

Autobiography of Red Study Guide

Autobiography of Red by Anne Carson

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Contents

Autobiography of Red Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Section 1.....	5
Section 2.....	7
Section 3.....	10
Section 4.....	12
Section 5.....	15
Section 6.....	18
Section 7.....	21
Section 8.....	24
Section 9.....	27
Section 10.....	30
Section 11.....	33
Section 12.....	36
Section 13.....	39
Section 14.....	42
Characters.....	45
Symbols and Symbolism.....	49
Settings.....	52
Themes and Motifs.....	54
Styles.....	58
Quotes.....	61



Plot Summary

This “novel in verse” uses the poetry and history of classical Greek writer Stesichoros as a springboard for a poetic narrative that combines centuries-old legends with contemporary values. The work is ultimately a prequel to the mythic story of the relationship between the murdered monster Geryon and the hero who killed him (Herakles here, more commonly known as Hercules). Its events and themes are primarily defined by Geryon’s coming of age, an experience itself defined by first love gone awry. At the same time, the narrative and its imagery also explore thematic issues relating to the power of feelings, being different, and the significance of chance encounters.

The book begins with an academically toned, somewhat fictionalized analysis of how the poet Stesichoros, writing in Ancient Greece shortly after the time of the narrative poet Homer, evolved the use of language in poetry. That analysis is followed by similarly fictionalized fragments of Stesichoros’ poetry that introduce the story of the book’s central character (the monster Geryon) and relationship (that of Geryon with the hero Herakles). The third component of this introductory section of the book is a series of three appendices that comment on a key point of the legend / history of Stesichoros: his being blinded by Helen of Troy in the aftermath of his criticism of her.

The actual story, the “autobiography of red,” begins with narratives of Geryon’s childhood. As a whole, that story is told in a series of short chapters each headed with a single sentence commenting on and/or summing up aspects of that chapter, with the writing in general containing a great deal of poetic imagery and language. That language, in turn, contains frequent, almost regular references to the color red: in the first chapter, for example, which is defined by Geryon’s being abandoned at school by his older brother, the feel of the grass in front of the school is defined as red, as is Geryon’s shadow. Here it’s important to note that Geryon himself is red, and has wings: he is, in his own mind, something of a monster.

The autobiography’s opening chapters describe Geryon’s discomfort with himself, his being bullied by his brother, and his being reassured by his sometimes distant, sometimes compassionate mother. There are also descriptions of what is arguably the most significant of the narrative’s many chance encounters: the teenaged Geryon’s meeting with Herakles, which results in the development of a deep, intense friendship between the two. Narration describes how that relationship becomes sexual; how Geryon’s feelings for Herakles become more oriented towards love than Herakles’ feelings for Geryon; and how, eventually, Herakles moves on, leaving Geryon alone and abandoned.

The narrative then moves forward several years, to a point at which Geryon is in his early twenties. He and Herakles have another chance encounter that results in their friendship (and Geryon’s feelings) being rekindled. The situation is complicated by the volatile Herakles’ relationship with the calm, sensitive Ancash, who seems to know the history of the relationship and, while being committed to Herakles, still has compassion



for Geryon. For his part, Geryon becomes friends with Ancash while fighting his lingering attraction (and desire) for Herakles. Eventually, Geryon finds himself unable to fight any longer, and falls back into a sexual relationship with Herakles. Ancash finds out and becomes angry, but stays in the relationship with Herakles. Ancash also finds out about Geryon's wings, a key reason for Geryon's negative self-image, and tells Geryon a story that suggests that in the history of Ancash's community, people with wings were regarded with respect and admiration. As the group's time together comes to a conclusion, Geryon learns that Ancash really wants to see him fly and out of respect takes a picture of himself in the air, and leaves it for Ancash. The novel ends with an image of Geryon, Herakles, and Ancash united in their appreciation of a volcano's simultaneous beauty and usefulness.

The book ends with an epilogue of sorts: a fictionalized interview with Stesichoros, in which he discovers his experience of waking up to a new way of seeing the world.



Section 1

Summary

“Red Meat: What Difference did Stesichoros Make?” This section, and the novel, begin with a quote from writer Gertrude Stein that refers to “words doing as they want to do and as they have to do” (3).

The actual introduction begins this way, referring to the ancient Greek poet Stesichoros: “He came after Homer and before Gertrude Stein, a difficult interval for a poet” (3). It describes how Stesichoros developed the art of writing poetry: where Homer repeated the same poetic description of a god or a character every time that that god or character appeared, Stesichoros used different descriptions. He was, narration suggests, a great innovator in the poetic use of adjectives, going on to suggest that by innovating in the way he did, “Stesichoros released being” (5). Narration refers to the legend of how Stesichoros was blinded by Helen of Troy (which, narration also suggests, is the subject of several appendices to follow) and how he took a non-traditional, but very effective, approach to telling the story of Geryon, a monster from Greek myth about whom Stesichoros wrote a long lyric poem. Geryon, narration explains, was destroyed by the hero Herakles, but where most narratives focused (or would focus) on the latter, Stesichoros focused his storytelling on the former, giving the reader a glimpse of his origins and family history.

This brief introductory section approaches its ending with a reference to the form in which Stesichoros’ poem was discovered: as a series of papyrus fragments hidden in widely scattered jars. The section concludes with an invitation to the reader to look at the fragments and interpret them however s/he chooses.

Analysis

As a whole, “The Autobiography of Red” uses both historical fact (i.e. the existence of Stesichoros and his writings) and ancient myth (i.e. the story of Geryon and Herakles) as foundations for a work of poetic imagination. This first of three introductory sections is based more in historical fact than almost anything else in the book: Stesichoros WAS an innovator, he DID write a lyric poem about a character that most writers would have dismissed, and he WAS (according to legend) blinded by a vindictive Helen of Troy (who was, also according to legend, a daughter of Zeus). What the author does here is relate Stesichoros and his work to that of Homer (arguably the first, and most significant, of classical poets) and Gertrude Stein (widely recognized as one of the most important innovators in modern poetry). The final paragraphs of the section can be seen as a lead-in to the next section, in which the author begins the book’s process of adding layers of fiction to fact, putting contemporary spins and/or interpretations on both the idea and the content of the Stesichoros fragments.



Discussion Question 1

In what way is the theme of becoming an artist developed in Section 1?

Discussion Question 2

What are your thoughts on the Gertrude Stein quote that opens this section? What is your response to the idea that words have a life of their own?

Discussion Question 3

What do you think the author means by suggesting that by developing the use of adjectives in poetic writing, Sésichoros “released being” (5)?

Vocabulary

interval, dialect, comparison, Homeric, epithet, apt, consumption, insomniac, tractable, conventional, monstrosity, extant, tantalize, pitiful, papyrus, corpus



Section 2

Summary

“Red Meat: Fragments of Stesichoros” - “Geryon”: Geryon is described as a monster: “everything about him was red” (9), including his nose, the landscape where his cattle grazed, the wind around him, and his dreams.

“Meanwhile He Came”: This fragment refers to “Him” (9), coming in search of Geryon because of his “homegold” (9).

“Geryon’s Parents”: Poetic narration describes how Geryon’s parents send him up to his room for wearing a mask while the family is eating. He goes up “those hemorrhaging stairs ... to the ticking red taxi of the incubus” (10).

“Geryon’s Death Begins”: Poetic narration describes how the extremely upset Geryon sees his cattle having been murdered, and asks to be murdered himself.

“Geryon’s Reversible Destiny”: Geryon’s mother reassures him, and suggests he doesn’t have to decide to die right then. Geryon sees that behind “her right red cheek” (10), a hot plate is glowing.

“Meanwhile in Heaven”: The gods Athena and Zeus look down and point to Him.

“Geryon’s Weekend”: After leaving a bar, Geryon goes back to a centaur’s house. The centaur gives him wine in a cup made out of a skull and invites him to join him on the sofa. Geryon’s nerves are described as a “reddish yellow small alive animal not a bee” (11) moving up his spine.

“Geryon’s Father”: Poetic narration describes how Geryon’s father predicted that even though Geryon was quiet, he had the capacity to make a lot of noise.

“Geryon’s War Record”: Geryon hides from the noise of war – specifically, from “the sound / of the horses like roses being burned alive” (12).

“Schooling”: Poetic narration describes how family was stronger than police authority, and how, when she dropped him off at school, Geryon’s mother “neatened his little red wings” (12).

“Right”: Geryon talks with his joyful dog about being the sort of boy who knows that people are right when they call him a monster.

“Wings”: Poetic narration suggests that someone (Geryon?) is flying and looking down at a little red dog on a beach.



“Herakles’ Killing Club”: Poetic narration suggests that the dog “did not see it he felt it” (13), and that any / every event really only involves one person.

“Herakles’ Killing Arrow”: Poetic narration describes how an arrow “parted Geryon’s skull like a comb” and caused the boy Geryon’s neck to take on an odd shape, like a poppy blown by the wind.

“Total Things Known about Geryon”: This fragment consists of a list of things known about Geryon and that Herakles killed him and his dog for his cattle.

“Geryon’s End”: This brief stanza suggests that the world and the breezes, both red, went on after Geryon died.

Analysis

The first point to note about this section is the way the narrative develops variations on the visual motif of the color red, an authorial practice that continues throughout the main body of the story. Not only are there several literal references to red (i.e. the use of the word), but there are also images that imply red: the reference to hemorrhaging (which, by definition, is a flow of blood); the references to roses and poppies (which, in popular perception, are usually red); and the first of several references in the book to fire and burning (which, again in popular perception, are usually perceived as being red). On another level, the motif of red, here and throughout the book, is representative of the book’s thematic interest in strong feelings.

Other points to note about this section include the enigmatic references to “Him” (a term that seems to be used to refer to Herakles, given the fact that He is being watched by the gods and is also engaged in violence, as was Herakles), and the description of the encounter with the centaur. The first point to note here is the nature of a centaur, a mythic animal whose body is human from the waist up, and horse-like from the waist down. The second noteworthy point is the feel, in this section, of a sexual encounter: the tone of this fragment and some of the content (i.e. the wine) create the very strong sense that, at the very least, something untoward and/or inappropriate was going on between the seemingly much older centaur and the young Geryon. This foreshadows Geryon’s other experiences of sexuality throughout the narrative, most of which (for a variety of reasons) have a similar sensibility of something untoward going on.

Also worth noting is the reference to Geryon’s self-awareness of people being right when they call him a monster. There is an resonance here of anyone who has been called a derogatory name because of their identity: non-heterosexuals, non-Caucasians, non-males, the differently-abled ... many people who have had aspects of immutable identity referred to negatively have, as Geryon does, reluctantly felt and/or believed that that the hatred is justified because they know that the aspect of the identity referred to is true. In other words, the hatred of others because of difference becomes internalized, a parallel aspect of individual identity. The establishment of Geryon’s self-awareness about his situation is an important thematic element: specifically, of his coming of age



story. As the narrative progresses, it first reveals and deepens his awareness of both the hatred he encounters and the causes of it, but also portrays him as moving past that hatred, reclaiming his identity (i.e. his “monster-ness”) and ultimately celebrating it. There is the sense, in fact, that showing readers how it’s possible to transcend such internalized hatred is perhaps a sub-textual authorial intention.

Finally, there are the references to the dog. This last foreshadows references throughout the book to Geryon’s relationship with the dog, and more importantly, the final moments of the book. There, during an “interview” with Stesichoros, the poet makes an additional, somewhat ironic reference to the attention readers tend to give the dog. Finally, there is the way the author deploys the previously discussed technique of using existing narrative (i.e. the actual fragments of the Geryon story written by Stesichoros) as springboards for contemporary interpretation or variation.

Discussion Question 1

In what way does the story of Geryon’s experiences in this section reflect and/or manifest the “coming of age” theme?

Discussion Question 2

Given that red, throughout the narrative, represents strong feelings, discuss which feelings are represented by the various evocations of red in this section.

Discussion Question 3

What aspects of the language or imagery in this section can be seen as contemporary elements layered into a classic text, or series of ideas?

Vocabulary

hemorrhage, incubus



Section 3

Summary

Appendix A: “Testimonia on the Question of Stesichoros’ Blinding by Helen”: Narration discusses how Stesichoros was reputedly struck blind for writing negatively about Helen of Troy, but how, after writing a work (i.e. a palinode) that praised her, he regained his sight as a result of her forgiveness. This, narration suggests, was the result of Stesichoros submitting himself to purgation, or a period of punishment and repentance.

Appendix B: The Palinode of Stesichoros by Stesichoros (Fragment 192 Poetae Melici Graeci). This short three-line poem, ostensibly written by Stesichoros, seems to rebut everything Stesichoros said about Helen in his initial poem.

Appendix C: Clearing Up of the Question of Stesichoros’ Blinding by Helen. This appendix consists of a series of 21 statements, each one posing alternative answers to questions about what Stesichoros actually did (or might do), how Helen responded (or might respond), and how those who pose the questions might be treated for getting involved (or not). The series begins and ends with questions about whether Stesichoros was actually blinded, with the concluding question suggesting that in making a statement about Stesichoros’ blindness, “we” (20) will either lie or not.

