

The Art of Fielding Study Guide

The Art of Fielding by Chad Harbach

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Plot Summary

The Art of Fielding opens with an unexpected discovery. During a summer league baseball game, Mike Schwartz, a student at Westish College, discovers a ballplayer of remarkable talent: Henry Skrimshander, an unassuming young man from South Dakota who turns out to be a shortstop of remarkable intuition and efficiency. Schwartz is determined to recruit Henry for the Westish baseball team, the Harpooners. After contacting Henry's parents and working through the Westish administration, he secures Henry a place in the incoming freshman class. Henry, for his part, is somewhat disoriented upon arriving at campus, but strikes up an easygoing friendship with his roommate Owen Dunne, who is both openly gay and academically brilliant.

Both Henry and Owen make the Westish baseball team, which is led by the good-natured yet indulgent Coach Cox. Mike, however, is the one who truly transforms Henry into a powerful ballplayer, subjecting Henry to workouts and batting practice that refine his skills. By his junior year, Henry has almost set a record for error-free games; the current record-holder is Aparicio Rodriguez, a (fictional) shortstop whom Henry himself idolizes and whose book on baseball is itself called *The Art of Fielding*. But Henry's junior year is a crucial period for other characters as well. Mike Schwartz is applying to law schools, and Westish College president Guert Affenlight is dealing with two changes in his own life. First, his daughter Pella is dealing with the collapse of her marriage to an architect; second, President Affenlight himself has fallen helplessly in love with Owen.

Henry's junior year is upended when one of his own throws flies into the Westish dugout and incapacitates Owen; shaken, Henry is filled with a sense of anxiety that destabilizes his entire ability to play baseball. Despite his own efforts, he voluntarily steps down from the Westish baseball team, only to sink into a deep depression. As Henry deals with this crisis of confidence, Owen recovers and strikes up a secretive romance with President Affenlight, Mike receives a series of law school rejections and strikes up his own romance with Pella, and Pella finalizes her break from David, her estranged husband. Yet after Mike's relationship with Pella runs into tension, Pella sleeps with Henry. Mike himself discovers this liaison, and a rift opens between Mike and his onetime protege.

Even as all these characters deal with personal tensions, the Harpooners baseball team enjoys a remarkable winning streak. President Affenlight himself also seems to be headed for a personal victory; he plans to buy a house in the environs of Westish, and to more firmly establish himself and Pella (who has been auditing classes and plans to enroll) as members of the Westish community. Yet before he can put this plan in motion, President Affenlight is confronted by the Westish administration. His affair with Owen, which is against school protocol, has been discovered, and he must leave both his post and Westish itself. Shortly after learning of this unfortunate fate, President Affenlight seeks out the depressed and now self-starving Henry. President Affenlight arranges for the young ballplayer to go to South Carolina (where Westish will face Amherst in a championship game), then retires to his quarters and quietly passes away.



Henry arrives in South Carolina, where the small and by now exhausted Westish team faces the difficult task of pulling off a decisive victory. He helps out as much as he can in his depleted state, and the team itself is within a few points of triumph when the news of President Affenlight's death arrives. Owen, who is slated to bat for the Harpooners, is too stunned to play. Henry takes his place. By allowing a pitch to hit him in the head, taking first base, and then madly rushing to home, he manages to score the team's winning run. Then he blacks out and is put into medical care.

The novel nears its end in the summer after Westish's championship season. Mike has accepted a position in the Westish athletics department and has renewed his relationship with Pella, Owen is headed to Tokyo on a scholarship, and Henry (despite being recruited for professional baseball) wants to finish out his Westish education. Yet Pella wants to honor her departed father, who was drawn to life at sea and to the sea adventures of Herman Melville, by re-burying him in the lake near Westish College itself. Owen, Mike, and Henry meet her one night and assist her in this endeavor. By the time they are done honoring and re-locating President Affenlight, it is almost time for the day to begin. Owen sets off for the airport, Pella sets off for her job in the Westish dining hall, and Mike takes out a bucket of baseballs and begins hitting them to Henry, who, after much trial and effort, seems to be re-claiming some of his former talent.



