon as they arrive, she cuts him off. She says she wants to enjoy the 10-hour trip without worrying about what's to come. He realizes he can do that, and naps with Jimmy while she explores and visits.

Mrs. Bienenstock does not say a word when Robert arrives with Molly, who is clearly pregnant, and a baby. She and Molly have a brief conversation, including that Molly should wash diapers out back. William is at the docks. When he sees Molly, he demands an explanation. William soon realizes that Martha – who had stopped briefly at Mrs. Bienenstock's and met both Mrs. Bienenstock and William – has died.

The conversation quickly turns to the trees William wants to send to England. He says a man there is offering a premium price for 50 redwood seedlings. The man has hired a single collector, but is offering the price to the first who can get the seedlings to him. William fears another collector will beat them to the delivery. They decide a forest in Oakland will be their best place for finding the seedlings. Though William is ill, Robert convinces him to go along.

They gather the trees and are forced to spend a night away from the boarding house. When they return the next day with a wagon loaded with pails containing seedlings, Mrs. Bienenstock is at the door. She gripes at Robert, saying that it is difficult to clean blood from a mattress. He panics and runs to his room where Molly is in bed with Jimmy on one breast and her infant daughter at the other. When they discuss what they should name her, Molly pushes Robert to choose. When he hesitates, she suggests naming the



baby after Robert's mother. He says his mother's name was Sadie, but refuses to consider it. Molly suggests that Sadie is usually a nickname for Sarah, and that Sarah sounds calmer, like Robert. He tries out the name and finds that it calms him, rather than angering him.

The next day, Molly is in the kitchen with Mrs. Bienenstock, now known to Molly by her first name, Dody. Robert is amazed at the relationship between the two women. As William and Robert head for the docks to put the trees on a ship, Mrs. Bienenstock warns Robert not to let William make the last-minute decision to travel with the trees.

Typically, William pays a sailor extra to take care of the trees, plants, and seeds he ships to England. This time, they did not have time to build the Ward's cases to keep the seedlings safe, and the sailor charged with their care is angry at the work he faces, despite the money William is paying him. The sailor drops one of the pails in his haste to get them on board, making it clear that few – if any – will survive the trip. When William reminds the man that they cannot be watered with sea water, the man argues.

Robert asks if William can make the trip, but William knows he cannot stand up to it. Robert knows William wants him to go, even though William says it is too much to ask. Robert rushes back to the boarding house. Molly immediately knows there is something going on. Robert explains and Molly forces him to stop for a moment to consider the situation. She says that he has spent his entire life being shoved around from one place to another, especially as he traveled west trying to get away from his childhood. She says it is time for him to make decisions because of what he wants. He admits that he does want to travel with the trees. The next question Molly poses is whether Robert wants her and the babies to travel with him, and whether he can afford for them to. She says she can make a living on her own, working at the saloon in Murphys or at Calaveras Grove, and hiring someone to care for the babies. She assures him he is not obligated to take them. Robert hesitates, and he hates himself for that moment of hesitation, but he then says he wants Molly and the babies to go with him.

Molly says that she first arrived at the mining camps in search of a miner who had managed to save some money and who would make a good husband. She recounts Robert's past, including that he had been a miner and had saved some money, and says it appears that Robert was the man she was searching for all along.

Molly screams out for Mrs. Bienenstock to help her pack. Robert rushes to do whatever the women instruct. They pack and go to the docks in a relatively short period of time to find that Robert is at the rail of the ship, arguing with the captain who is trying to leave. Mrs. Bienenstock yells at the captain to make his men hurry to get Molly's things aboard and William follows after Robert, giving him last-minute instructions, including to use only fresh water to hydrate the trees. He warns that even rainwater will have salt spray, and will kill the trees.

Aboard the ship, Molly is caught up in the excitement, including her first look at the ocean and her first sighting of a whale. Robert finds himself excited because of Molly's



excitement. Sarah becomes fussy and Robert hands her to Molly to be fed, and he finds himself relieved to have someone he can depend on for help.

Robert does not know where they will end up. Molly says she wants to see London after Robert delivers and plants the trees, and he finds himself excited about her list of plans. He touches the small packet of Golden Pippin seeds in his pocket and wonders where he will eventually plant them. He believes he will know the right place, when he sees it.

Analysis

There is a statement in this section relating the fact that Robert feels connected to Molly as soon as they are settled in at Murphys, but it is because she is taking care of Jimmy and not because she is having Robert's baby. That seems cruel, but Robert is a practical character who has never forced to analyze his feelings. He is also faced with the reality of Jimmy's existence, whereas his own child is still a "mound under Molly's dress" (253).