Analysis

These three brief appendices explore the third notable aspect of the life and work of Stesichoros, other than his writing about Geryon and his evolution of poetic language: his being blinded by Helen of Troy (who, as previously discussed, was a daughter of the god Zeus) and his sight being restored following his recantation, or apology. There is the sense that the essential function of the appendices is to suggest to the reader that in the same way as the author is / has been using the Geryon myth as a springboard for other, more contemporary contemplations, the Helen of Troy aspect of the Stesichoros story is also going to be used as such. The most specific example of this approach is in Appendix C, in which the carefully crafted loop of questions turning into answers turning into other questions suggests that ultimately, nothing about the perception of myth or reality can be trusted to be absolutely true: truth, this section suggests, is dependent upon perception, while reactions to truth (such as Helen’s reaction to Stesichoros’ portrayal of her truth, and Stesichoros’ reaction to the truth of Helen’s anger) can be unpredictable. This, in turn, foreshadows moments later in the narrative where truths and reactions again become unpredictable.

Discussion Question 1

Helen of Troy is renowned as one of the most beautiful women in history: hers was, according to the famous saying attributed to the poet Goethe, “the face that launched a



thousand ships.” What contrasts or ironies are there in juxtaposing stories of Helen with stories of Geryon?

Discussion Question 2

Stesichoros’ situation is changed by an apology. What situations in your life have been changed by an apology?

Discussion Question 3

Each of the questions in Appendix C contains very different possible answers or possible truths. What situations have you been in in which there has been no clear, easy answer to a difficult question? How have those situations resolved?

Vocabulary

encomium, palinode, blasphemy, purgation, contingent, misconduct, unsavory, aftermath, vermouth, dialectical



Section 4

Summary

“Autobiography of Red: A Romance”, Part 1, pages 21- 33: This section of the book is prologued with a quote from poet Emily Dickenson that begins with a comment about “a reticent volcano” and, in its conclusion, comments that “The only secret people keep / Is Immortality” (22).

“Justice”: This section begins with a one-line reference to how Geryon learned about justice from his brother at a very young age. Then, narration describes how the young Geryon was first walked to school by his mother; how his brother soon took over the job; and how he soon became tired of Geryon not being able to remember the ways into and/or through the school. Because he was called “stupid” by his brother, Geryon both became angry and gave up trying to find his own way, at one point standing “on his small red shadow” (24) trying to figure out what to do and at another giving way to a hot, burning anger and running away.

“Each”: This section begins with a one-line reference to how “the sleep of the just” (26) is sweet and pleasant. Then, poetic narration describes how “the word EACH blew towards him and came apart on the wind” (26); how he asked his mother what it meant; and how, after she told him that it meant separation and independence, Geryon “clothed himself in this strong word” (26). Narration then describes how Geryon had to share his brother’s bedroom; how Geryon’s brother manipulated Geryon into masturbating him; and how Geryon’s brother insisted that what they did together remain a secret. Narration describes how their regular encounters became voyages “into the rotten ruby of the night” (28), and how Geryon realized that what happened to his body, his outside, meant nothing to his inside. The section concludes with a description of how, after one sexual encounter, Geryon’s brother took him to the beach; and how that was the day that Geryon started his autobiography, in which he “set down all inside things / particularly his own heroism / and early death” (29).

“Rhinestones”: This section begins with a one-line reference to how Geryon straightened up and put his hands under the table just in time. Then, narration describes how Geryon’s mother, wearing rhinestones and “all her breasts” (30) went out, leaving Geryon first in the company of his brother (who teases him) and then in the company of a babysitter, who offers to read to him. Geryon suggests that she read a book that will not feel wrong for her to read: narration indicates that he wants to keep “her wrong voice away / from words that belonged to his mother” (32). Later, when the babysitter is reading to Geryon, his brother joins them on his bunk, and starts a conversation about what they each would say is their favorite weapon. Geryon opts for a cage, but is ridiculed by his brother, who says that weapons are about destroying an enemy. At that point, Geryon hears his mother come home. Inside him, narration suggests, something catches on fire.



Analysis

The first point to note about this section is how the quote with which it begins (from Emily Dickinson) is echoed in the narration of one of its final sections – see “Section 13”. The opening phrase, which refers to “the reticent volcano”, can be seen as foreshadowing both the many literal references to volcanoes throughout the narrative and the many metaphoric references to what those volcanoes represent – in general, the power of feelings which is, in turn, one of the book’s central themes. Meanwhile, for further consideration of the last part of the quote.

The second point to note about this section is how it introduces the narrative structure that continues throughout most of the remainder of the book: a single sentence, followed by narration written with the sensibility of both a story and a poem. Meanwhile, a key point to note, here and throughout the narrative, are the references to the color red, both directly (i.e. to the color itself), indirectly (i.e. to objects that manifest the color red), and through implication (i.e. to experiences that suggest the color red). Indirect manifestations of red in this section include the reference to the ruby (a red gemstone), while implied references to red include the comments about anger and strong feelings, experiences that, throughout the novel, are similarly linked to red in all three of the above mentioned ways. These ways, in turn, are among the primary manifestations in the book of its thematic exploration of the power of feelings.

Other important points to note include the references to “each” and to “inside”, which can be seen as elements of the book’s thematic explorations of coming of age and of being different and the references to sexuality. The references are simultaneously disturbing and part of a continuum of such references, the first being the reference to Geryon’s encounter with the centaur in the “Fragments” and other references coming later in the story. This continuum of sexual experience is another component of the book’s exploration of Geryon’s coming of age: here, as in many other such stories, exploring / experiencing sexuality is a key component of a character’s developing maturity.

Then there is the reference to justice, one that is primarily ironic, given that what Geryon receives at the hands of his brother isn’t really justice at all. The reference is also foreshadowing (in that the treatment Geryon receives here is similar to the unjust treatment he receives from Herakles) and an important part of Geryon’s coming of age, in that his experience with his brother is one of many that inform him of the nature of people, relationships, and the world. Finally, there are the references to Geryon’s mother, which suggest a number of things: that she is, in her way, as much of a monster physically as he is; and that their relationship is intensely important to him, in ways that become increasingly apparent as the narrative unfolds.

Discussion Question 1

How is the theme of “being different” developed in this section?



Discussion Question 2

Given the reader's knowledge of Geryon's fate (i.e. that he is murdered), what do you think are the implications for the story of the quote from Emily Dickinson that starts this section?

Discussion Question 3

How do the concepts of "each" and what goes on "inside", as discussed in this section, interact with / relate to one another?

Vocabulary

reticent, slumber, precarious, admonish, intolerable, gesticulate, heroism, rhinestone, sentry, clamber, catapult

Section 5

Summary

“Autobiography of Red: A Romance”, Part 2, pages 34 - 41 - “Tuesday”: This section begins with a one-line reference to how Tuesdays were Geryon’s favorite day. Then, narration describes how, on alternate Tuesdays when Geryon’s father and brother were at hockey practice, Geryon spent the evening with his mother. One evening, narration says, Geryon made a sculpture (with, among other things, a tomato and some crinkly paper taken from his mother’s purse that he tears up) while his mother talked on the phone with a friend about the friend’s husband. Later, when she’s finished her conversation, Geryon’s mother compliments the sculpture, saying next time, he might want to use a one dollar bill instead of a ten.

“Screendoor”: This section begins with a one-line reference to his mother looking at him as she stands at the ironing board and lights a cigarette. Then, narration describes his mother urging him to go to school as he lingers at the back door, telling him that going to school would be hard if he was weak, but that he’s not. She tidies his “little red wings” (36) and sends him on his way.

“Ideas” This section begins with a one-line reference to how Geryon finally learns how to write. Then, narration describes how Geryon receives a notebook from a friend of his mother’s; how he uses it to write his autobiography; and how that autobiography includes references to his and his dog’s death, and to his beliefs about why Herakles killed him. On the day of a parent-teacher meeting, Geryon’s teacher asks his mother whether he ever writes anything with a happy ending. Geryon takes his composition back from his teacher, goes to the back of the classroom, and gives his story a new ending, one that describes “beautiful red breezes [blowing] hand in hand” (38).

“Change”: This section begins with a one-line reference to how Geryon managed to make it to adolescence. Then, narration describes a chance encounter (at the bus depot) between Geryon and Herakles: Geryon asks Herakles if he can make change for a dollar so that he (Geryon) can call home. Herakles says he’ll give Geryon a quarter for free, adding that he “Herakles” believes in being generous. They then spend several hours together, hours that conclude with Herakles realizing that Geryon’s hands are cold and putting them inside his shirt.

“Click”: This section begins with a single sentence from Geryon’s mother, asking whether Herakles is the friend with whom Geryon is spending so much time. Then, narration describes how, as Geryon works with his new camera, his mother asks him about his relationship with an unnamed friend, presumably Herakles. As she talks about how they’re spending so much time together, their conversation is interrupted by the arrival of Geryon’s brother.



Analysis

Several elements introduced earlier in the work are developed here. The first among these to note are the references to Geryon's mother, who veers back and forth between compassion and control. Particularly worthy of note is how the narrative now includes references to her cigarette smoking, a motif (repeated image) that appears throughout the narrative. There is perhaps the sense here that the cigarettes are another implied reference to the color red, given that the end tip of a lit cigarette glows red when its smoke is being inhaled. This, in turn, leads to another repeated idea, or motif: the three sorts of references to the color red. Here again, there are direct references (to the actual word / color, such as to the "color" of the breezes), indirect references (to objects understood to be red, such as the tomato), and implied references (to objects that have the sense or feel of red, such as – as noted above – the cigarette end).

Among the new elements introduced in this section, the most significant is the character of Herakles who, from earlier content of the book, the reader already knows is Geryon's killer. This means that there is a deep sense of both irony and anticipation about their relationship, here and throughout the narrative: how, the reader will likely ask him/herself, is this relationship going to turn murderous? Meanwhile, the relationship with Herakles is significant for a number of other reasons. Their meeting is the first (and arguably most significant) manifestation, in the novel, of its thematic interest in unexpected encounters; the relationship that develops between the two is also a key component in the development of two themes, coming of age and the power of feelings; and the character, as portrayed here and throughout the novel, is shown to be an attractive, powerful contrast to Geryon's vulnerability and lack of confidence.

Another new element in this section is the reference to Geryon's camera, which appears throughout the narrative as a key manifestation of his emerging artistic sensibility, talents, and drive. As such, the camera, and Geryon's relationship with it, is the primary element of the book's thematically central exploration of how an artist becomes an artist.

Finally, there are the references to Geryon's diary and/or his autobiography. There is an intriguing sense that Geryon, his writing, and the book in which he writes are somehow, almost magically, transcendent of time: that there is something magical about the diary / autobiography and his relationship to it. It could be argued, in fact, that the reference to the autobiography here is a tie-in with the quote (about immortality) at the beginning of this primary section of the book.

Discussion Question 1

What are the metaphoric implications of the section title "Change"?



Discussion Question 2

How is the theme of being different introduced / developed in Section 5?

Discussion Question 3

How does the reference to Tuesday being Geryon's favorite day relate to information / details presented earlier in the narrative?

Vocabulary

melodrama, luminous, fluorescent, disembark, relinquish, insomniac, swivel



Section 6

Summary

“Autobiography of Red: A Romance”, Part 3, pages 42 - 52 - “Space and Time”: This section begins with a single sentence referencing an individual’s role in a conflict: “Up against another human being one’s own procedures take on definition” (42). Then, narration describes how Geryon sees Herakles almost every day, and how distance seems to be growing between Geryon and his mother. Narration also describes how the ripped T-shirt Geryon is wearing has red letters in its logo that say “God Loves Lola.” When his mother asks Geryon what he likes about Herakles, Geryon considers some things he might tell her, but remains silent. He offers to light her unlit cigarette: she tells him she plans to quit.

“Sex Question”: This section begins with this short single sentence: “Is it a question?” (44). Then, narration describes how Geryon (14) and Herakles (16) sit in a car on a highway in a moonlit night, both feeling sexual tension. Geryon feels a building urge to ask Herakles a question, and does (“Is it true you think about sex every day?”) (45). Narration revealing both that it’s not the question he really wanted to ask and that Herakles became uncomfortable. Herakles starts the car and they drive off, both upset and bewildered.

“Hades”: This section begins with a single sentence about how journeys sometimes become too important not to take. Herakles takes Geryon on a visit to his (Herakles’) home town of Hades, which he says was “cooked” (47) by the eruption of a volcano decades before, witnessed by his grandmother and from which there emerged only one survivor: someone that Geryon nicknames “Lava Man” (47). Herakles smiles and says Geryon is going to really get along well with his family.

“Lava”: The single sentence at the beginning of this section refers to “he” not knowing how long he’d been asleep. Someone (either Geryon or Herakles) lies awake in bed while everyone else in the house is sleeping, imagining what it might be like to be a woman alone in the dark, and then imagining what it might be like for such a woman to be listening to a potential rapist coming up the stairs. Narration compares the ascent of a rapist to the slow movement of lava, which is sometimes red (the cooler it is) and sometimes yellow (the hotter it is).