Chapters 1-16

Summary

In Chapter 1 of *The Art of Fielding*, Mike Schwartz, student at Westish College in Wisconsin, has just finished a summer game with his American Legion team. Though the game itself was unremarkable, Schwartz makes an important discovery afterwards; his attention is drawn to a small, unassuming shortstop from South Dakota. This shortstop spends a few minutes after the game fielding balls hit by his coach, and moves with grace and instinct that immediately impress Mike. Mesmerized and determined not to lose such an example of natural talent, Mike decides to approach the shortstop.

Chapter 2 shifts to the perspective of the shortstop himself, Henry Skrimshander. Growing up, Henry had developed a passion for baseball. He was a devotee of legendary shortstop Aparicio Rodriguez and of Rodriguez's book *The Art of Fielding*, and honed his own skills to a remarkable degree. (Henry's baseball mitt is named "Zero" because, typically, Henry makes zero errors in a game.) Yet Henry has not planned to go to college prior to Mike approaching him. The idea of enrolling in Westish surprises Henry and to some extent unsettles Henry's family, yet Mike is relentless in his pursuit, and even talks directly to Henry's father. Henry ultimately arrives at Westish for the fall semester. Though he feels out of his element for the most part, he strikes up a quiet friendship with his roommate Owen, who is academically talented, openly gay, and neat almost to a fault.

Henry spends his first winter vacation away from home in Chapter 3. He works at the Westish dining hall under the supervision of Chef Spirodocus. He also has a tense conversation with his parents, who have learned (from Henry's sister Sophie) that Owen is gay and are disconcerted by this information. However, Henry defends Owen as an ideal roommate. Later, Owen and Owen's current boyfriend Jason take Henry shopping in an effort to find Henry more fashionable clothes.

As Chapter 4 opens, Henry stands outside a door, listening to the sounds of the passionate and pained activity on the other side. The door opens and Henry finds Mike and Adam Starblind, another Westish athlete, who have been exercising. Mike and Adam introduce Henry to a workout routine that includes lifting weights and drinking a nutritional supplement called SuperBoost Nine Thousand. This regimen prepares Henry for the tryouts for the baseball team, the Westish Harpooners. When the tryouts themselves arrive, Henry is surprised to see the scholarly Owen in attendance; Owen, however, proves to be a powerful and precise batter. Both he and Henry make the team, as do two other freshmen, Rick O'Shea and Adam Starblind.

Chapter 5 begins with a depiction of a trip that the Harpooners take to Florida to play baseball. By this point, Henry's skill has become apparent and the current Harpooners shortstop, Lev Tennant, fears that he may lose his position to the younger player. Mike



is unhappy with the manner in which the team, under the guidance of Coach Cox, seems to indulge its less talented players. In a sly move, Mike provokes Lev to assault him, and Lev subsequently turns over his post as shortstop to Henry. Now holding a starting position, Henry is able to refine his skills and gain physical strength. By his junior year at Westish, Henry has turned into a powerful batter and has registered enough error-free games to almost beat the record set by his idol, Aparicio Rodriguez.

Chapter 6 shifts focus to describe the journey that Herman Melville, the famed author of *Moby Dick*, took to the Great Lakes region in 1880. In 1969, a Westish undergraduate named Guert Affenlight discovered an original Melville manuscript which proved that Melville had visited Westish College during the trip. The manuscript ignited the imagination of young Affenlight, who (in an attempt to follow Melville's example) both went to sea and began writing his own fiction after graduation. Eventually, though, Affenlight found a different outlet for his Melville-inspired love of the written word. He enrolled in a humanities doctoral program at Harvard, and went on to become a celebrated professor of American literature. He wrote one book (titled *The Sperm-Squeezers*) and raised one child, his daughter Pella, who was born out of wedlock.