The perspective focuses mostly on Robert during these chapters because his inner feelings are presented as fact while the reader has only Robert's impressions and the various scenes to determine what other characters are feeling and thinking. That is seen clearly as Robert prepares to return to San Francisco after Martha's death. He looks around their hotel room and sees diapers that Molly has washed and hanged out to dry, a cradle, Molly's clothes scattered around the room, and other pieces of their life in the form of her belongings. To Robert, this seems to indicate that Molly has settled into her life here. When he mentions going to San Francisco, she corrects him, pointing out that she is living in a single hotel room with a baby and another on the way, and that this is not her idea of a stable, long-term lifestyle. The fact that they have different ideas is perfectly acceptable for their characters. The fact that Molly's actions and attitudes surprise Robert is an example of her character. It is also important for the reader to remember that Robert's idea of marriage was skewed to the negative when he witnessed his parents kill each other.

Molly's desperation from earlier in the novel is one of the minor motifs of the novel, mainly because it is a stark contrast to Robert's self-reliant attitude in which he prefers to spend most of his time alone and fears anyone who would depend on him for emotional support. That desperation apparently disappears after Molly becomes nursemaid and mother to Jimmy, but it seems to resurface briefly when Robert says he will be going back to San Francisco. Molly says Robert might never make time to see them unless she goes along, but that seems less like her previous desperation and more like an acknowledgment that Robert's job keeps him traveling a lot. The limited perspective means the reader has to decide her motivations.

The relationship between Molly and Robert continues to change, and there is a piece of foreshadowing that hints at future problems. While Molly and Robert are on the steamboat headed for San Francisco, Robert points out to her that he will have to get to work as soon as he has Molly and Jimmy settled. Molly is not happy with Robert's



statement, but mainly because she wants to live in this moment and to be happy with her excitement over the steamboat ride. She urges Robert to let her have that happiness for their 10-hour ride to San Francisco, and he agrees. However, he feels that their relationship has changed. No longer is Molly asking him to spend another day with her as she did at the mining camp. Instead, “it no longer felt like she was chasing after him; instead she was sweeping ahead and making him decide if he would follow” (260). This sounds like a piece of foreshadowing and the author may have presented it this way to make the reader expect that Molly will force Robert into a new level of their relationship. That is not the case, and Molly continues to take each step in their combined lives as it comes without making unreasonable demands.

To a large degree, this novel is an example of an epiphany ending. Robert spends many years trying to run away from the memories of his childhood and his guilt over leaving Martha behind. For a period of time, he is struggling with his situation, especially with the two women and two children who now have demands on his life. By the time he and Molly are boarding the ship bound for England, Robert has come to accept the situation and has learned to depend on Molly and to accept Molly's dependence on him. There is nothing that prompts these changes, and they are merely made from Robert's personal feelings.

Discussion Question 1

What is the significance of the apple seeds Robert has in his pocket when he boards the ship?

Discussion Question 2

What is Molly's attitude about Robert's travels?

Discussion Question 3

How does Robert view his situation after Martha's death? How does Molly change that? How does Robert change that?

Vocabulary

solidity, incredulous, assuage, dazzled, wistful, proprietor, squalling, mesmeric, benign, intently, relented, logistics, tangible, amenable, debilitation, sanguine, traipsing, vulnerable, perish, unfurling, brusque



Characters

Robert Goodenough

Robert is the youngest son of the Goodenough family. He is a quiet youngster who loves nature and really just wants to get along in life. He is the only child of the family who is interested in learning about James's apple trees. When Robert is nine, he is skilled at grafting and creates a graft onto a wild apple tree near the family home.

Robert is one of the children present when Sadie strikes James with an axe, mortally wounding him before he knocks her down into a spike from a deer fence, causing her to die as well. Before she dies, Sadie informs Robert that James is probably not his biological father, which hurts Robert horribly. Then Sadie tells Robert to run away from the swamp, and urges him to go find a prairie somewhere. Sadie has believed that living somewhere else would make her happy, and she now wants Robert to go in her stead. Robert and his young sister, Martha, are close, and Robert immediately considers what will happen to Martha if he leaves. However, Sadie urges him to leave without Martha, and Robert does. By the time he is an adult, he admits that he spent his entire life running from the horrible scene in Black Swamp, and from the guilt he feels because he left Martha behind.

Robert wanders around for almost 20 years. As an adult, Robert meets William Lobb, a plant collector who teaches Robert all about the business. The job suits Robert well, and he loves learning about the plants.

Robert has a sexual relationship with a woman named Molly Jones, and he keeps some distance between them in an effort to ensure that she does not come to depend on him. When Molly steps in to care for Martha's baby, Robert feels a connection forming with Molly. By the time he gets to know Molly better and learns that she is able to take every situation in stride, he feels a deeper connection with her. Robert experiences an epiphany as the novel comes to a close, accepting that there are now people who depend on him and that he has the power to choose his next step rather than just reacting to situations.

James Goodenough

James is the father of the Goodenough family. He is sometimes a strong character, but he has flaws and weaknesses that put his family in horrible situations and eventually costs James his life. James hates his life in Black Swamp almost as much as Sadie hates her life. James, however, has focused his entire attention on the apple trees as a means of coping with his disappointment and dissatisfaction. His focus on the trees has grown to the point that he always turns there for comfort, even when Sadie also needs comforting. When Sadie has sex with a random man at the camp meeting, James decides to leave her behind, but he changes his mind when he considers that Sadie



might happen upon a wild apple tree that Robert has grafted. James's love of that apple tree is so strong that he is willing to take Sadie home with him in order to protect the tree.