“Somnambula”: This section begins with a single sentence describing Geryon’s uneasiness upon awakening. Narration then describes Geryon’s slow waking up to the sounds of Herakles’ large, busy, and noisy family. He goes downstairs, and finds Herakles on the lawn with his grandmother. He also sees a red butterfly flying on top of a black one, and although he thinks the one is helping the other, Herakles tells him (much to his grandmother’s shock) that the red one is “fucking” the black one (50). Herakles then invites Geryon to go with him and see the volcano.



“Red Patience”: The single sentence at the beginning of this section refers to a photograph that Geryon found surprisingly disturbing. Narration then describes how Geryon became fascinated with a photograph taken by Herakles’ grandmother, a 15-minute exposure that recorded everything that happened when the volcano erupted. The photograph is named “Red Patience.”

Analysis

The primary element to note about this section is its exploration of sexuality in general, and on Geryon’s sexuality in particular. There is a range of such explorations here, from the awkward innocence of Geryon’s question, to Herakles to the disturbing references to rape, to the intriguing, metaphor-rich references to the butterflies: all these foreshadow eventual developments in the book’s primary sexual relationship, between Geryon and Herakles. Those developments, here and elsewhere, are key components in the development of at least one of the novel’s central themes: coming of age. A related point is the clear, vivid juxtaposition of the volcano and both sexuality and other feelings: there is the sense here, and throughout the novel (where there are several additional references to volcanoes) that the narrative is creating a strong metaphoric connection between the power of a volcano (not to mention things like lava that emerge from it) and feelings, particularly those of Geryon. In short, this section marks the first point at which volcanoes are utilized as the key metaphoric representation of the book’s thematic exploration of the power of feelings.

Then there are the references to red, which in this section are primarily direct (i.e. to the actual color). These include the reference to the logo on Geryon’s t-shirt (which suggests a certain rebelliousness, freedom, and/or burgeoning flamboyance), to lava (which suggest, again, slow-moving intensities of feeling), and to the butterfly. This last is particularly interesting, given its implied link between red and passion (specifically sexual passion) and, on a deeper level, its connection between red and Herakles, clearly the emotionally dominant character in the relationship between him and Geryon in the same way that the red butterfly is the dominant one. There is also the reference to Hades, which was the Ancient Greek term for the Underworld, the Afterlife, or Hell, depending on one’s spiritual / religious perspective. Finally, there is the reference to Lava Man, which can be seen as foreshadowing a key revelation later in the novel which suggests that Geryon, like Lava Man here, is capable of surviving volcanic eruption. The reference here is both literal (i.e. to physically surviving physical eruption) and metaphorical (i.e. to emotionally surviving eruptions of strong feeling).

Discussion Question 1

In this section, how does the narrative develop / explore the theme related to the power of feelings?



Discussion Question 2

Given that the term “somnambula” is a reference to the experience of someone walking in his/her sleep, what do you think is the metaphoric reference to Geryon’s experience of coming of age?

Discussion Question 3

What do you think is the relationship between the title of the photograph discussed here and the references to lava, particularly those related to the qualities of its movement?

Vocabulary

accusation, astonishment, casket, geothermal, fluidity, incandescent, velocity



Section 7

Summary

“Autobiography of Red: A Romance” - Part 4, pages 53 - 62.”Pair”: The single sentence at the beginning of this section references Geryon feeling a pain “not felt since childhood” (53). Narration describes his discomfort because of the pair of wings on his back, and how he straps him down. Herakles, while inviting him to see the volcano, notices he’s behaving oddly. Geryon, when asked, says he’s fine. Narration comments how they watched each other, “this odd pair” (53).

“Grooming”: The single sentence at the beginning of this section references living childhood close to the sky, and then a surprising dawn. Narration then suggests that Herakles got Geryon to perform oral sex on him in public (explicit terms for sex or the sexual organs are never used) and how, afterwards, they went on with their friendly activities until a waitress brought them their food, asking if they were newlyweds.

“Walls”: The single sentence at the beginning of this section suggests that one night, Geryon and Herakles went painting. Narration then describes how they go out painting graffiti, Geryon’s paint always red. Herakles comments that all Geryon’s graffiti references being imprisoned, and that it depresses him. This thought, narration suggests, triggered the return of Geryon’s sexual boundaries, and the memory of his dog eating his ice cream cone. Herakles takes them back home.

“She”: The single line at the beginning of this section refers to the house being dark except for a single light on the porch. Narration then describes how Geryon plans to make a phone call to his mother, but his attempt to find the phone is interrupted when he finds a woman’s room and becomes unnerved by what he sees there - “spokes of red rang across his eyelids” (57). He goes back outside and joins a conversation between Herakles and his grandmother, in which the latter refers to having known Virginia Woolf. As Herakles goes in to answer the phone, Geryon and the grandmother have a conversation (shown in italics without paragraphs) about Lava Man, and how he became an object of display at a circus. Herakles returns, saying that Geryon’s mother is on the phone.

“From the Archaic to the Fast Self”: The single sentence at the beginning of this paragraph comments that in order to connect with reality, “you have to tune in to it not just keep yelling” (60). Poetic narration then suggests that the truths in Geryon’s autobiography moved upward into his story like lava, under pressure, moved slowly and heavily upwards towards the surface of the earth. His early morning contemplations are interrupted by Herakles, bringing tea, bananas, and suggestions that it might be time for Geryon to go home, given how angry his mother was the night before. Conversation about volcanoes continues, with Geryon suggesting he might want to stay but Herakles hinting that it might be time to go: “we’ll always be friends,” he says (62). He then tells Geryon to hurry up, as they (along with the grandmother) are going out to the volcano.



Narration also references how Geryon wrote his autobiography between the ages of five and 44.

Analysis

In this section, sexuality again becomes a dominant aspect of the narrative, and again, there is the implication that Geryon is being sexually dominated, or at least controlled, by those with whom he has his sexual experiences. Here again, as is the case throughout the book, Geryon's experiences of sexuality tie in with the book's thematically central exploration of the experience of coming of age, and of the power of feelings – in this case, the power of sexual desire. There is also the sense that the reference to the volcano – or, more specifically, to Geryon visiting the volcano – is a metaphoric representation of the “visit” Geryon is making to the sexual sides of himself. A word here on the use of the word “grooming”: on one level, there is a joking pun here related to the reference to Geryon and Herakles possibly being newlyweds; on another, darker, level, the term “grooming” is used to refer to the process by which young people are “groomed”, or manipulated, into becoming the objects of attention from a sexual predator. Here, the author seems to want the reader to see Herakles as the person doing the grooming, while Geryon is the person being groomed. There are clear echoes here of the seemingly sexual relationship Geryon had with the centaur in Section 2.

This section also contains the first of several references to famous writers and their work – in this case, the work and writing of Virginia Woolf, widely regarded as one of the first writers to give a literary voice to the experience of women. There is the sense here that in the same way as Geryon is something of an outsider, the feminist, innovative, and mentally ill Woolf was also an outsider: in other words, the reference to Woolf is a quiet, implied echo of the book's thematic interest in being different.

Other important points to note in this section include the references to lava moving slowly (which can be seen as metaphorically representing both Geryon's passionate feelings and the emerging truth of himself with which he is finally beginning to connect) and the phone call from Geryon's mother (which suggests that she is continuing to try and control him). Important references to red in this section include those about the red spokes (again, a likely representation of strong feeling – in this case passion, embarrassment, or uncertainty), and the red paint used by Geryon to make his graffiti, both elements suggesting that Geryon is starting to make connections between who he is and what he creates – a key development of the “becoming an artist” theme.

Discussion Question 1

How is the “power of feelings” theme developed in Section 7?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Geryon strap his wings down?



Discussion Question 3

Given what the narrative has revealed, to this point, about the relationship between Geryon and his mother, what do you think Geryon's mother was angry about? What do you think she said to him?

Vocabulary

dubious, opaque, chancery, encircle, precept, captivity, trinket, anecdote, transference, metaphysics, pumice, molten, ocher, archaic, ravine, terrestrial, mahogany, proportional



Section 8

Summary

“Autobiography of Red: A Romance” - Part 5, pages 63 - 75. “AA”: The single sentence at the beginning of this section suggests that Geryon fell asleep on the drive to the volcano. Narration describes how, when he, Herakles, and Herakles’ grandmother arrive at the volcano, they discuss the different forms of lava. Geryon helps the grandmother out of the car, still feeling sleepy. He hears Herakles talk about how a particular kind of lava in Hawaii was called “aa.” As they leave, Geryon is again falling asleep.

“Memory Burn”: The single sentence here refers to Herakles and Geryon going to a video store. Narration then describes how, on their way back, they bicker about the distance to the stars. When they get back to Herakles’ house, they sit on the front porch with the grandmother. Herakles eventually goes inside, but Geryon remains: he and the grandmother talk about the grandmother’s photograph, “Red Patience” and the things it makes them each think about. Conversation also turns to Geryon’s mother, but Geryon says he doesn’t want to talk about her. When Herakles returns, he sees his grandmother is uncomfortable and helps her into the house.

“Fruit Bowl”: The single sentence at the beginning of this section suggests that Geryon’s mother was at the kitchen table when he arrived home. Narration then describes how Geryon took the morning bus from Hades, and wept most of the way. Geryon’s mother comments on his shirt (red with white letters): when Geryon starts to talk about how Herakles gave it to him, he almost starts to cry. Conversation then turns to the always-empty fruit bowl in the middle of the table, with Geryon wondering whether it actually is a fruit bowl. The conversation makes both him and his mother start to laugh. They eventually go upstairs to bed, leaving the empty fruit bowl still on the table.

“Water”: The single sentence at the beginning of the sentence refers to how “out from between two crouching masses of the world the word leapt” (70). Geryon wakes up in the middle of the night and also in the middle of a rainstorm. He starts to imagine things (including the appearance of a dog in the living room) and of Herakles’ home. This last thought makes him start to cry and he collapses to the floor. As the storm continues he recovers, and then takes a long-exposure picture with his camera of the weather.

“Freedom”: The single first sentence here refers to Geryon going through a phase of being numb in the aftermath of his separation from Herakles. Narration then describes him getting a job in the government archive section of the local library. One day, a tense conversation with his mother about the things that happen at the library is interrupted by a phone call from Herakles. Herakles describes a dream about Geryon he had in which, Herakles says, Geryon (in the form of an old man) rescued a yellow bird. As Geryon thinks that the color of the bird suggests that Herakles doesn’t really know him, Herakles says he wants Geryon to be free, like the bird: Geryon thinks he doesn’t really want to be free, but to be with Herakles. After spending the rest of the evening out,



Geryon returns home. He looks at himself in the mirror (noting, among other things, his “funny red smell” (75) and his sadness), then weeps, and then goes to sleep. In the middle of the night he wakes up, disoriented and confused and grieving.

Analysis

There are several points to note about this section. The first is primarily narrative, or story-related: the fact that Geryon and Herakles have, for lack of a better phrase, “broken up.” The experiences of grief, of feeling lost, and of sudden, emerging resentment are, arguably, all common experiences in the aftermath of such a change in relationship status, and are all, also arguably, important components of Geryon’s coming of age. There is also a potential metaphoric parallel in the conversation that takes place at the beginning of this section: given that lava, throughout the novel, is representative of intense feeling, the conversation about the different types of lava seems to evoke and/or foreshadow Geryon’s experiences of different types of feeling in the aftermath of his “breakup.” This experience of intense feeling is echoed in the reference to the color of Geryon’s shirt, a clear reversal of a shirt he was wearing earlier: where that one was white with red letters, the one in this chapter is red with white letters, a metaphoric suggestion of the intense feelings Geryon is experiencing. Other important references to red include his “funny red smell” (again tying the color red to intensities of feeling – in this case, grief) and another reference to “Red Patience,” again an evocation of both the power and the pace of lava.

Other important points to note in this section include the reference to Geryon’s job: this is significant because present life is dominated by both working with the past (i.e. archived historical documents) and longing for it (i.e. his relationship with Herakles). Finally, there is the reference to water: given that water puts out fire, and given that fire has represented, among other things, the passion in the relationship between Geryon and Herakles, there is the sense that the water described here metaphorically represents the fire of that passion being put out by both rain and tears.

Discussion Question 1

Which incident / relationship in this section explores and/or relates to the theme of becoming an artist?

Discussion Question 2

What do you think is the metaphoric meaning of the empty fruit bowl? What aspect of Geryon’s life / relationships does it seem to represent?



Discussion Question 3

Given what the narrative has suggested about Geryon's experiences of feeling imprisoned, what is ironic about his experiences / contemplations of freedom? Is Herakles' wish for Geryon's freedom genuine? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

bitumen, pumice, ballast, bulbous, basalt, silica, intraplate, rhyolite, obsidian, vitreous, asymmetrical, amplitude, agitation, forlorn, austerity, acrylic



Section 9

Summary

“Autobiography of Red: A Romance”, Part 6, pages 75 – 87 - “Tunnel”: The single sentence at the beginning of this section indicates that “Geryon was packing when the phone rang” (76). Narration then reveals that Geryon is 22, and living apart from his mother. Narration then shows Geryon’s side of a phone conversation with his mother that reveals he’s on his way to visit Argentina and includes a reference to a cowboy saying that suggests going into the unknown feels like a tunnel. He ends by asking her to not smoke too much.