In Chapter 7, Harbach depicts the present-day Affenlight. Now 60 years old, Affenlight is president of Westish College. He has surrounded himself with books, including a first edition of *Moby Dick*, but he is also in the midst of a few conflicts. Bruce Gibbs, chair of the Westish trustees, is paying a visit to President Affenlight's office. President Affenlight is working with student groups and supporting new environmentally-friendly practices on campus, but Gibbs believes that such initiatives will drain Westish school funds. President Affenlight is also scheduled to pick up his daughter, Pella, who is flying into a nearby airport and making her way to Westish.

Chapter 8 follows President Affenlight immediately after his meeting with Gibbs. The Westish president makes his way to the school's baseball diamond; he reflects on how his the Melville discovery resulted in a campus-wide Melville obsession. He finds that the Harpooners (their own name derived from Melville) are nearing the end of a game, and that impressed baseball scouts have begun seeking out Henry. Yet President Affenlight is interested mostly in catching a glimpse of another player, whom he thinks of simply as "O." Eventually, the scouts depart. The game is soon to conclude, and Henry makes what appears to be a routine throw. This throw, however, goes badly off course; it veers into the Westish dugout and hits Owen, the very "O" of Affenlight's thoughts.

As Chapter 9 opens, Henry stands in shock; he believes that Owen has died as a result of his off-track throw. Mike approaches Henry, explains that Owen is incapacitated, and drives Henry to the hospital where Owen has been taken. At the hospital itself, the two ballplayers are joined by Coach Cox (who brings fast food for them to eat) and by President Affenlight (who reflects on how Owen spurred his own interest in the environment-friendly policies for Westish, and who has begun to experience romantic feelings for the student). The men learn that Owen's life is not in danger even though the ball that Henry threw collided with his face. President Affenlight then leaves to pick up Pella from the airport.



Chapter 10 begins with a depiction of Pella's arrival at the airport near Westish. She has left behind her marriage to an architect named David, who is based in San Francisco. As a high school student, Pella had been drawn to David's intellectualism and apparent maturity; she even dropped out of her prestigious boarding school, Tellman Rose, to share David's life of travel and high culture. Eventually, though, she began to find his presence oppressive and spiraled into a pattern of isolation and depression. The initial meeting between Pella and her father is somewhat strained, and in fact their relationship has always been complicated by the death of Pella's mother and by Pella's rebellious nature. When they arrive at Westish, Pella reveals that she would like to begin taking courses at the college.

In Chapter 11, Henry returns to his dorm room. He takes a call from Mike, who advises him to eat and stay in shape, despite what happened to Owen. Henry also receives a call from Miranda Szabo, a high-powered sports agent who is interested in taking Henry on and guiding his baseball career. Though Henry realizes that this is good news (or at least news that would please Mike), he remains worried about Owen and begins to doubt his own abilities as a ballplayer.

Chapter 12 returns the novel to Mike's perspective. Mike spends much of his time in the Westish Varsity Athletic Center (or VAC) working on his undergraduate history thesis. Although Mike came from a poor family and originally considered dropping out of high school, Westish gave him opportunities to be recognized as a leader. He has even applied to six prestigious law schools, yet has been rejected from five so far. After dealing with Owen's injury, Mike returns to the VAC and discovers a letter from Yale, the last of his schools to respond. He leaves the letter unopened, takes a call from Henry, learns the news about Miranda, and decides to open the letter.

In Chapter 13, the weather at Westish has turned cold. Henry, however, makes his way to the Westish stadium and begins an exercise routine: he charges up the bleachers and down the steps. After some initial difficulty and hesitation, he falls into a rhythm, heating himself up as he goes.

Chapter 14 returns to Pella, who has had an uneasy first night at Westish. Early in the morning she decides to head to the VAC. When she arrives, she finds Mike on the steps, wearing nothing more than a towel and sitting in the snow that has begun to fall. Mike reveals that he was rejected from Yale and talks about his background. When he learns who Pella is, Mike explains that President Affenlight played an important role in his own life; one of President Affenlight's speeches inspired Mike to enroll in Westish. Pella heads into the VAC, but Mike remains in the snow.