James tends to react with violence, and Sadie sometimes provokes him on purpose. James's reactions are swift and harsh, and are not confined to Sadie, as seen when he whips Martha for using the eating apples in a pie, even though he knew Sadie was ultimately responsible. James has a fondness for Robert, but he also feels uncomfortable around him. James freely admits to himself that he loves Martha best of all his children, though he does not really show her any kindness.

James's attitude about his children is different from Sadie's attitude. When Hattie Day is helping Robert and Martha put up produce, James becomes jealous at the children's laughter. Sadie is furious at the laughter, but James wishes that he could be included or that he could prompt that kind of happiness in his children. He does not, however, take steps to make it happen, which is another sign of his weakness.

Molly Jones

Molly is a woman who met James in Texas at a cattle ranch, and who moves to California to become a cook at a mining camp. She is openly honest about her ultimate goal to find a husband among the miners. When Robert sees her for the first time in California, he sees a level of desperation in her eyes, and he fears that she might need something from him. However, Molly is the one Robert turns to when Jimmy is about to die for lack of milk.

Molly takes on the responsibility for Robert's nephew without any fuss. She settles herself and the baby into a hotel room, but then moves to San Francisco with Robert and then packs her belongings for a trip to England. However, she makes it clear that she can make her own way in the world if Robert does not want to take her along.

Molly is outgoing and happy, the exact opposite of Sadie. While she is willing and able to take control of some aspects of her life, she is also determined to be happy and excited about any situation. Molly is also the person who begins to help Robert understand that he is looking at his parents' death from the perspective of a child, and that he can take control of his life to make active decisions about what he wants.

Martha Goodenough

Martha is Robert's sister, and the daughter of Sadie and James Goodenough. Martha is shy and quiet as a child, eager to please and willing to work hard. She is among those present in the orchard when Sadie and James die. Martha spends years at the mercy of her circumstances. She moves in with the Day family, but is treated as a servant rather than as an adopted daughter. After Hattie Day dies, John Day rapes her. She leaves his home when it is clear that the abuse will not end. She suffers the same fate at the hands of her older brother, Caleb when she moves back to the Goodenough farm.



Martha holds onto the hope that Robert will return for her. When she finds all his letters, she sets out to find him for herself, which is evidence of her strength, hidden up to that point. Martha dies soon after giving birth to a son she names Jimmy.

Sadie Goodenough

Sadie is James Goodenough's wife, and the mother of Robert, Martha, and the other Goodenough children. She is a weak person who hates their life in Black Swamp, Ohio. She believes that she could have a better life if the family moved back East, which is what leads to her death.

Sadie is unable to find happiness on any level. She hates her husband because she believes he is responsible for her unhappiness. She hates her children because she believes they judge her for her failures and her weakness. She drinks to excess in an effort to escape the unhappiness, and she seeks out male attention whenever she has the chance.

Sadie begins to equate her life in Ohio to the apple trees, and believes that chopping them down will free the family to leave. When she goes to strike the first blow, James steps in front of her and she kills him with the axe, then dies when he kicks out, making her fall into a spike from the deer fence.

John Chapman

John is a man who travels around the country, mainly by boat, selling seedlings and saplings for various kinds of apple trees. He gives away apple seeds as well, but always warns that those trees will not bear fruit for several years in an effort to sell his trees. He provides Sadie with applejack, a kind of liquor, and seems to admire her. He may be this author's version of Johnny Appleseed.

William Lobb

William is a collector of seeds, plants, and saplings. He is an older man who is suffering from serious health issues by the time he and Robert have worked together for a few years.

Billie Lapham

Billie is the owner of the property where William and Robert gather sequoia seeds and saplings. Billie becomes a close friend of Robert, and is revealed to be an honorable, loyal man who happens to be partnered with someone less scrupulous. He is married to Nancy, who is sick.



Nancy Lapham

Nancy is Billie's wife. She is ill but always has a smile for Robert and time to visit with him. She is a wise and caring person, but it is clear that she is nearing death. She connects with Martha and is sad over the girl's death. When Robert leaves Murphys with Molly and Jimmy, Nancy predicts that she and Robert will never see each other again, and he looks back on that parting from years later, realizing that she was right.

Hattie Day

Hattie is a neighbor of the Goodenough family. Sadie believe Hattie acts superior. She is married to John Day and has no children, and her farm reflects hard work and that it only supports two people, rather than the large family common to the time. When James and Sadie die, Hattie takes Margaret in, but never treats her as an adoptive daughter.

John Day

John is Hattie's husband. He appears to be a hardworking man and does not show up in many scenes of the novel. However, he rapes Margaret after Hattie's death, and fathers a child by her that dies.