“Aeroplane”: The single sentence at the beginning of this section comments on how it’s always winter in the upper atmosphere. Narration then describes Geryon’s feelings about leaving his life behind: he remembers an experience of seeing a rabid dog killed by its owner. He feels somewhat claustrophobic in the small plane; notes a man video-recording a video-presentation about Argentina (the plane’s destination); and contemplates how he feels squeezed by time as well as by the smallness of the plane. He finally manages to sleep, his guidebook left open to a comment that suggests that Argentinian gauchos (cowboys) “acquired an exaggerated notion of mastery over [their] own destiny from the simple act of riding on horseback way far across the plain” (81).

“Mitwelt”: This section opens with the comment that “there is no person without a world” (82). Narration describes how, at the Café Mitwelt in Argentina, Geryon writes postcards in German, and how he has been studying German for several years. Narration also describes Geryon’s nervousness at being seemingly discussed by waiters, that nervousness combined with awareness of his wings beneath his coat. When one of the waiters comes over to check if he wants another coffee, Geryon rushes out, remembering how he did a science project in the seventh grade on the experience of seemingly being deserted by his own mind. That project, narration reveals, included a photograph of his mother’s roses, some of which were on fire.

“Skepticism”: The single sentence at the beginning of this section refers to a blue cloud in the red sky. Very early on another morning, Geryon goes back to the Café Mitwelt to write more postcards. As he’s writing to his mother, he’s joined by someone that narration refers to as “the yellowbeard” (86). Conversation is initially awkward, but Geryon eventually relaxes and learns that the “yellowbeard” (whose mouth is described as resembling a nipple) is a philosopher specializing in skepticism and that he’s in town to present at a conference. They seem intrigued by each other, with the yellowbeard inviting Geryon to hear his presentation and Geryon asking if he can take his camera.



Analysis

This section begins with a clear suggestion that a significant amount of time has passed for Geryon: he is now a young man, whereas before he was a youth, an adolescent. There is a similarly clear sense that he has moved on, at least to some degree, from his perhaps too-close relationship with his mother: there is still a connection there, and concern, but less of a sense of her being a dominant force in his life. Interestingly, the narrative makes relatively little reference to what has happened for Geryon in the years since he and Herakles broke up: there are occasional glimpses and/or references (such as the comment in this section about his having studied German), but nothing too overt or concrete.

Another important aspect to note about this section relates to the name of the café where Geryon spends significant amounts of time both here and later in the narrative. “Mitwelt” is a term taken from a type of German psychotherapy that relates to the relationship between an individual and his/her environment, that relationship often defined by issues relating to inclusion and/or exclusion. That said, the name “Café Mitwelt” can be seen as metaphorically quite potent, given that one of the book’s overall themes relates to issues of being different, and or excluded. This sense of metaphoric potency is enhanced by the references to Geryon’s wings, which throughout the novel are key components / reasons for Geryon feeling isolated and/or separate from the people / environment around him.

Other important points to note about this section include a couple of key references to color: one overt (i.e. the reference to the man described as “yellowbeard”), one that might be either metaphorical or literal (i.e. the reference to the red sky, which may be a “sky” filled with feeling or a sky filled with sunset), and one less so. These are the references to roses and to fire, both of which imply the color red – as always in this book, evocative of strong feeling. Finally, there is a reference to skepticism, a branch of philosophy which advocates rigorous and disciplined questioning of opinions and/or beliefs not supported by facts and/or scientific evidence. There is a sense here that the yellowbeard, via the practicing of his philosophy and his presence in Geryon’s life, is leading Geryon into a period of questioning and self-examination – specifically, of his self-perception as a monster. That questioning arrives at a resolution / climax in the final chapters of the main body of the book.

Discussion Question 1

How do the comments about cowboys in Section 9 reflect, literally or ironically, Geryon’s experiences as described here?

Discussion Question 2

How is the novel’s thematic interest in unexpected encounters developed in Section 9?



Discussion Question 3

What do you think is the significance of the anonymous man in the café being described by the color of his beard? Consider other references to the color yellow so far in the book: what might the man represent?

Vocabulary

gaucho, consulate, nullity, indigenous, suffix, ravenous, extinguish, ridicule, skeptic, precondition, renounce



Section 10

Summary

“Autobiography of Red: A Romance,” Part 7, pages 88 - 104 - “Slopes”: The single line at the beginning of this section suggests that Geryon could be very charming, even though he was a monster. Narration then describes how Geryon and the yellowbeard ride uncomfortably in a taxi to where the yellowbeard is to give his presentation, a large, poorly kept building that the yellowbeard says is an abandoned cigarette factory. As Geryon goes in and makes his way to where the lecture is to be given, he notes the discarded cigarette butts all over the floors and the disorganization of the desks in the lecture hall. The yellowbeard lectures at length, referring frequently to the ideas and teachings of other philosophers and questioning them all, suggesting that what they are saying is the opposite of what is actually true. This, Geryon thinks, is the philosophy of skepticism in action: “White is black. Black is white,” he thinks. “Perhaps now I will get some new information about red” (92). But the lecture continues without any reference to red, and Geryon begins to daydream, asking himself again about the nature and identity and purpose of time.

“Distances”: The single sentence at the beginning of this section reiterates that Geryon’s question about the nature of time was one that had intrigued him for much of his life. Narration then describes how Geryon goes with the yellowbeard and a number of other attendees of his lecture to a café. There, Geryon has a conversation with a man named Lazer (short for Eleazar) which, among other things, includes references to Lazer’s young daughter: children, Lazer says, inspire people to see distances. Lazer also suggests that the life story of people in general involves all of them climbing up a mountain, unable to truly help anyone else doing the same. Shortly afterwards, Lazer leaves, and Geryon finds himself wishing he would have stayed. Geryon then listens to the conversation of the yellowbeard, conversation that includes a reference to how many babies are born with tails and how doctors suppress that information. Geryon wonders to himself how many babies are born with wings. As the result of the conversation, Geryon goes back to his hotel room and takes a picture of himself, naked and with his wings displayed, a photo he eventually called “No Tail!” (97).

“Tango”: The single line at the beginning of this section comments on the hidden nature of pain. Geryon wakes up in his hotel room frightened and anxious. He makes his way through the streets and down to the harbor, eventually finding himself in a tango bar. There, he sits and listens as a woman sings tango songs. Narration seems to suggest that Geryon is dreaming, describing him as being aware he has no pants. The singer, meanwhile, comes down and starts a conversation with him, a conversation that leads Geryon to remember an encounter with his brother: coming home from a dance, seeing his brother make a stack of sandwiches, cleaning up after him – and all the while aware of his reflection (“a small red person in a big jacket”) (102) looking back at him from the surface of the kettle. Geryon suddenly wakes up, and he is back in conversation with the woman singer. After a brief philosophical conversation (in which the woman reveals



that she is a psychoanalyst), Geryon is asked a philosophical question with personal meaning: “Who can a monster blame for being red?” (104). Geryon then leaves, as the woman packs her cigarettes away.

Analysis

As Geryon moves through the three conversations in this section (all of which are primary manifestations of the novel’s thematic interest in unexpected encounters), there is the sense that each one is leading him to ask questions about himself that he has never asked before. In this sense, the previous section’s reference to the yellowbeard and the philosophy of skepticism can be seen as foreshadowing: Geryon, as previously discussed, is indeed entering a period of skepticism about his beliefs about himself. Those beliefs can be roughly defined in terms of the individuals Geryon encounters: the yellowbeard, seems to move Geryon towards questioning his beliefs about his physical identity; Lazer seems to move Geryon towards questioning his beliefs about relationships; and the tango dancer (given that tango is a very sexual, sensual, power-oriented dance) seeming to move Geryon towards questioning his beliefs about both sexuality and guilt. All of these questionings result in Geryon coming up with answers in the following section that in many ways surprise him, the people he encounters and the reader.

All that said, there are a number of intriguing metaphorical ideas developed here. The reference to climbing a mountain, for example, can be seen as a metaphoric reference to the process of coming of age, with the journey towards maturity being the climb, and maturity itself being the goal to be reached at the top of the mountain. Then there is the photograph taken by Geryon, which on one level can be seen as an evocation of the theme of becoming an artist; on another level, can be seen as referencing the similarly thematic exploration of being different (here suggesting, perhaps for the first time in the book, that being different is something to be celebrated); and which, on a third level, can be seen as another manifestation of Geryon’s coming of age. This is as a result of him seeming to come at least a little closer to a place of accepting himself as he is. Finally, there is the reference to the kettle, which can be seen as a dream-founded, metaphoric suggestion that all his life, Geryon has seen himself as a “reflection” or “mirror image” of how other people see, view, and react to him.

Finally, on a structural note, the chapters in this section (and in both the previous and subsequent sections) tend to be longer than those earlier in the book – five or six pages, as opposed to one or two. There is a sense, as a result of this structural choice, that the author is working towards portraying both Geryon and his thought processes as being more mature, more sophisticated, more complex. The shorter, earlier chapters seemed to be more immediate, tending to be more concerned with moments and sensation: here, the sense is that the narration is suggesting that Geryon’s experiences are more about contemplation and observation.



Discussion Question 1

How is the theme of “being different” developed in Section 10?

Discussion Question 2

Given that, to this point, cigarettes have been vividly associated with Geryon’s mother, what do you think are the metaphoric implications of all the discarded cigarette butts?

Discussion Question 3

What are the implications for Geryon’s coming of age when he is asked the question about who can be blamed for being red? What questions might this lead him to ask / answer about himself?

Vocabulary

blasphemy, fluent, pittance, cavernous, abstraction, pallor, lucidity, apparatus, continuous, kiosk, cobblestone, authentic, sulfurous



Section 11

Summary

“Autobiography of Red: A Romance,” Part 8, pages 105 - 117 - “Kiss”: The single sentence at the beginning of this section suggests that “a healthy volcano is an exercise in the uses of pressure” (105). Narration then describes how Geryon sits in his hotel room contemplating “the cracks and fissures of his inner life” (105) and reading books of philosophy, several of which contain references to the color red. That evening, Geryon goes out and walks through the city, eventually ending up in a bookstore. As he’s looking through a book, he’s distracted by the sight and sound of a man and a bird playing a kissing game outside the shop. He’s further distracted by a collision with a man who smells of leather – Herakles.

“Fast Forward”: The single sentence at the beginning of this section reveals that Geryon and Herakles, at the Café Mitwelt, agreed that encountering each other was a major surprise. Narration then reveals that Herakles is traveling with a companion named Ancash, going around South America recording volcanoes for inclusion on a project. Ancash plays several of the sounds they’ve recorded for Geryon, who listens on headphones while, at the same time, holding an intense gaze with Herakles. At one point, the sound being played is that of birds landing heavily on the ground, their wings having been burned by the heat rising from the volcano. When Ancash uses the word “wings”, the connection between Herakles and Geryon intensifies, and Geryon suddenly has to leave, experiencing feelings like magma rising inside him. Herakles invites him to call. Geryon says he will, and rushes out.

“Harrods”: The single sentence at the beginning of this section refers to Geryon sitting alone in his hotel room. Narration then reveals that Geryon is trying to not think about Ancash and Herakles together. His phone rings, and he is invited to breakfast by Herakles who, at the Café Mitwelt, leaves Geryon alone with Ancash. Their conversation reveals that Ancash is from Peru, and that his mother is something of a rebel. Herakles returns and sings a nonsense song in Ancash’s native language. Later, as they are exploring the city, Geryon reveals that he heard Ancash’s name in Herakles’ song, but just as Ancash is about to translate his name, Herakles takes them into Harrods, narration commenting on the red awning over the front door. Inside, the store is generally empty and unwelcoming, but when the trio goes to the second floor, they find a carousel with animals that Ancash suggests were carved in Germany. Herakles impulsively takes the beautifully shaped tiger off the carousel to take back to Peru as a gift for Ancash’s mother. Ancash objects, but Herakles says everything will be fine – and Geryon starts brooding about how they seem to be intending to leave him behind.



Analysis

This section begins with one of the clearest metaphoric connections between Geryon and volcanoes – specifically, the comment about the “cracks and fissures” in Geryon’s life, both terms that can also be seen as applying to the landscape in and around volcanoes. The key point to note here is that in the same way as lava, under extreme pressure from below, often escapes through such cracks and fissures, so too do Geryon’s feelings, also under pressure from who he is and what he feels “inside,” to use an importantly defined word from earlier in the narrative. Further to this point: the reference in “Kiss” to cracks and fissures foreshadows the reference in “Fast Forward” to the surge of feelings Geryon experiences as a consequence of Ancash’s reference to wings, with all these references acting as manifestations of the book’s thematic interest in the power of feelings.

Other noteworthy elements include different sorts of references to the color red, including direct references (such as the description of the awning over the entrance to Harrods, a well-known, higher-end, British department store) and implied references such as the reference to the heat of the volcano which, here as throughout the book, is connected both directly and through implication to redness. Finally, there is Herakles’ removal of the tiger from the carousel, which seems to reinforce the ideas that Herakles is both a rebel and a powerful one, tigers being very powerful, dominant animals. Finally, there is the matter-of-fact portrayal of the relationship between Ancash and Herakles, the narrative making no major statements about the fact that it is a same-gender relationship but just presenting it as it is, without commentary of any sort.