Chapter 15 depicts events from the morning after Owen's injury. President Affenlight drives out to visit Owen in the hospital. President Affenlight reflects on Owen's physical beauty and on his own strong feelings for the younger man; Owen, for his part, is somewhat disoriented due to his injury. He does point out that he needs his glasses, and President Affenlight promises to bring them.



In the opening stages of Chapter 16, Henry and the now-tense Mike drive out to bring Owen a few necessary items for his hospital stay. Then they meet up with the rest of the Harpooners for practice, and Henry learns that Aparicio Rodriguez wants to meet him; despite his bad throw, Henry has just tied Rodriguez's record for error-free games. Henry wants to meet up with Mike for Italian food (a post-practice routine of theirs) later on in the day, but Mike heads home instead.

Analysis

In his first few chapters, Harbach situates *The Art of Fielding* within a few different literary genres. Most obviously, perhaps, *The Art of Fielding* is a campus novel: it deals with life at Westish college, and with the conflicts and comedy that arise from the interactions of diverse characters. However, it is also a novel that gains much of its narrative momentum from its treatment of the sport of baseball. Indeed, for Mike and Henry, the ups and downs of baseball practices and baseball games are a source of great suspense. Campus novels and baseball novels are both firmly established American genres: Randall Jarrell's academic satire *Pictures from an Institution* is a famous example of the former, while Bernard Malamud's *The Natural* is a celebrated specimen of the latter. Almost from the outset, Harbach is working with material that has some revered precedents in the American canon.

The Art of Fielding can also be classified as a bildungsroman, or a novel that traces the education and development of a young adult. Henry's maturation is indeed a focus of the early chapters, which portray him as he evolves from an awkward freshman ballplayer into a formidable batter and astute shortstop. He also, however, is "educated" in how to navigate a world that is much larger and more complex than his native small-town South Dakota. When he arrives at Westish, for instance, he finds it difficult to even imagine what college has in store for him: "He didn't know how many roommates he'd have, or what sort of roommates they might be, or what kind of music that was. If he'd been able to imagine the students of Westish College in any specific way, he imagined twelve hundred Mike Schwartzes" (15). Henry quickly learns that Mike is by no means a representative Westish student, and is challenged to interact with undergraduates who are radically different from Mike, including Owen and Adam.

But with the introduction of the well-read President Affenlight, Harbach firmly places *The Art of Fielding* within yet one more literary genre: meta-fiction, or literature that reflects on literature itself. President Affenlight is a scholar of Melville; to some extent, he models his life on Melville's own. But even though President Affenlight offers the strongest signs that *The Art of Fielding* will be a work of fiction about other works of fiction, he is not the only character who raises the issue of how life and writing intersect. Owen, of course, is surrounded by books. For his part, the much less literary Henry lives his life as something of an attempt to live up to the principles set forward in a beloved book of his own, *The Art of Fielding* by Aparicio Rodriguez.

There are a few other surprising ways in which Henry and President Affenlight approximate one another. Like Henry, President Affenlight proves capable of radical



change. A womanizer for most of his life, President Affenlight develops a surprising affection for Owen, one that is remarkable in its passion and intensity. Consider President Affenlight's impressions of the injured Owen: "He looked beautiful, beautiful, beautiful, in the way that a shattered dynastic vase might be beautiful, the ivory pieces unearthed and glued so the delicate plum filigree once again retraced its original circling paths after a lapse of centuries" (120). On the basis of the elegant imagery of "a shattered dynastic vase," President Affenlight is a man of culture and sophisticated observation. Yet his powerful emotional response is the sign of a man who is by no means jaded, and who is perhaps capable of a younger man's freshness and power of feeling.