Caleb Goodenough

Caleb is one of the older surviving boys of the Goodenough family. He does not grow into a productive, capable adult, and is unable to keep the family together after James and Sadie die. He allows Margaret to move back home after Hattie Day's death, but he rapes her and fathers a child by her, despite the fact that Margaret is his sister. Margaret and Caleb have a physical confrontation before Margaret leaves home, and she believes she may have killed him.



Symbols and Symbolism

The West

Robert moves ever westward, which symbolizes distance from his brutal childhood, the tragedy of his parents' deaths, and his own guilt. When he reaches the ocean, he realizes he has to turn around and go back or learn to live with himself here, but Molly points out that he could have taken a ship and continued his journey, making it clear that the California coast was literally as far west as Robert needed to go.

The Golden Pippin Seeds

Martha brings several seeds from Golden Pippin apples, and these seeds represent hope for Robert. He also comes to see the seeds as a symbol of home, saying he does not yet know where he will plant them, but that he will know the right place when he sees it.

The Golden Pippin Apples

This is the variety of apple that James favors, and it symbolizes his family's history and his hope for the future. To James, this variety is the perfect apple and he loves to tell the connection between his family's history and the Golden Pippin. Robert is later disappointed to find that this is a very common variety in England, and that it is not considered there to be nearly as special as it was in his father's eyes.

Apple Tree Grafts

These grafts symbolize hope for James and Robert, but they symbolize unnatural changes for John Chapman and Sadie's fear that she will never leave Ohio. A graft that Robert made is the only reason that James does not leave Sadie in town after she has sex with another man. James fears that Sadie might pass by the tree and destroy the graft, as she has done to other trees. He is proud of that graft because Robert made it by himself, and he does not want to risk it being hurt. That is evidence of how much James loves the trees and the grafting process, and how much Sadie hates them.

Eaters

These are the apples that are meant to be eaten and they symbolize positive steps forward for James. He loves some specific varieties, and wants to have more trees that are set aside as eaters.



Spitters

These are the apples set aside for making drink, including the liquor applejack, and they symbolize Sadie's ever-growing attempts to escape from her reality in Ohio, even if that escape is nothing more than a drunken stupor.

The Apple Orchard

James's apple orchard is symbolic of a safe, happy place for him. He is literally willing to protect it with his life against everything, including Sadie. His fear that she will damage his trees is one of the reasons he comes to hate her so much.

The Sequoias

These are huge trees that capture Robert's attention before he sees them or is even certain that they are real. They symbolize Robert's love of nature and his abhorrence of the way the developers are using the land as a tourist destination. They also make him feel small, and he likes that feeling, probably because it means he has less responsibility in the grand scheme of the universe.

Molly's Attitude

Robert believes he sees desperation in Molly's eyes when they first reconnect in California, and that attitude symbolizes Robert's ultimate fear and Molly's need for someone who can help her survive in this difficult time and place. However, her attitude changes dramatically over the coming years, and Robert soon feels that Molly is leading, which is symbolic of her newly discovered confidence and her natural happiness.

Jimmy and Sarah

These are the two babies, who represent hope and healing, especially for Robert. The babies are named for James and Sadie, Robert's parents, and Robert is surprised that he finds their names comforting when he had expected feelings of harsh sadness.



Settings

Black Swamp, Ohio

This is the place in Ohio where James and Sadie live with their children. It is a horrible place where making a living is a constant struggle and the ground is difficult to cultivate. Almost everyone in the family suffers from malaria, a common disease in the region. Sadie hates Black Swamp and wants to return to their family in the East, though she was not happy there either. The Black Swamp is near Perrysburgh and is located near the Portage River.

Calaveras Grove

This is where Robert first sees the sequoias, including the tree developers cut down so they could create a dance floor on the stump. The area becomes important to Robert for several reasons. He meets William Lobb here and reconnects with Martha here. He also becomes close with one of the developers, Billy Lapham and Billy's wife, Nancy. The developers set out to create a tourist destination, which Robert hates, preferring that the area would remain the forest where the trees remain in their natural state.

San Francisco

This is where Robert and William base their collection operation. The town is booming during this period of history, and the setting in the novel seems to be historically accurate. There are few specific details, other than Mrs. Bienenstock's boarding house and the docks.

Murphys

Murphys is a town near the Calaveras Grove where Nancy and Billie Lapham are moving in the days following Margaret's arrival. Margaret dies in the hotel in Murphys and Molly settles into one of the hotel's rooms during their stay there. Robert feels that Molly is absolutely attached to the place and will want to stay, but she makes it clear that this is nothing more than a stopping point for her, and that she is ready to travel with Robert to San Francisco.

Perrysburg

Perrysburg is the town in Ohio that is located near Black Swamp. This is where the Goodenough family goes to buy supplies and to attend the camp meeting. The family is camped outside town when James catches Sadie having sex with a random man. This

is also the location of the store where Hattie Day makes it clear that she does not approve of Sadie's attitude.



Themes and Motifs

Death

Death is a normal part of life, but the people in this time and place are well aware that any one of them might succumb to the swamp fever or any number of other perils that exist in their everyday lives. Sadie personifies Death in one scene, which makes it even more real and present to the reader.