Discussion Question 1

In what ways do the events of this section develop the novel’s thematic interest in unexpected encounters?

Discussion Question 2

What is the metaphoric connection between the reference to birds having had their wings cut off and the relationship between Geryon and Hercules?

Discussion Question 3

A carousel is symbolically evocative of an experience of going around in circles without arriving at a particular destination. What are the possible implications of this metaphor for the relationships explored / commented on in this section?



Vocabulary

fissure, lateral, volcanology, magma, mastodon, lychee, impersonal, clarity, oblivion, monsoon, tsunami, seismograph, agitation, anthropologist, baize, roulette, etymology, sprocket



Section 12

Summary

“Autobiography of Red: A Romance,” Part 9, pages 118 - 133: “Gladys” The single sentence at the beginning of this section refers to how Geryon was experiencing both hunger and a more humiliating feeling. Narration reveals that Geryon sits between Herakles and Ancash on a plane to Peru, aroused by the novel he brought that he didn’t realize was pornographic: its central character is a sexually hungry woman named Gladys. Narration reveals that all three are under the same blanket; that Geryon pretends to be asleep so he can lean his head on Herakles’ shoulder; and that under the blanket, Herakles puts his hand on Geryon’s crotch and masturbates him. Narration also includes references to passengers passing by with cheeks flushed red.

“Roof”: The single sentence at the beginning of this section sets the scene as being “a soiled white Saturday morning in Lima” (120). Narration then describes how Ancash’s mother has set up a home on the roof of the building where she works as a cook for two Americans and as a drug dealer. Narration also describes how cold Geryon was all night on the roof, and how he and Ancash look out over the city, noting bits of activity and realizing how much calmer it is in Lima than in Argentina. They are joined by Herakles, who tells Geryon that he should go and see the collection of parrots housed by Ancash’s mother, including one parrot who is so aggressive that he might have killed a cat. As Herakles and Ancash go down into the main part of the house to fix an electrical problem, Geryon wonders why he’s there.

“Eyewitnesses”: The single sentence at the beginning of this section comments that “Saturday went whitely on” (125). Narration then reveals that Geryon wandered through Lima, taking note of people and animals and even statues all apparently waiting. When he gets back to the house where he’s staying with Ancash and Herakles, it’s beginning to get dark. Geryon is on the roof when Ancash comes up with an armload of blankets and offers to show him a way to keep warm. Their conversation is interrupted by Herakles, who speaks with them both flirtatiously. Ancash tells him firmly to leave them alone. Herakles goes back downstairs, leaving Ancash to start wrapping Geryon in the blankets. As he does so, Ancash becomes aware of Geryon’s wings, and becomes very quiet before telling Geryon a legend of his people: that in ancient times, people were sent into the heart of a volcano in the northern part of the country to see if there were other people inside. The people sent in, according to the legend, flew back out of the volcano colored red and endowed with wings: they were called the “eyewitnesses.” Their conversation is again interrupted by Herakles, who excitedly announces that they’re going on a trip to visit a volcano in the north. He again teases Geryon, who tells him to go away. Herakles rushes off to arrange for a rental car for the trip. Ancash tells Geryon that he will have to be careful on that trip, and then goes – but not before saying that Geryon can sleep with him if he gets cold. “Just sleep,” he adds (130). After Ancash goes back into the house, Geryon then falls asleep.



“Car”: The single sentence at the beginning of this section describes how Geryon, in the back seat of the car, watches the edge of Herakles’ face. Narration then describes how Ancash’s mother drove the three young men out of Lima and up a steep mountain along an increasingly worsening road. Geryon recalls how, in the past, he often asked Herakles what he was thinking, and how Herakles never did the same for him: narration comments that “in the space between them developed a dangerous cloud” (132), and that Geryon knew he could never let himself be drawn back into that cloud. He again wonders what Herakles is thinking, as the road gets even worse and Ancash continues to sleep. At one point, the car passes a group of women smoking cigarettes by the side of the road.

Analysis

There are several important points to note about this section, the action of which is almost entirely defined by developments in the book’s thematic interest in coming of age. Specifically, as this section builds to the novel’s climax in Section 14, it provides key experiences leading to Geryon’s maturation and/or emerging knowledge of himself and the world. These include deepened insight into the renegade character of Herakles, the nature and function and pervasiveness of waiting, and the necessity of seeing things as they are (most apparent in his growing awareness, in “Car,” of how unequal his relationship with Herakles actually was/is). The most significant of these life-changing experiences, however, is the conversation with Ancash on the roof, in which Ancash tells him the legend of the people with wings. There is the clear sense here that, for the first time in his life, Geryon learns that having wings might mean he is something other than monstrous, a discovery that changes his view of himself significantly and foreshadows the book’s climactic moment in which the ability to fly (and ergo his wings) become a gift. This, in addition to being thematically central to the book’s coming of age story, is also a manifestation of the book’s thematic interest in being different (i.e. Geryon discovering that being different is not necessarily a bad thing).

Also important to note are the various references to red. One reference is particularly intriguing: the comment about the flushed cheeks of the passengers on the plane. There is the sense here that because red cheeks often suggests blushing, or embarrassment, the reference suggests that Geryon is embarrassed about what happened between him and Herakles. Then there are also the implied references (i.e. to the red at the end of cigarettes, a following-up to similarly implied references made in connection to the cigarettes of Geryon’s mother).

Another key element in this section is the portrayal of Ancash (whose name is the same as that of something of a wilderness area in Northern Peru). His sensitivity towards Geryon, particularly in relation to how the latter is treated by Herakles, is a clear and vivid contrast to Herakles’ insensitivity and recklessness. There is also important foreshadowing here, simultaneously ironic (given Ancash’s reaction to what happens between Herakles and Geryon in the following section) and compassionate (given Geryon’s choices in relation to Ancash in the following section). Finally, there is the



journey taken in “Car,” which can be seen as metaphorically paralleling the “journey” towards a deeper understanding of himself and the world being undertaken by Geryon.

Discussion Question 1

How is the theme of “unexpected encounters” developed in Section 12?

Discussion Question 2

What do you think is the “humiliating feeling” that narration suggests, in the opening section of “Gladys,” that Geryon is feeling?

Discussion Question 3

What do you think is the metaphoric connection between Geryon’s situation and the reference to his seeing so many images of waiting on his journey through the city?

Vocabulary

kimono, horticultural, frond, carbine, languor, papaya, conjecture, articulate (v)



Section 13

Summary

“Autobiography of Red: A Romance,” Part 10 - pages 134 - 141 - “Huaraz”: The single sentence at the beginning of this section references the low boiling point of water in the high altitudes of Huaraz, where Geryon and the others have come. Narration then describes the empty hotel where the group is staying; the bad taste of the coffee, which Ancash’s mother says is infused with cow blood as part of a local tradition; and how the group goes exploring, everyone but Geryon chatting among themselves or with the locals. Geryon keeps his camera in his pocket since “raising a camera to one’s face,” narration comments, “has effects no-one can calculate in advance (135).

“Photographs: Origin of Time”: The single sentence at the beginning of this section describes a photograph: one of four people at a table with their hands in front of them. Narration suggests that Geryon and the rest of the group have been smoking drugs; that Geryon is having trouble steadying his camera to take a picture; and that he realizes how desperate he is to love someone.

“Photographs: Jeats”: The single sentence at the beginning of this section refers to a photograph of one leg of Geryon’s pants. Narration describes how, as the group drives even further up the mountain, the car jolts frequently as Herakles and Ancash struggle over the pronunciation of the name “Yeats,” which Ancash pronounces “Jeats.” Suddenly, four soldiers surround the car. Ancash’s mother gently pushes Geryon’s camera out of sight.

“Photographs: The Meek”: The single sentence at the beginning of this section refers to a photograph of a pair of grazing burros. Narration then describes how the police took Ancash and Herakles down to a small house, and that as he and Ancash’s mother wait their return, Geryon wonders why burros seem so appealing. Ancash’s mother comments that “they’re waiting to inherit the earth” (138), a reference to the Bible quote about the meek inheriting the earth.

“Photographs: I Am A Beast” The single sentence at the beginning of this section describes a photograph of a guinea pig on a plate. Narration then describes how Geryon pushes aside the cooked guinea pig; how the group has been taken to lunch by the soldiers; and how the soldiers tell them that the volcano they are traveling to, Iccantikas, is active. They also describe how bakeries have been built into the walls of the volcano that use its heat in their ovens. When Geryon asks what the volcano’s name means, Ancash and his mother speak quickly to one another in their native language, and then Ancash’s mother says they’re all leaving, without explaining the meaning of the word.

“Photographs: The Old Days”: The single sentence at the beginning of this section refers to a photograph showing a man’s naked back. Narration then describes Herakles



standing at a window naked; Geryon crying, in the aftermath of their making love; and Herakles teasing him that, now as then, their making love and its aftermath was “just like the old days” (141).

Analysis

In this section, the narrative continues to build to its climax in the following section. Tension between Geryon and Herakles reaches its peak in the section's last two chapters, Geryon's experiences here making for key turning points in the book's thematic explorations of the power of feelings and coming of age. What's particularly interesting here is how the narrative begins to tie the latter experience with yet another of the book's themes: becoming an artist. Note how the titles and experiences of most of the chapters here, like those of several chapters in the following section, are defined by references to photographs, the creation of which is often viewed as an art form in general, and here as Geryon's particular chosen art form. In other words, more than ever Geryon is experiencing his life as material to be used in art, arguably a key element in the work / process of any artist. Note also that the first chapter in this section suggests that initially, Geryon avoided taking pictures, and how the other titles suggest that he couldn't / can't help himself, yet another reference to an experience of becoming an artist: the work of being creative, of converting reality to art, becomes a compulsion.

Other points to note include the reference to the low boiling point of water (which can be seen as foreshadowing of the “boiling point” of the sexual tension between Geryon and Herakles; the various references, direct and implied to redness (including the comments about the volcano's heat, here once again echoing previous references to heat being red, and to the blood in the coffee); and the reference to the volcano. Then there is the encounter with the police which, aside from manifesting the book's thematic interest in unexpected encounters, seems to exist primarily to set up first the encounter with the burros (which can, in turn, be seen as a reference to Geryon's own meekness) and then the lunch, with its reference to the volcano and, more specifically, its name. “Icchantikas” is, in fact, a variation on a term found in Buddhist philosophy and used to describe someone suffering from a degree of delusion who has difficulty reaching enlightenment and/or freedom from earthly attachments.

Finally, the references to the bakery and its ovens can be seen as foreshadowing important moments in the book's climactic section, in which Geryon, Herakles, and Ancash seem to come to important realizations while visiting one of those same bakeries.

Discussion Question 1

How does this section develop the theme of “the power of feelings”?



Discussion Question 2

Given how the narrative has metaphorically portrayed volcanoes previously, how does the reference to the volcano being active relate to other situations in this section – specifically, to what happens between Geryon and Herakles?

Discussion Question 3

What are the metaphoric / character-defined implications of the name of the volcano? Which characters, situations, or experiences might it be referring to? Also: given the volcano's name, why do you think Ancash's mother insists that they leave without telling Geryon what that name means?

Vocabulary

tamale, hemorrhoids, fennel, ambidextrous, palisade, aesthetic, dogma, tautology, atelier



Section 14

Summary

“Autobiography of Red: A Romance,” Part 10, pages 142 – 149. “Photographs: Like and Not Like”: The single sentence at the beginning of this section comments that a particular photograph was just like one in the old days – or perhaps not. Narration then describes how Geryon leaves his bedroom, goes outside, and sees Ancash in the garden of their hotel. Geryon goes to him and tries to start a conversation, but Ancash is silent. Geryon falls silent as well. Suddenly Ancash hits him and the two of them fight. In a pause, Ancash asks whether Geryon still loves Herakles (Geryon says no) and how it feels for Geryon to make love to Herakles now (Geryon says it feels degrading). Ancash heads for the hotel, saying he wants to see Geryon use his wings. Herakles comes out, excitedly announcing it’s time to go to the volcano. He stops when he sees the tension between the two. Ancash goes into the hotel. Geryon takes a photo of Herakles.

“Photographs: *1748”: The single sentence at the beginning of this section refers to a photograph not taken by Geryon or anyone. First person narration then describes Geryon setting up a camera next to the sleeping Ancash, and preparing to fly, even though he hadn’t flown in a long time: he wants, he says, to give Ancash something to remember him by. He starts flying and “smiles for the camera: ‘The Only Secret People Keep’” (145).

“The Flashes in Which A Man Possesses Himself”: The single sentence at the beginning of this section describes how flour dusts “them” (146). Narration then describes the bakers working in the volcano-side bakeries; Herakles, Ancash, and Geryon watching them (after having spent the day arguing); how beautiful Ancash and Herakles find what they’re watching; and how Geryon thinks that people are “amazing beings” (146).