Further complicating and enriching the novel's themes is the arrival of Pella, a young woman with her own potential for education and evolution. Like her father, Pella combines forms of maturity with a receptivity to new experiences. She has already been through a disillusioning marriage, and has in some ways gleaned an exceptional, informal education in literature and culture. However, she has missed out on any sort of college experience; even basic undergraduate experiences (such as having roommates and going to college parties) are beyond her. As *The Art of Fielding* progresses, it will be up to attentive readers to trace how these characters--with their different combinations of innocence and experience--dynamically evolve.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think *The Art of Fielding* discusses the perspectives of multiple characters, instead of the perspective of just one?

Discussion Question 2

Whose relationship seems closer and more secure, President Affenlight and Pella's, or Henry and Mike's?

Discussion Question 3

Is there a moral or a lesson behind Henry's bad throw and the events that happen immediately after?

Vocabulary

apoplexy, convocation, ecru, gurney, mulatto



Chapters 17-32

Summary

As Chapter 17 opens, President Affenlight is making his way to Owen's dorm room in Phumber Hall. Once inside the room itself, he looks around at Owen's orderly belongings, and discovers a pornographic image of a naked young man on Owen's laptop. President Affenlight begins to wonder whether Owen would find an older man such as himself attractive. Before President Affenlight can make his way out, Henry returns from dinner; the young ballplayer is disconcerted by President Affenlight's surprise visit, but President Affenlight explains that he is picking up Owen's eyeglasses. After President Affenlight leaves, Henry fields two phone calls. The first is from Owen, who is stunned and pleased to learn that Henry is being considered for professional baseball; the second is from Dwight Rogner, a scout for the Saint Louis Cardinals, who believes that Henry would be an excellent fit for the team.

Chapter 18 begins with a depiction of Mike, who has been drinking. He calls Pella and asks her to meet him for a date; she agrees to do so, and accompanies him to Carapelli's, an Italian restaurant near the Westish campus. Over dinner, Mike discusses his involvement with the baseball team and his mentorship of Henry. For her part, Pella reveals a few of the details of her marriage to David, which led her to abandon her plans to study at Yale. Mike and Pella then decide to go to Mike's house. The two of them make their way to Mike's bedroom, but, instead of having sex, quickly fall asleep next to one another.

In Chapter 19, the Harpooners are on their way to play against a team that is based in Illinois. During the bus ride there, one of the younger players--Izzy, an energetic shortstop mentored by Henry himself--asks about Henry's prospects in professional baseball. Henry, for his part, wants to know about Mike's law school applications and takes out the bottle of bourbon that he had intended as Mike's acceptance present. Mike then reveals that he did not get into any law schools. For the time being, though, he is determined to keep winning baseball games.

Chapter 20 returns to Mike's house, where Pella is still asleep. She wakes up around 1:30 in the afternoon and looks around at Mike's living space, which is messy and beaten-down. While making coffee, Pella discovers that Mike's sink is full of unwashed dishes. She cleans everything in Mike's sink and then leaves, since she needs to take a blue pill that helps her to deal with depression.

Chapter 21 returns to the Westish game against Opentoe, the Illinois-based team. Mike delivers a strongly-worded pre-game speech, referencing Westish's history of losses and urging his players to fight the school's reputation by winning. Adam pitches exceptionally well during the game. In the fourth inning, though, Henry makes a bad throw to first base; as a result, one of the Opentoe players makes it safe to first by a



small margin. Mike approaches the field umpire who made the call, angrily insults the umpire, and is pulled off the field. Henry's error-free streak is now definitively broken.

As Chapter 22 begins, President Affenlight is leaving his office, intent on bringing a volume of Walt Whitman's poetry to Owen. Yet when he arrives at the hospital, he discovers that Owen is not alone. Owen's mother, a television news anchor named Genevieve Wister, has come to visit her son. She exchanges pleasantries with President Affenlight, and is eager for President Affenlight to join her and Owen for dinner; Pella is invited as well to make a party of four. Genevieve then notices the volume of Whitman. Owen, whose affection for the famously gay poet has waned over time, nonetheless begins to recite a few Whitman verses, which are finished by President Affenlight himself. After agreeing to a later meeting with Owen and Genevieve, President Affenlight departs.