The family does not set out with the intention of settling in the Black Swamp, but they are literally forced to stop because the mud is so treacherous that they cannot continue their journey. Later summer brings swamp fever and the family is also not prepared for that constant threat. The first summer, one of their children dies. The second summer, another dies. At one point, James talks about the graves he had to dig during the first two summers in the swamp, and how difficult it was to cut the trees and dig out roots to make room for the graves. After those first two summers, he made room for new graves earlier in the year so that he would have room for the graves when the time came. That planning indicates his absolute certainty that they would need the space for the graves. He did not clear those spots on the chance that they might need the graves, but on the certainty.

By the spring of 1838, Sadie has seen five of her 10 children die. She talks about Martha, saying that Martha is the last of the weak children and the only one who has not yet given in to the swamp fever. James talks about his fear for her, knowing that she could die from the swamp fever during the coming season, or the one after that. He fears more for Martha than for the others, partly because he loves her more but partly because he can also see her weakness. Sadie seems certain that Martha will not be able to fight death off forever, and she talks about Martha's tendency to hum hymns as she goes about her day. Sadie says Martha hums "to block out the sound of Deaths footsteps behind her" (34). Sadie's personification of Death is an indication of her fear.

Sadie talks about their constant battles with death, saying they were not living "with the land, but alive despite it. Cause it wanted to kill us every chance it got" (35). She then lists the ways they could die, including the swamp fever, the heat, the cold, the mud, and the damp. Modern-day readers may not really understand the fact that the mud could kill them, but the family had been forced to stop because the horses and wagon were so deeply embedded that they just could not continue. The family was not the first to be stopped in their tracks, and others had built a series of inns very near together to accommodate the travelers who could make only a few feet of progress over an entire day's work.

Martha's death is another example of this theme. When Robert has to deal with the aftermath of her death, he realizes that he escaped this part of his parents' deaths. He ran away, leaving everyone else to grieve while dealing with the duties of digging graves, building coffins, and preparing the bodies for burial.



Man's Relationship with Nature

James Goodenough has a close relationship with nature, and his devotion is so strong that he is able to pass that connection along to Robert, which impacts Robert's life in ways he could never have predicted. This relationship is first seen in James's love of his apple orchard, but it surpasses that boundary to become a major theme throughout the novel in the lives of multiple characters.

James has a deep, abiding love for his apple orchard, which grew from his childhood memories of apples as the rare sweet treat during a time when sweets were uncommon and found mainly from natural sources. That love makes James an expert at caring for his apple trees, including the grafting. He teaches the art of grafting to Robert, the only one of his five surviving children to have any interest in the apple trees. One day, James is traveling through the woods near their house when he discovers a wild apple tree that has been grafted. He immediately knows that Robert was the one who created the graft, and that he did so as a means of ensuring that they had an apple tree available if Sadie went on a rampage and destroyed the trees in their established orchard. James is thankful that Robert has learned from him, and that Robert cares about the trees.

When James finds Sadie having sex with some random man during their trip to town, he fully intends to leave Sadie behind. The only thing that changes his mind is his fear that she will happen across Robert's graft on the way home, and will destroy it out of anger and revenge. The fact that he is willing to take his cheating wife home with him rather than risk that she will find the wild apple tree is a statement of James's love for nature.

While the apple trees are the focus of James's attention, he also has a deep love for all aspects of nature. On the day he first finds Robert's graft, he takes a seat and looks around at the woods for a long time. He is amazed, as always, that everything is beginning to make leaves and flowers, though he sees the same scene every spring. This is yet another example of his love of nature.

Robert's time with James creates an inner love of nature and an interest in botany, though he never has formal training. When he first encounters William Lobb, Robert is visiting an area where he has been told huge trees cover the forest. Robert is horrified by the fact that the landowners have cut down one of the trees and he sets to work with William Lobb because he is interested in Lobb's work. Robert's attitude about nature makes him a perfect candidate for William's assistant, and that makes him an adept and willing student to learn how to gather and handle specimens.

Coping

Characters faced with difficult situations find various ways to cope, and those methods are seldom healthy though at least some of them are at least productive on some level. Of the characters in this novel, Sadie's methods of coping seem the most destructive and some readers will believe that Molly or Martha exhibit the most productive coping techniques.



Sadie seems to have a vindictive, hateful nature, and she turns to alcohol to help cope with her depression. It is likely that she is suffering from depression on a deep scale, and the natural depressing properties of alcohol would exacerbate that. Sadie's drinking has become so serious that she notices James trying to lessen her use through subterfuge. He waters down her liquor and tries to intercept deliveries. Another sign that Sadie has become overly dependent on alcohol is seen in the fact that she hides her use. One morning, she desperately wants a drink but waits until Martha is out of the room before she takes one. Martha is just a child and would not openly condemn Sadie for anything, but Sadie can feel the negative reactions in others, probably because she knows she is drinking too much even when she refuses to openly admit it to herself.