“Interview (Stesichoros)”: An interviewer asks Stesichoros about some of the aspects of his work: specifically, about a tendency to show characters reacting to the knowledge that something is being kept from them. Stesichoros responds with a comment about self-imposed blindness, saying that he enjoyed seeing up until around 1907. That, he suggests, was when he realized that because of his art, seeing had to be more of a responsibility than a pleasure, and that after 1907, he stopped blinking: he had to keep seeing everything. That, he adds, continued until the war began (World War I?), and then other things took his attention. Conversation then turns to description and the need for it in order to distinguish object from object; to Geryon (which Stesichoros says explored his interest in the link between geology and character); and to Helen, who Stesichoros says doesn’t exist. As the interview concludes, Stesichoros reveals his relief that the interviewer didn’t ask about the little red dog.



Analysis

The novel reaches its narrative and thematic climax in the aftermath of Geryon's sexual encounter with Herakles – specifically, in the moment at which Geryon responds to Ancash's earlier request to see his wings in action and films himself flying. This is significant on a number of thematically central levels. It marks a key point in Geryon's coming of age, in that he seems to have come to accept both the good and the bad in himself without judging either: a key stage in a coming of age experience / story. The filmed flight also marks a key point in Geryon's journey towards becoming an artist: again, and as referenced earlier, Geryon is using himself and experiences to create a kind of art – that is, the video of himself that he creates, as kind of an apology, for Ancash. Then there is the development in the book's thematic interest in the power of feelings: here, arguably for the first time in the narrative, Geryon experiences joy (as evidenced by the reference to him smiling). All of this is foreshadowed by Herakles' reference, earlier in the section, to going to see a volcano: there is the sense here that in addition to representing deep feeling, the volcano also represents the power of acceptance of the self, a power manifest in Geryon's flight. The final point to note about this moment relates to the reference to "The Only Secret People Keep," a clear echo of / bookending with the Emily Dickinson quote that began the book (see Section 1). The chapter set at the bakery, meanwhile, becomes something of an epilogue, with the references to fire (and its implications of redness in the fire), to Geryon's thoughts about people, and to the white forgiveness / compassion implied in the reference to flour coating the three young men all suggesting that there is the possibility of peace even in the aftermath of torturous self-realization and painful conflict.

There is another epilogue, of sorts, in the final "interview" with Stesichoros. The sense here, as was the case with the book's opening sections, is that the author is once again using historical fact as a springboard for a work of the imagination, or fiction, presenting a possible reaction on the part of Stesichoros to the story that's just been told. There is also the sense that blindness, as discussed and in the context of the book as a whole, is a metaphoric reference to an individual's inability to see self-truths, in the same way that Geryon was unable to see his own self-value until wakened to it by his experiences with the other characters. The reference to being unable to distinguish object from object can, in that context, be seen as a reference to an inability to distinguish actual self from perceived self. The reference to the relationship between geology and character refers to the book's established links between volcanoes and feeling / identity, while the reference to Helen not existing can be seen as a suggestion that what Helen represents (vindictive anger in the face of painful truth) has no value. This idea is born out in the actions of the characters and the description of what happens at the bakery: they have come to peace in the aftermath of anger, a more valuable and truer possible experience that defines people, in the words of Geryon, as "amazing beings."

Discussion Question 1

How does the novel explore, in Section 14, the theme related to being different?



Discussion Question 2

Why, do you think, Geryon refers to the experience of making love with Herakles as being “degrading”?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think, in terms of the interview section, Stesichoros is portrayed as making the references he does to the red dog?

Vocabulary

aesthetic, dogma, tautology, atelier



Characters

Geryon

Geryon is the book's central character and protagonist. Throughout the narrative, he is both portrayed and perceived as a self-described monster, with red skin and wings. In spite of his mother's best efforts early in his life, he is unable to see himself as anything other than different, which means that when Herakles sees him as someone worth spending time with, and perhaps even loving, he finds himself drawn into a relationship perhaps more quickly, and more deeply, than he otherwise might. As anyone who has experienced a longing to be liked can probably attest, discovering someone who actually fulfills that longing, no matter who that person is or what that person's own flaws, can be simultaneously exciting and dangerous: both are aspects of Geryon's relationship with Herakles that play key roles in how the narrative, and Geryon's journey of transformation throughout that narrative, unfold.

As a whole, the story is primarily concerned, both thematically and narratively, with Geryon's coming of age – more specifically, his moving from youth into maturity. As he ages, he simultaneously comes to learn more about various aspects of himself – most significantly, his artistic interests, his sexuality, his ideas and interests – becoming a fuller, more adult, and more self-compassionate human being. This last is particularly important, in that by the time the novel reaches its conclusion, and as an indirect result of his renewed relationship with Herakles, Geryon has come to value those parts of himself that he originally hated: he has come to accept that his wings, as well as the other things that made him feel different, are in some ways gifts, rather than curses.

There is considerable irony of all this, as the reader is told from the very beginning of the book (i.e. in a series of prologues that establish a context for the telling of Geryon's story). In the original version of the Geryon / Herakles story, Geryon is, in fact, murdered by the person who catalyzed his positive transformation. According to the mythic story of Geryon and Herakles, the former is killed by the latter as part of the latter's famous Twelve Labors which, according to legend, he was forced to perform as part of a penance for serious crimes. In other words, Geryon's physical death is brought about by someone who, in this story at least, brought him to emotional life. Geryon's death is referenced a couple of times in the primary narrative, meaning that the reader is reminded of the ironies associated with the story even as it is being played out.

Herakles

Herakles is the exciting, volatile, unpredictable young man with whom Geryon becomes emotionally and sexually involved as a youth, and then again (after several years of separation) as a young man. Different in many ways from Geryon (which is perhaps part of what makes them attractive to one another), Herakles is somewhat selfish and self-



absorbed, aspects of his character here that relate to / echo aspects of the character upon whom he is based: the mythical hero Hercules, originally himself called Herakles.

Hercules was a son of Zeus, King of the Gods, and was gifted with several god-like qualities, including both positive (i.e. physical strength) and negative (i.e. arrogance). In both versions of the character, Herakles is a rule-breaker and a boundary-pusher, charismatic and charming: a real troublemaker, someone who today might be seen as a very attractive, so-called "bad boy."

As noted in relation to Geryon, Herakles both brings him to life (that is: wakes him up to himself) and kills him (literally: later in life, Geryon is murdered by the man whom he had once loved). In both circumstances, Herakles uses Geryon to get something he wants; In the former case, he wants attention, and gets it: in the latter case, he wants Geryon's cattle, and gets them. Again, and consistently, Herakles is out for number one.

Ancash

As a character, Ancash appears late in the narrative: he is involved in a romantic / sexual relationship with Herakles when the latter re-enters Geryon's life. Unlike Herakles and Geryon, Ancash has no mythological antecedent: that is, he is not a variation on a character of legend. He is, however, named after a region of Northern Peru, one with a great many geological / geographical contrasts: mountains and valleys, beaches and plains. Similar sorts of personal/emotional contrasts can be found in Ancash as a character: he is mostly calm (much calmer than the unpredictable Herakles), but is also capable of violent eruptions of temper (such as when he attacks Geryon for having had sex with Herakles).

The most significant part of Ancash's character is not his sensitivity and compassion, both very much in evidence throughout his time in the story, but rather his comments to Geryon in the aftermath of discovering that he (Geryon) has wings. His recounting of how winged individuals in his community are regarded as heroes is a key moment in Geryon's realization that he is not necessarily a monster - in other words, it becomes an essential part of his self-acceptance. Ancash is rewarded for being so kind to Geryon by Geryon doing as he asks, and showing him his wings in action. The relationship between Ancash and Geryon is, therefore, as significant a thematic and/or narrative element as the Herakles / Geryon relationship.

Geryon's Mother

For much of the early part of the book, Geryon's primary relationship is with his mother. At one point, narration suggests that she is as much of a physical "monster" as he is, indicating that she has more than the usual number of breasts: her monstrous-ness, however, is not portrayed as being as debilitating for her as Geryon's seems to be for him. On the other hand, it may be why she is so sensitive to what makes him different, and so determined to help him become strong and independent. Her capacity to identify with him, however, does not preclude her from becoming somewhat controlling and just



slightly domineering: compassion gone sour, as it were. Here it's interesting to note how Geryon moves from the controlling influence of one person (his mother) into the controlling influence of another (Herakles), only truly breaking free from both as a result of his encounter with the compassionate, agenda-free Ancash.

Ancash's Mother

Ancash's mother is a highly contrasting maternal figure in the book, appearing relatively late in the action when Geryon, Herakles, and Ancash visit Peru. Described almost in passing as being involved with dealing drugs, she seems to be somewhat plain-spoken and rough around the edges, although she is sensitive enough to keep potentially hurtful information from Geryon (i.e. the meaning of the name of the volcano she is taking the three young men to visit). She can be seen as representing the casual, unpredictable side of life.

Herakles' Grandmother

Shortly after Geryon and Herakles begin their relationship, Herakles takes Geryon to visit his home, where they encounter Herakles' grandmother. Elderly and wise, somewhat forgetful but insightful, she and her photography become important influences in how Geryon sees himself and the world. She and what she has to say don't necessarily change him, but Geryon's encounters with her do cause him to ask questions, to which he finds answers as the narrative unfolds.

Lava Man

"Lava Man" is the nickname given to a man referred to by Herakles' grandmother as having survived the volcanic eruption that destroyed her home town decades before. Lava Man became something of a freak / celebrity because of what made him different, with the story of his relatively unhappy fate suggesting to the impressionable Geryon that that kind of fate was something he wanted to avoid: hence, his continued, ongoing secret-keeping about his wings.

Yellowbeard

Geryon has a chance encounter with this character, whose proper / given name is never identified, while visiting a German-named cafe in Argentina. The Yellowbeard is a philosopher, and invites Geryon to hear a presentation he is making. That presentation, and the Yellowbeard's line of study, relate to the philosophy of Skepticism - that is, questioning and / or challenging the usual meaning of ideas, objects, or principles. Being exposed to Skepticism is part of Geryon's journey of self discovery, in that he is led to ask questions about his own usual ideas about himself. Thus, the Yellowbeard is a significantly catalytic and/or transformative character in the book.



Lazer

In the aftermath of his encounter with the Yellowbeard, Geryon has a second chance encounter: with the philosopher Lazer. Their conversation leads Geryon to a new and different understanding of what it means to be a child, to relate to a child, and to have a sense of distance from life and from other people. His influence on Geryon is perhaps less overly important than that of the Yellowbeard, but is nonetheless significant: as a result of the conversation with Lazer, Geryon begins to question other ideas relating to his youth.

Real-World Writers

Several actual authors, each with a degree of fame and/or notoriety and/or critical respect, are referred to throughout the story. Some (like Emily Dickinson and Gertrude Stein) are quoted, their words offering echoes of various narrative and thematic elements. Others (Virginia Woolf, Walt Whitman, Yeats) are referred to in passing by the characters during conversation. The point to note here is that each of these writers, in his or her own way, was an innovator in the style, structure, and/or writing of poetry: this, in turn, relates to the described experience of a poet who is arguably the originator of the Geryon story, the classical Greek poet Stesichoros.

Stesichoros

Stesichoros was a poet writing thousands of years ago in Ancient Greece. As noted above, and elsewhere in this analysis, he was an innovator when it came to the writing of poetry - specifically, in how descriptions were integrated into a piece of storytelling. He was also known for having been suddenly blinded by the demi-goddess Helen of Troy for having told some uncomfortable truths about her. According to legend, Stesichoros regained his sight after recanting (i.e. apologizing for) what he said. There is a sense here of connection between what happened to / with Stesichoros and what happens to Geryon: both have life-altering encounters with difficult truths, but where Stesichoros is forced to say his truths were in fact lies, Geryon becomes able to accept the positive values of HIS truths.

Helen of Troy

The legendarily beautiful Helen of Troy was a daughter of the god Zeus. Vain about her appearance and lineage, she, according to legend described in the Prologue and Epilogue to "Autobiography of Red," took vengeance on the poet Stesichoros for saying things about her that, while true, she didn't want said. So, in an act of vindictive anger, she struck him blind, restoring his sight only after he apologized. In the same way as there are echoes of Stesichoros' story in Geryon's, there are echoes of Helen's story in that of Herakles: both characters are emotional, impulsive, and volatile, and both causing damage to others as a result of that volatility.



Symbols and Symbolism

Red

Throughout the narrative, the color "red" appears in a variety of different contexts and is expressed in a variety of different ways (sometimes direct, sometimes indirect, and sometimes entirely implied). The motif first appears in reference to Geryon, whose red skin is a key component of his experience of being different. This initiating connection to the central character suggests that throughout the remainder of the book, the color red, whether it represents anger, passion, violence, or any of its other implied meanings, is intended to be seen as a direct connection to, or manifestation of, one of Geryon's experiences or character traits.

Geryon's Wings

Geryon's wings, like his skin color (red), are primary manifestations of his experience of being and/or feeling different. For much of the narrative, there is the sense that he is ashamed of them, and /or feels in danger because of having them. Later in the story, however, he becomes aware that his wings are part of what makes him unique in a more positive way, and he seems to at least be beginning to accept them as a positive aspect of his life.