Chapter 23 opens with a depiction of the moments just after Henry's error-free streak is broken. The Opentoe crowd cheers Henry's accomplishment, but Henry only makes more errors. Overall, the Harpooners emerge victorious, winning both games of their double-header against Opentoe. Henry, despite his relatively poor performance, is offered reassurance from both Dwight and Mike. The rattled shortstop resolves to re-examine his techniques and do better in the future.

Chapter 24 moves forward to Pella and President Affenlight's preparations for their dinner with Owen and Genevieve. President Affenlight is nervous; he repeatedly changes his tie and talks about how Owen, who has won a prestigious scholarship called the Trowel, is going to be heading to Tokyo. He also decides to invite Owen and Genevieve over for drinks and appetizers, since Owen does not feel up to going out to dinner. Pella realizes that there is not much to eat in Affenlight's quarters and walks over to the dining hall to find some light food to serve.

Pella arrives at the deserted Westish dining hall at the beginning of Chapter 25. She encounters Chef Spirodocus, the world-weary man who is in charge of the facility. After a little urging from Pella, he puts together a bag full of gourmet food and sends her off. Before she leaves, though, Pella tells Chef Spirodocus that she wants to work in the dining hall. He explains that the only opening is for a 5:30 a.m. shift, and Pella accepts the spot.

At the beginning of Chapter 26, President Affenlight watches as Owen and his mother emerge from Owen's residence hall. The two of them arrive at Affenlight's quarters; Genevieve is in a good mood, but Owen is still somewhat exhausted and seems to be reeling from his injury. By his own testimony, Owen has not felt this badly hurt since his breakup with Jason. Affenlight mulls over his attraction to Owen and does his best to deal with the increasingly flirtatious Genevieve. President Affenlight's phone begins to vibrate; he recognizes David's number, but decides not to answer.

Pella returns to Affenlight's residence in Chapter 27, and finds Genevieve sitting with her father. She assumes that her father is attracted to this new guest; however, when the two women go to the kitchen to prepare the food, Genevieve asks whether Pella's



father is gay. Pella denies the possibility. The four companions then gather to toast Owen's scholarship. Soon, though, President Affenlight hears a noise outside; he opens a window and discovers Mike, who has been tossing pebbles at the window in an attempt to get Pella's attention. Mike, eager to sample President Affenlight's liquor collection, joins the party. The evening passes along pleasantly, and eventually President Affenlight and Owen find themselves alone in the kitchen. President Affenlight indicates that he will miss Owen, who plants a kiss on President Affenlight before leaving to rejoin the other guests.

At the beginning of Chapter 28, Henry has dedicated himself to working out relentlessly; he spends time practicing his throw with Mike. Yet during a game against Muskingum, Henry continues to make bad throws. The Harpooners still beat the Miskingum team by 19 to 3, but Henry is miserable and Mike resolves to restore Henry to his former mastery and confidence. Other priorities (including Mike's relationship with Pella) can wait.

Chapter 29 starts with a depiction of Professor Eglantine's class on the oral tradition in literature, which Henry, Adam, and Rick O'Shea are all taking. While the class listens to an audio recording of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Adam and Rick notice Pella and pass notes back and forth, commenting on her looks. After the class, Pella approaches Henry and comments on his reputation as an extremely talented ballplayer. Henry, uncomfortable, tries to brush off the conversation.

Afterwards, Henry joins the rest of the Harpooners for a home game; despite the reassurances of Coach Cox and the strong performance of the rest of the team, Henry continues to make errors. Soon after the game concludes, he is pressed on his recent performance by Sarah X. Pessel, a student journalist, who seems to think that Henry may be at the beginning of a larger pattern of paralysis and breakdown.