One of the effects of the alcohol is her behavior. Sadie is drunk when she has sex with a man at the camp meeting. Even before that encounter, she is acting out in ways that are not appropriate. At one point, she sees Robert staring at her and is fully aware that she is acting out of drunkenness.

James's focus on the fruit trees is his form of coping. He is so focused on the survival of those trees that he does not do any of the things a loving father and husband should do. He becomes enraged when Sadie makes negative comments about the trees. James is so determined that the trees should survive that he puts himself in front of an ax in an effort to save a tree.

Robert has his own way of coping. From the time he leaves home, he moves generally westward because the west represents a place far from Black Swamp in Ohio, and far from the tragedy of his parents' deaths. Robert is in a fragile emotional state when he finally reaches the ocean because he realizes he literally cannot go any farther west, and now has to figure out what to do. He believes he has two options. He can head back east with Ohio as his goal, and accept that he will have to face his demons when he arrives, or he can learn to live with his past while living in California. An important aspect of this is seen in the fact that Robert does not make a conscious decision of which option he will choose.

Martha's methods are different. She spends most of her life hoping that Robert will somehow rescue her from her situation. It is a sign of her positive coping skills that she takes matters into her own hands the moment she knows for certain where Robert lives. Molly has a different attitude, depending mainly on herself but with a willingness to listen, understand, and evaluate people and situations. When Robert is about to leave for England, she assures him that she can survive on her own, even with two children, and helps him understand that he can make a proactive decision for himself. When he does that, she immediately steps up to make the trip with him, and her ability to change with the situation is part of her coping mechanism.



Coming of Age

All characters age chronologically, but some reach new levels of understanding and acceptance that make them examples of the traditional coming-of-age theme. Robert is the main example of this theme in this novel.

Robert is only nine years old when his mother and father kill each other in Black Swamp, Ohio. He has grown up with their constant arguments and the violence that erupts on a regular basis, so he is not surprised when his parents fight. However, no nine-year-old child should have to witness his parents kill each other. To make the situation even more traumatic, Sadie tells Robert that James is not his biological father, but when she sees the look on his face, she qualifies the statement, saying that Charles could be Robert's father. Robert's relationship with his father is far better than his relationship with his mother, and he is devastated again when he learns that James is probably not his biological father.

Robert takes Sadie's advice and runs away just moments after his parents die, even though he is nine years old. He works his way across the country, ranging from the southern parts of Canada to Texas along the way. When Robert reaches the Pacific Ocean, he is aware that he has gone as far west as he can, and that he cannot get any farther from Ohio and the memories of his childhood. He feels strongly that he has to make a decision at that moment: To go back toward Ohio and confront his memories, or to learn to live with them while he remains in California. The fact that he realizes he has to make a decision is a major point in Robert's emerging maturity.

Another moment comes when Robert is talking honestly to Molly about his parents' deaths, explaining why he needs to reassure Martha that he will not leave her again. Molly points out to Robert that he has to take a new perspective on his memories. He is still looking at his parents' deaths and at his own decision to leave Martha behind as if he was a nine-year-old child. As an adult, Robert has the ability to evaluate the situation and to understand that neither of his parents actually set out to murder the other. He can also understand that a nine-year-old boy had no way to take care of a sister.

Finally, Molly helps Robert understand that it is time for him to accept responsibility for making decisions. She points out that he has spent his entire life letting himself be pushed or driven toward some new place, without ever making plans or deciding what he actually wants. She gives him the choice of whether to take her and the two babies with him to England, and Robert realizes that he wants them to go along. The realization that he has the power to make decisions and plans should seem normal to Robert by this time in his life, but he finds himself reveling in the feel of the power. This epiphany moment is another example of Robert's new-found maturity.

The Comparison between People and Trees

Nature in general and trees in particular are very important to Robert, James, and Sadie, and there is a continuing comparison of people to trees throughout the novel. In

some cases, these comparisons are meant to show the differences between the two, but they are often used to show how trees and people are actually very much alike.

In an interesting twist, Sadie is one of the examples of this theme. John Chapman knows that Sadie hates the apple trees in James's orchard, and one evening he asks her why she hates them. Sadie says that it is not fair that the trees are transplanted onto this property and manage to thrive here. She compares that her own situation, saying she was transplanted here as well, and that she has not thrived. She says that she will never do as well as the trees have done, and argues that trees should be stationary. John counters, saying that he makes a living by moving trees from one place to another. He also points out that trees have a difficult life. As an example, he says that trees have to battle for the water that falls on them as rain, and for the sunshine. Small trees will wither when they are surrounded by larger trees that block out the light. Sadie argues against John's comments, saying that people have those same battles. She points out her own family, obviously making it clear that she feels she is surrounded and is fighting for the resources to survive.