Geryon's Dog

Early on, the narrative makes it clear that Geryon's dog suffers the same fate as Geryon himself: both are killed by Herakles. There are, however, brief flashback references to Geryon's experiences of joy with his dog, the suggestion being that when the dog is killed (when Geryon is an adult), it is, on some level, also a death of Geryon's happiness.

Geryon's Camera / Photography

Fairly early in the narrative, Geryon is portrayed as developing an interest in, and an enjoyment of, photography. Eventually, his camera becomes a key means of his interaction with the world: as such, it also becomes a key expression of the novel's thematic interest in the process of becoming an artist.

Volcanoes

Throughout the narrative, volcanoes have a clear, metaphoric connection to experiences of intense feeling. This is primarily true of Geryon, whose range and depth



of feeling are key components of his character / journey of transformation, but it is also true of other characters, most notably Herakles.

Fire and Heat

Both fire and heat are associated with volcanoes, and therefore with strong feeling. Throughout the narrative, strong emotions (particularly anger and passion) are described in terms that suggest they are hot, fiery, and powerful.

Cigarettes

Several times in the narrative, there are clear and/or pointed references to cigarettes. Among the most significant are the references to the cigarettes smoked by Geryon's mother, as well as her expressed intention to quit; the cigarette butts left behind in the factory where Geryon hears "the yellowbeard" deliver his lecture; and, late in the novel, the cigarettes smoked by the women by the side of the road along which Geryon and other characters drive to reach a volcano. In each of these cases, there is a sense that the cigarettes represent a secret, hidden, or implied truth; that the glowing tips of cigarettes have a connection to the color red, as discussed above; and that cigarettes, which are temporary and fall to ashes, evoke the passing nature of the circumstances through which Geryon is passing at the time the cigarettes appear.

Airplanes

There are several references to airplanes, and airplane journeys, throughout the narrative. The most significant of these is found in the description of the trip Geryon takes, on a plane, with Herakles and Ancash. In that section of the book, there is a sense that for Geryon, being on an airplane is claustrophobic, that it is an experience of being trapped and confined. This metaphorically relates to the idea that Geryon feels / is trapped by his perceptions of himself as a monster, and also by other aspects of his life (i.e. his feelings for Herakles), an idea also developed in other ways (i.e. in Herakles' reference to Geryon's graffiti art always focusing on images of imprisonment).

The Cafe Mitwelt

In the middle section of the narrative, when Geryon is visiting Argentina, he finds himself spending a great deal of time in The Cafe Mitwelt. "Mitwelt" is a term used in German psycho-therapeutic practice to refer to how an individual experiences his / her cultural and/or social circumstances (as opposed to his / her physical circumstances). The term tends to be associated with an experience of being different, or being an outsider, something that Geryon strongly feels about himself. In other words, when Geryon has an experience of the Cafe Mitwelt, the implication is that he has found yet another way to see himself as being different and/or separate.



Iccanticas

Iccanticas is the name given to the volcano in Northern Peru visited by Geryon, Herakles, and Ancash. The name seems to be derived from the term "iccantika," a concept in Buddhist teaching / thought that refers to someone who, as a result of self-delusion, is unable to experience nirvana (i.e. heaven) or enlightenment. In the context of the novel, the term / name can be seen as representing Geryon's experience of being self deluded - his long-standing belief that he is a monster unworthy of love or self-respect. It's a significant irony, therefore, that the journey to Iccanticas is, in fact, a key component of Geryon's realization that he does have reasons to value himself.



Settings

Geryon's Home

There are no specific physical descriptions of the house in which Geryon lives; there are no indications of the city, country, or continent where he lives; there is, in fact, little or no sense of anything about where much of the action is set other than to suggest it is a "normal" family home: living room, dining room, kitchen, bedrooms, yard. This sense of place contributes to the book's overall sense that Geryon lives a life that many people would experience as similar to their own: the implication is that Geryon's appearance is virtually the only thing about him that could / would be perceived as "different," and that ultimately, in most ways, he is no "different" from anyone else.

Herakles' Home

In much the same way as Geryon's home is described primarily through implication rather than overt description, Herakles' home also feels "average" or "normal." There are, however, two aspects of Herakles' home that set it apart from Geryon's. One is that the community in which Herakles lives is called "Hades," the realm of the underworld, or of the dead. The second is that it is situated near a volcano that, at some time in the past, erupted and killed almost all of Hades' citizens. What arises from both these concepts is that Herakles comes from a place associated with death, which is ironic given that Herakles, in many ways, is associated with awakening Geryon to a different way of perceiving and/or experiencing life.

A Time Like The Present

In the same way as the homes of Geryon and Herakles are never explicitly, overtly described, the novel's setting in time is left mysterious. There is a feel of the piece's temporal context being contemporary, or set in the recent past: this is perhaps more likely, given the absence of contemporary technology. A few references / images (in particular the reference to smoking, but also other aspects of the writing) give the book a feel of America in the 1950's, a time when homes and home life operated within a particular sense of parameters in which Geryon, with his redness and difference, would be perceived as most glaringly different. In fact, an argument could be made that his skin color has a particular 50's resonance. Communists, at that time, were just about the most feared socio-political-cultural movement in the west: "red" was, and is still, a term used to describe Communists. If this is in fact the case, the book could potentially be seen as a disguised, metaphorical treatise on the positive values of Communism.



Argentina

About halfway through the novel, when Geryon has matured into a young man, he takes a trip to the South American country of Argentina. That country's cultural heritage, in particular that of the gaucho (cowboy), is an important trigger / context for Geryon's realizations about himself, his values, and his needs.

Peru

About two thirds of the way through the narrative, Geryon travels with his ex-lover Herakles, and Herakles' boyfriend Ancash, into Peru, Ancash's home country. Peru is the setting for several key elements of Geryon's coming of age story, including (and arguably most significantly) his coming to understand that he has reason to value the presence of his wings - that he has reason to value himself.



Themes and Motifs

Coming of Age

Geryon “comes of age” about several aspects of life, primarily about love and sexuality, about how those who are different are viewed by the world, and about the need for strength in individuality. A “coming of age” story is one in which the primary line of action has to do with a young, child-like character (or a child-ish character) comes to a more mature understanding – of him/herself, of aspects of life, of the world. It is a journey of transformation that, at its basic level, takes a character from a place of innocence to a place of knowledge, whether it be innocence / knowledge about a specific thing or about life/the world/the self in general.

In terms of love and sexuality, Geryon not only discovers and acts on his affections and/or sexual feelings: he also discovers that people have different attitudes towards both experiences, and that those differences can sometimes cause pain. Here he moves from innocent celebration of love and sex to a more mature knowledge of the implications of engaging in both. In terms of the world’s attitudes towards those who might be considered “different,” Geryon learns that not all perspectives are negative: when he hears the story from Ancash about how the winged people escaping from the volcano are respected for their differences (that is, for having the gifts that enable them to survive potential danger and suffering, and also for having seen what they’ve seen), he learns that what he has always hated and/or hidden about himself can also be celebrated.

This, in turn, leads to the third way in which Geryon comes of age, a way tied in with the other two: the celebration of individual identity. As Geryon becomes more and more aware of his values, morals, and perspectives as a result of seeing them juxtaposed with those of others, he learns not only what feels good and true and right for him: he also learns that he doesn’t need to be accepted and/or respected by others in order to stay true to himself. He learns both what that self actually is and that he has a right to be glad of it and grateful for it. This is arguably what makes his story somewhat tragic: the reader knows from the beginning that Geryon is killed by the person (Herakles) who, inadvertently, taught him so much about valuing himself.

The Power of Feelings

Through Geryon's example, the novel shows that, when it comes to relationships, strong feelings of love often go hand-in-hand with strong experiences of hate. Throughout the narrative, Geryon is portrayed as having strong feelings that define and/or motivate his actions and choices. The most notable and/or apparent of these are the feelings he experiences and/or expresses towards Herakles: affection, desire, and arguably even love. There is also a sense that the flip side of those feelings – anger, frustration, and resentment – become similarly as strong.



What's particularly interesting about the book's thematic exploration of feelings is how that exploration is developed metaphorically, specifically through the repeated references to volcanoes, to their power, their unpredictability, and their dangerousness. This metaphoric exploration occurs even more specifically through the use of terms used to describe volcanoes also being used to describe Geryon's feelings and reactions. This extended / repeated metaphor, or motif, suggests that for Geryon, all his feelings (including, but not limited to, love and anger) have the same potential for power, unpredictability, and dangerousness. The clear difference, however, between Geryon and the volcano is that Geryon is able to exert at least some voluntary control over his feelings, whereas a volcano does not. Geryon's struggle to do so is, in fact, one of the book's primary sources of conflict: while the flow of lava from a volcano, for example, is destructively unstoppable, or unstoppably destructive, Geryon repeatedly makes the effort to keep the flow and/or the explosion of his feelings reined in – and when he doesn't (such as the point, late in the novel, when he gives in to his desire for the relationship-involved Herakles), both danger and new knowledge result. The question therefore arises: is the new knowledge Geryon acquires as the result of letting his feelings run free worth the danger? The novel seems to suggest that it is, and that the process of Geryon learning this is an integral part of his coming of age.

Being Different

Having strong, powerful, potentially dangerous feelings is one way in which Geryon, throughout the narrative, experiences feeling different. Perhaps the most obvious way, though, is his physical appearance: red skin and, most notably, his wings. There is an interesting dichotomy here, a very interesting contrast. On the one hand, there are very few comments from other characters about either aspect of his physical identity: in most cases, those who are aware of his wings seem quite accepting, and there are virtually no references to the color of his skin. On the other hand, Geryon is portrayed as feeling both these differences keenly and deeply: he seems most ashamed of his wings, keeping them hidden (for the most part) and reacting nervously when it seems as though they are about to be seen / revealed. Over the course of the narrative, however, and as a key part of his coming-of-age process, he becomes aware that his "differences," while frightening to some and once frightening to him, can be a source of strength, power, and integrity.

Meanwhile, an interesting aspect of this thematic element is the fact that Geryon's apparent same-sex orientation is not the source of fear and/or difficulty that other aspects of his "difference" become. This may be because the narrative is creating an implied parallel between his orientation and other aspects of his difference: there is the sense that on some level, Geryon's wings are something of a stand-in, or metaphor, for his sexual orientation – in other words, that Geryon's wings represent his gayness. On the other hand, the lack of emphasis on same-sexuality suggests that, from the author's perspective, the gender of Geryon's sexual partner doesn't seem to matter, that the feelings and situations are the point. There is the feeling that if Herakles or Geryon (or even Ancash) were female, the tensions between them would be similar because those tensions arise out of who they are as persons, as human beings, not because they are



people of the same gender: Herakles is a user, Geryon is vulnerable, Ancash is wise and compassionate, none of these characteristics having to do with their genders or their orientation. Geryon's experience of difference, then, exists and/or plays out on levels of reality more fundamental, more central to his identity than his sexuality: they emerge, to continue the book's central metaphor, from the core of his being in the same way that lava emerges from the core of the earth, emerging through a volcano in the same way that Geryon's sense of difference emerges through his sexuality.

Becoming an Artist

Throughout the novel, Geryon's photography seems to take on another level of importance: helping him look at, and see, the world for important details, details that help him understand both the world and himself. He does what all artists do: take reality, look at it from different perspectives, and as a result, come to different understandings about that reality and about the self. There is the sense that initially, that Geryon initially takes photograph simply in order to flesh out his autobiography, supplementing words with images and vice versa. However, as the novel develops, Geryon becomes increasingly interested in / engaged with the process of taking photographs.

Geryon's process of becoming an artist is inextricably connected to other aspects of his coming of age. What he sees and photographs helps and supports him come to better and deeper understandings of what he is discovering about love and sexuality, about being different, and about developing strength in individuality. What's interesting to note about Geryon's particular process, and the process of becoming an artist in general, is that both simultaneously involve a distancing and an engagement, an objectivity and a subjectivity – the ability to step outside of a moment, of a situation, or of the self and see it for what it is / implies, entwined with the ability to find echoes of what is seen / implied in the self. Photographic art becomes for Geryon what so much other art becomes for so many other artists: a route into, and/or an exploration of, deeper truths and experiences, both individual and universal.

It's no coincidence that seven of the last eight sections of the main body of the book (the Autobiography itself) are defined by photographs, snapshots of idea, or insight, or feeling. The author is portraying Geryon's coming of age as a person and his emerging sense of self as an artist in both style (i.e. the way in which these sections are identified / presented) and substance (i.e. the way in which the content of these sections focuses tightly on, and distills, experiences that trigger insight and ultimately at least a degree of transformation).

Finally, it's important to note that the sections framing the main narrative (Sections 1, 2, and 3, as well as the Epilogue) also develop this theme in their examination / consideration of how Stesichoros interacted with his art.

Unexpected Encounters

Several times throughout the narrative, Geryon has unplanned encounters with people that trigger change and/or transformation in him. The most significant of these have to do with Herakles: both their original encounter in the bus station (where they meet for the first time) and their encounter in the bookstore (where they meet for the first time since separating) are random encounters that send both Geryon and his life in different directions. Other similar encounters that are less overtly significant but are still important include the encounters with the unnamed “yellowbeard” (Section 9), Lazer (Section 10), and the woman in the tango bar (also Section 10). All three of these encounters also challenge Geryon to think differently about himself and about the world, albeit in a somewhat less significant way than his encounters with Herakles.