Another example of this theme is seen in Robert's attitude about the trees in Calaveras Grove. The developers there have named many of the trees, and have put up signs to indicate the identities of the various trees. Their names are descriptive of their position in the forest. For example, there is a large sequoia beside a smaller one, and they are dubbed Mother and Son. Another is called The Bachelor and a small group is called The Orphans. When Robert catches up with Martha among the trees, he finds that she is seated near The Orphans. Though he hates that the trees have been named, he finds some poetry in the fact that Martha chose to sit near The Orphans. Robert and Martha are also orphans, which makes this one of those comparisons.

Another is seen in Molly's choice of where to sit. When she and Robert walk among the trees, she takes a seat near The Bachelor. Robert is struggling to deal with his new responsibilities of Margaret and Jimmy, and of Molly and her unborn child. While he does not verbally bemoan the loss of his bachelorhood, his thoughts and conversations hint at that loss.



Styles

Point of View

The novel is written from several perspectives, and the tone, language, and style changes with each. The first, and most obvious, is seen in the first section when the perspective alternates between Sadie and James Goodenough. When the focus is on James, the novel is written in third person from a limited viewpoint. The reader knows only what James knows but the scenes are written in a modern-day, traditional style with a narrator providing information. There is an abrupt change when the perspective changes to Sadie. At that point, the novel is written in first person and the tone becomes almost frantic as she struggles to deal with her situation, her emotions, and her insecurities. The writing becomes less traditional, with dropped consonants and little punctuation. The author uses no apostrophes, for example, when the focus is on Sadie. The fact that this is written in first person while James's scenes are written in third person makes an impact on the reader, and reinforces which of the characters is in charge of the perspective.

When the perspective shifts to Robert's life in California, the author uses a narrator for the third-person perspective. This sounds very similar to the scenes that were focused on James, but without the constant interruptions to present scenes from Sadie's perspective.

The perspective also makes a shift during the two chapters that consist of letters from Robert and from Martha. The letters sometimes overlap and some of Martha's letters cover the same events, but each reflects the tone and attitudes of the authors. Robert's letters change dramatically from the early letters, which are filled with mistakes, poor grammar, and incorrect spellings. The later letters reflect that he has matured and learned though there are still occasional mistakes. In the tradition of letters, both of these sections are written from the first person perspective of the writers.

Language and Meaning

The novel is written in English with traditional spelling and usage, with the exception of the changing perspectives, which change wording, spelling, and even punctuation. For example, the author does not use traditional punctuation when the novel switches to Sadie's perspective during the scenes set in Ohio. Words and phrases are written as if Sadie were talking, using the typical slang and sounds of the time and place. Consonants are often dropped at the end of words and poor grammar is common in those sections.

The letters are also filled with spelling, punctuation, and grammar mistakes, but the author tends to use very common, traditional words and phrases, making the meanings easy to understand. In some cases, the reader may have to use phonetic spelling to



sound out words, such as when Robert writes about “bullits” instead of bullets (79). In another letter, Robert crosses out the word “here” and uses the misspelled version, “heer” (74). Martha’s letters indicate that she might have had a higher level of education or more practice.

The reader with an average vocabulary will have no trouble reading and understanding the novel. There are some references to places and plants that may be unfamiliar, but most are explained to a reasonable degree. There are a few sexual references, but these are not invasive and most adult readers will not be distracted by these.

The overall tone is mixed with tragedies wiping out much of the positive attitudes. Sadie and James literally kill each other and their vindictive natures color every aspect of their lives and the lives of their children. Robert spends most of his life running away from his childhood and his guilt over leaving Margaret. Margaret lives a harsh life and is eventually raped by the man who raised her and by her own biological brother. Even Molly has a harsh past, which she briefly describes to Robert. Despite all this, there is an undercurrent of hope that becomes more pronounced as Robert gives in to Molly’s insistence that he can take control of his own future.

Structure

The novel is divided into six parts, each identified with a number and title. There are different structures and contents in the various parts. For example, the second part is titled “Part 2: America.” This section takes place between 1840 and 1856. The entire section consists of 11 letters from Robert to his family in the Black Swamp of Ohio. The letters are all very brief, and there are no responses, though this section covers 16 years of Robert’s life. The section titled “Part 5: Black Swamp Ohio,” consists of 10 letters from Martha to her brother, Robert. The letters are addressed to various places, always in the hope that the letters might catch up with Robert.

The novel is not presented in chronological order. The first section is titled “Part 1: Black Swamp, Ohio, Spring 1838.” Several characters are introduced in this section. The second section is set in various parts of America, between 1840 and 1856. The third is, “Part 3: California, 1953-1856.” This reverts back several years to pick up more of Robert’s story. The next section is “Part 4: Black Swamp, Ohio, Fall 1838,” and this section reverts back to pick up where the first section left off. The next is titled “Part 5: Black Swamp, Ohio, 1844-1856,” and the letters from Martha to Robert are a means of explaining the details about her life after Robert left Ohio. The final section is “Part 6: California, 1856.” This is the conclusion of the story, bringing Martha and Robert together and setting Robert on a new course in his life.

Quotes

James Goodenough did not think he could bear that loss for so long – not in the misery of the Black Swamp, with its stagnant water, its stench of rot and mold, its thick black mud that even scrubbing couldn't get ut of skin and cloth. He needed a taste to sweeten the blow of ending up here.”

-- Narrator (Part 1: Black Swamp, Ohio, Spring 1838 paragraph 4)

Importance: This is one of the first looks at James Goodenough's character. He is trying to make the best of this situation and he does so better than Sadie, but he is also bitter over his life. He was basically forced away from his home, but he was forced to settle in the Black Swamp when they encountered trouble on the trail west.

James Goodenough was a sensible man, but apples were his weakness. They had been since he was a child and his mother had given him sweet apples as a special treat.”

-- Narrator (Part 1: Black Swamp, Ohio, Spring 1838 paragraph 29)

Importance: This is the first clue that James's love of apples is more than just a minor part of his character and his life. The fact that this is a "weakness" indicates that the apples become an issue for James and for his family. In fact, this love of apple trees will literally contribute to his death.

The fact that Golden Pippins could grow in the swamp - that a sliver of his ordered life in Connecticut was now tucked into Ohio mud - make him feel hopeful that one day he might finally feel at home there.”

-- Narrator (Part 1: Black Swamp, Ohio, Spring 1838 paragraph 58)

Importance: This is an indication that James does not feel at home in Black Swamp and that he is also struggling to deal with life there. The fact that he focuses on his apple trees is a means of coping with his reality, and coping is one of the novel's themes.

She wanted everything to be fair, when the best lesson she could learn was that life aint fair and theres no point expectin it to be.”

-- Sadie (Part 1: Black Swamp, Ohio, Spring 1838 paragraph 106)

Importance: Sadie is talking about Sal, and though she believes that Sal needs to learn this lesson, Sadie is unwilling to accept that life is not fair. She wants to have a better life, but she is not able to see that she is in the way of her ow happiness, and that she is constantly causing problems for herself.

It has been over 17 years since I left the Swamp and I never had a letter back. I do not know is anyone is still alive and so this is my last letter.”

-- Robert (Part 2: America, 184-1856 paragraph 1 of the January 1, 1856 letter)



Importance: Robert has been writing to the family without ever receiving any news of them, and he has given up hope that anyone will write back. The reader should remember the poor mail service of this time, when letters would travel for months to reach their destinations, but Robert has to believe by now that no one will ever answer.

He did not step onto the stump, vowing to himself that he never would."
-- Narrator (Part 3: California, 1853-1856 paragraph 31)

Importance: This is talking about Robert during the first time he sees the sequoias, including the one the developers have cut down so they could create a dance floor on the stump. His attitude is an example of his connection with nature, which is one of the novel's themes.

Never call them redwoods. They're sequoias."
-- William Lobb (Part 3: California, 1853-1856 paragraph 46)

Importance: This is the first example of William teaching Robert. Robert is hungry for this kind of knowledge and it is what binds the men together for the coming years.

An advertisement does not decide what a tree is called,' William Lobb said. 'The California Academy of Sciences decided it is a different genus from redwoods and have named it a giant sequoia, with a Latin name to follow shortly.
-- Narrator (Part 3: California, 1853-1856 paragraph 98)

Importance: This is another example of William Lobb's knowledge and of his willingness to teach Robert, though he has a brusque, businesslike attitude. The rest of this conversation is rather humorous, with William Lapham arguing that the trees have to be redwoods because he has already placed advertisements about the Calaveras Grove.

Everyone was silent with me after camp meeting. Wouldnt meet my eye or ask me how I did or fill my plate without askin. Not even Sal, who I could usually count on for the little things that showed she respected her Ma."
-- Sadie (Part 4: Black Swamp, Ohio, Fall 1838 paragraph 31)

Importance: This shows that Sadie is contrite about her actions at camp meeting, but not for the right reasons. This is also an example of the changed tone and writing style that happens when the novel is written from Sadie's perspective.

I never felt easy when James and I was gettin along. Havin a common enemy like Hattie Day jest messed things up, put us on the same side and that didnt feel right."
-- Sadie (Part 4: Black Swamp, Ohio, Fall 1838 paragraph 72)

Importance: This is a sample of the feelings between Sadie and James, and exemplifies the fact that Sadie is absolutely determined that they should spent their time arguing rather than working together toward any common goal.



"I wish I knew where you were. America is such a big country, you could be anywhere."
-- Martha (Part 5: Black Swamp, Ohio, 1844-1856 paragraph 3 of the January 1, 1850 letter)

Importance: Martha has pinned all her hopes on finding Robert, and having him provide a life for her. This is her means of coping with the horrible conditions of her life, and that coping is one of the novel's themes.

It was then that Robert really saw her, saw that she might be small but she was not as frail as he had remembered; she was huge of heart."
-- Narrator (Part 6: California, 1856 paragraph 29)

Importance: Robert has just reconnected with Martha and he is still amazed that she was able to travel across the country, alone and pregnant, just to find him. With this realization, he understands that everyone considered Martha weak when she was a child, but that she was stronger than most gave her credit for.