There is a sense, in fact, that the randomness of these encounters is one of the main reasons, if not THE reason, for their being in the book. The narrative never explains their meaning – or, more specifically, it never explains how they affect Geryon and/or what they’re intended to mean. Geryon seems to just have them as part of the cumulative experiences that trigger his process of transformative coming of age: the author leaves it to the reader to come to an understanding of just what the connections are / can be between these encounters and Geryon’s identity / transformation. The implied metaphor is this: a traveler (as Geryon is), making his / her way through a new part of the external world (as Geryon does), encounters the new and unexpected (again, as Geryon does) in that world in the same way as a traveler through the inner world (again, as Geryon is) encounters the secret and unsuspected in him / herself. In this way, through linking the portrayal / inclusion of Geryon’s random encounters with his coming-of-age, the author and the book suggest that maturity and growth are both dependent not only on experiencing the unexpected but LEARNING from it, as Geryon seems to be at least beginning to do.

Styles

Point of View

The main narrative point of view of the piece is third person limited, anchored by the experiences of central character and protagonist Geryon. The reader is given the opportunity to follow Geryon's coming of age from both the outside, observing events as Geryon experiences them, and the inside, being brought into the feelings, thoughts, and insights he experiences as a result of those events. This means that the actions and/or intentions of the other characters, such as Herakles and Ancash, are left open for interpretation: the reader and Geryon are placed in approximately the same position of trying to infer motivation and meaning.

The central narrative is bookended / framed with short, fictionalized and/or adapted writing by, or about, Stesichoros, the Ancient Greek poet who extracted the story of Geryon from the myth of Hercules (Herakles) and developed it into a parallel, complementary work. The point of view of these sections varies: in the first part of the opening section, the point of view is that of an objective academic, while in the last, the point of view is that of a wordsmith and philosopher, arguably something more subjective. Between these two parts, there are what appear to be variations on Stesichoros' actual writing (likewise shaped by a more contemporary poetic sensibility) and, again, a somewhat academic analysis of that writing. The book's closing section, which serves as something of an epilogue, consists of what is presented as an interview with Stesichoros, but given that historically there are no actual interviews (and that such an interview is a very contemporary thing), it is clearly entirely fictional.

Ultimately, throughout both the opening and closing sections (i.e. prologue and epilogue), the overall academic tone is supplemented and/or counterpointed with a poetic sensibility that suggests the primary point of view is, in fact, authorial: that the author has a particular way of looking at and/or communicating the story, and that that way will infuse and/or define the book as a whole.

Language and Meaning

The primary point to note about how language is used in this book is that overall, its sensibility is poetic. There are moments of dialogue, and in the main section of the book (i.e. the story of Geryon and Herakles) the text is primarily narrative: that is, a story is being told. But throughout the book, there is the overall sense that the author is telling the story, developing character, and exploring theme in language that is primarily defined by exploration of images and / or the inclusion of language that might most accurately be described as evocative. Meaning is communicated through implication than through outright statement: the reader, as this language is deployed, is asked to think about what is being read, and / or intuitively feel his her / way into meaning, rather than having things clearly explained. The reader must come to an understanding of



what is happening and what is meant: the author is not, in most cases, spelling out what's happening in literal words that supply meaning.

Meanwhile, a key component of the book's poetic sensibility is the use of motifs, or repeated imagery. This sense of repetition, with variations, draws connections between situations and relationships that might not otherwise be made, or available to be made by the reader. The most apparent example of this technique is the recurring use of red, in everything from "the intolerable red assault of grass" (23) and red shadows in the first chapter of the autobiography to "the bitter red drumming of wing muscle on air" (145) in the last. The repeated use of red contains a sense of unity throughout the piece – specifically, that because Geryon himself is red, that everything being described and / or experienced is being considered and/or valued in his terms, from his perspective. In other words, the consistent, repeated, and varied use of red is a language-based way of defining and centering the story around him.

One last point to note about language is that even in the framing sections in which Ancient Greek writer Stesichoros is the focus of the narrative, the language has a contemporary sensibility such that, even in the recreation / reinvention of Stesichoros' original poetry, there are references to taxis and a glass-bottomed boat. There is the sense that this somewhat anachronistic use of language adds a layer of universality to the story and its telling, still drawing on the work's classical Greek roots but giving it a contemporary sensibility.

Structure

The main body of the book, the story of Geryon and Herakles, is told in a relatively linear fashion – that is, moving from Point A in time through a series of points and eventually, 47 chapters later, reaching a conclusion. Within that linear structure, for the most part, there is an emphasis on what might be described as traditional, cause-and-effect structure: action leads to reaction leads to action, choice leads to response leads to choice, and so on until the climax. All of this is connected to the journey of transformation experienced by central character Geryon: structure, in this case as in many narratives, is defined by the choices and actions of character as driven and defined by that character's needs and/or goal.

At the beginning and end of the book, framing the central story, there are sections of writing which take place outside this central structure. The first few pages of the book are taken up with what might be called a series of prologues, each focusing on aspects of the life and work of the Ancient Greek poet Stesichoros, upon whose writing the central part of the book is based and whose real-life history is given an author-revised, rather contemporary spin. At the book's conclusion, the author includes what is described as an interview, again with Stesichoros, which likewise takes place outside of the book's overall, core narrative structure. In fact, both the beginning and the end can be seen as referencing, through implication, a different kind of structure: the structure of how stories are told. In this case, there is a clear sense that the author is using the idea of, and work



of, Stesichoros as imaginative structure, a framework upon which to build the explorations of the book's themes.

One last point to note about structure relates to the chapter-by-chapter structure of the main body of the book – the story of Geryon and Herakles. Each chapter begins with a single sentence that either sums up or prologues the ideas, events, or experiences of that chapter, and then develops the story of that chapter. This single line introduction can be seen as a kind of warm-up for, or enticement to, the reader, offering chapter-by-chapter glimpses of what is to follow.



Quotes

Adjectives seem fairly innocent additions but look again. These small imported mechanisms are in charge of attaching everything in the world to its place in particularity. They are the latches of being.

-- Narration (Section 1)

Importance: This quote is taken from the book's introductory (and somewhat fictionalized) analysis of the contribution made to poetic style / writing by the Ancient Greek poet Stesichoros. In that introduction, the author contends that that contribution had to do with Stesichoros expanding the use / value of adjectives.

...the fragments of [Stesichoros' poem] read as if Stesichoros had composed a substantial narrative poem then ripped it to pieces and buried the pieces in a box with some song lyrics and lecture notes and scraps of meat. The fragment numbers tell you roughly how the pieces fell out of the box. You can of course keep shaking the box ... here. Shake.

-- Narration (Section 1)

Importance: This quote, also taken from the book's introductory section, presents the author's perspective on how the actual Stesichoros fragments can be read and/or interpreted, and suggests that one way to reading / understanding them is to simply arrange and/or read them randomly.

His mother was a / Nymph of a river that ran to the sea His father was a gold / cutting tool Old scholia say that Stesichoros says that Geryon had six hands and six feet and wings. He was red ...

-- Narration (Section 2)

Importance: In this quote, the author describes the original, mythologized description of Geryon's physical appearance - in other words, his monstrous-ness. The actual novel limits the manifestations of Geryon's difference to his wings and skin color.

[Geryon] lay very straight / in the fantastic temperatures / of the red pulse as it sank away and he thought about the difference / between outside and inside. / Inside is mine, he thought.

-- Narration (Section 4)

Importance: In this quote, narration describes Geryon's reflections on his self-value in the aftermath of being initiated into sex by his brother. The quote can be seen as echoing the experience of many who have encountered sexual abuse: that they are able to separate the experience of the abuse (i.e. the physical, or in Geryon terms, the outside) from the experience of feeling and/or being (i.e. the emotional / spiritual - or, in Geryon terms, the inside).



QUESTIONS Why did Herakles kill Geryon? 1. Just violent. 2. Had to it was one of His Labors (10th). 3. Got the idea that Geryon was death otherwise he could live forever.
-- Narration (Section 4)

Importance: This quote is taken from Geryon's so-called "autobiography," or his journal. He sums up the possible reasons for Herakles' killing of him, all of which, the narrative implies overall, are possible to one degree or another.

How does distance look?' is a simple direct question. It extends from a spaceless within to the edge / of what can be lived. It depends on light. 'Light that for you?' [Geryon] said pulling a book of matches out of his jeans as he came towards her. 'No thanks dear.'
-- Narration (Section 6)

Importance: This quote metaphorically explores the growing emotional distance between Geryon and his mother, who had, at one point, been extremely close.

[Herakles' grandmother] stumbled then and Geryon caught her other arm, it was like a handful of autumn. He felt huge and wrong. When is it polite to let go someone's arm after you grab it?
-- Narration (Section 7)

Importance: This quote, taken from the section of the story in which Geryon visits Herakles, is notable for its metaphor - specifically, the connection drawn between Geryon's grandmother and autumn, with its resonances of age, withering / drying, and the dying year.

[Geryon's] brain was jerking forward like a bad slide projector. He saw the doorway the house the night the world and on the other side of the world somewhere Herakles laughing drinking getting into a car and Geryon's whole body formed one arch of a cry – upcast to that custom, the human custom of wrong love.
-- Narration (Section 7)

Importance: Here, the quote evokes the pain of young / first love betrayed. It's important to note that because the novel downplays the same-sex nature of the Geryon/Herakles affair to such a significant degree, the reference to "wrong love" can be seen as, in fact, a reference to loving the wrong person - i.e. Geryon loving Herakles, whom he knows is wrong for him but yet cannot resist.

Once [Geryon] had seen a dog having a rabies attack ... when the owner stepped up and put a gun to the dog's temple Geryon walked away. Now leaning forward to peer out the little oblong window where icy cloudlight drilled his eyes he wished he had stayed to see it go free."
-- Narration (Section 9)

Importance: In this quote, taken from the description of Geryon's plane trip to Peru with Herakles and Ancash, the reference to freedom can be seen as a reference to death. The sense here is that Geryon regrets not having stayed to see the dog freed from its



physical suffering, a freedom he himself longs for - that is, freedom from his being different, and also from his longing for Herakles.

It was the year [Geryon] began to wonder about the noise that colors make. Roses came roaring across the garden at him. He lay on his bed at night listening to the silver light of stars crashing against the window screen. Most of those he interviewed for the science project had to admit they did not hear the cries of the roses being burned alive in the noonday sun.”

-- Narration (Section 9)

Importance: This quote, taken from a section of the narrative in which Geryon reflects on the relationship between past and present experiences, can be seen as evoking his experiences of strong feeling through its evocation of the color red, which throughout the book is connected with such feeling. The references to roses, burning, and sun all imply, again as they do throughout the novel, heat and fire, both in turn associated with the color red.

I have labored up to the top of this hill, here I am it has taken about half my life to get here and on the other side the hill slopes down. Behind me somewhere if I turned around I could see my daughter beginning to climb hand over hand like a little gold animal in the morning sun. That is who we are. Creatures moving on a hill.

-- Lazer (Section 10)

Importance: This quote from the character Lazer, one of several important and / or life-changing encounters experienced by Geryon over the course of the narrative, sums up an aspect of Geryon's experience, and indeed, of living in general. The implication of life being a struggle / challenge affects Geryon's understanding of himself and of life, making it a key piece of his thematically central coming-of-age puzzle.

[Geryon] had never been so stoned in his life. I am too naked, he thought. This thought seemed profound. And I want to be in love with someone. This too fell on him deeply. It is all wrong. Wrongness came like a lone finger chopping through the room and he ducked. ‘What was that?’ said one of the others turning towards him centuries later.”

-- Narration (Section 13)

Importance: In this quote, taken from the section of the novel in which Geryon is traveling with Herakles, Ancash, and Ancash's mother to the top of a volcano, reveals the depth and intensity (drug induced as it is) of Geryon's troubled, self-isolating sense of different-ness.

In the photograph, the face of Herakles is white. It is the face of an old man. It is a photograph of the future, thought Geryon months later when he was standing in his darkroom looking down at the acid bath and watching likeness come groping out of the bones.

-- Narration (Section 13)

Importance: This quote, from narration of Geryon's fight with Ancash in the aftermath of



Geryon's having sex with Herakles, suggests that finally, Geryon has come to realize how unhealthy and without a future his affair with / love for Herakles actually is. There is also a reference to the further future of their relationship: specifically, Herakles bringing death to Geryon.

We are neighbors of fire. And now time is rushing towards them where they stand side by side with arms touching, immortality on their faces, night at their back.”

-- Narration (Section 13)

Importance: This quote, taken from the final moments of the book's central section (that is, the story of Geryon and Herakles), continues the metaphoric development of fire and heat evoking both strong feeling and the color red. The sense here is that the three characters being referred to (Geryon, Herakles, Ancash) have put the intense feelings of their past behind them and looking into a more positive future. The quote is ironic, given that very early in the book, the narrative established that Geryon was going to be murdered by Herakles.