Chapter 30 opens by discussing one of President Affenlight's newfound routines: Owen now stops by President Affenlight's office in the afternoon, and President Affenlight reads to the injured student. After some hesitation on President Affenlight's part, the two of them develop a physical intimacy. For President Affenlight, the experience is full of uncertain moments, but does call to mind some of his experiences with women. Because Owen's jaw is injured, though, he is incapable of performing oral sex on President Affenlight, so President Affenlight performs oral sex on Owen.

In Chapter 31, Henry and Adam are working out. They begin by lifting dumbbells, then shift to a series of sprints. They agree to do 20; Henry has never beaten Adam before, but develops a strategy that seems promising this time. After allowing Adam to win the early sets, Henry begins exerting himself to prevail in the later sprints and push the disconcerted Adam to his limits. The workout ends with Henry triumphant and Adam vomiting.

Chapter 32 begins by portraying the aftermath of Owen and President Affenlight's first erotic encounter. President Affenlight is uncomfortable after having oral sex with Owen for the first time, and considers that Owen might be happier with a younger man. But



Owen is willing to see him again; in fact, the two continue their afternoon meetings, which now include sexual intimacy. For her part, Pella is more frequently away from President Affenlight's living space because she has begun staying at Mike's house.

Analysis

In many respects, these chapters deal with the outcomes and aftershocks of crises that occurred earlier in the novel. By the time Chapter 17 begins, Mike has received his final law school rejection, Henry has dealt with the initial upheaval caused by his bad throw, and President Affenlight has acknowledged (if only to himself) his love for Owen. The real drama of the novel, now, is how these crises will affect the relationships between different characters. For instance, Mike is conflicted about whether or not to reveal his law school rejections to Henry: "He should have told the Skrimmer straight up, each time a letter came. Now he'd maneuvered himself into a real damned-if-you-do-or-don't. The only reason not to tell him right now was to avoid distracting him before the game--but he'd already distracted him by being so brusque and rude" (152). How Mike handles his own crisis will, in turn, affect how Henry handles the crisis surrounding the bad throw. The tensions and linkages among Harbach's characters are only becoming more complex.

It is thus ironic that Pella has come to Westish to seek relief; instead of finding an escape from problems, she has simply found new problems in the form of Mike's dissatisfactions and her father's edgy personality. Nor has she actually escaped her central problem: her relationship with David. Even President Affenlight realizes that David is probably "Bewildered now; apoplectic soon enough" (186) in response to Pella's abrupt departure. Indeed, yet another source of tension in these chapters is the strong likelihood that David will arrive at campus--and encounter either the temperamental Mike or the disdainful President Affenlight.

Temporarily, however, a few of the main characters in *The Art of Fielding* do seem to find happiness. The party at the Affenlight's quarters is one of the standout moments of fellowship and community in the novel. Miscellaneous characters appear, celebrate a meaningful achievement of Owen's, and genuinely seem to enjoy one another's company, even though their problems have not fully been forgotten. The structures of some of the main relationships in the novel also appear to become firmer and stronger. Owen and President Affenlight begin a physical relationship, and Pella discovers some stability in her emerging routine of working at the dining hall and spending time at Mike's house.

The one character who seems to be left out of these satisfactions, however, is Henry. As if to symbolize his state of alienation, he is the only major character who does not make an appearance at President Affenlight's party. Festivities, however, probably would not do him any good; in his current state, Henry even reacts negatively to casual compliments. After Professor Eglantine's class, Pella approaches Henry and tries to make conversation about his talents: "I'm just wondering what it's like, to be so good at something, and know it. For a while in high school I thought I wanted to be an artist, but



I gave it up, because I could never convince myself that I was good enough" (209). He shrugs off such praise with the remark "There's always somebody better," (290) uncomfortable that he is still being held up as a model of excellence even though his real ability has become questionable.

By the end of Chapter 32, the novel's main source of suspense is the question of whether Henry will break his crisis of confidence--and of how that crisis will change him. The mind games that he plays during the sprints with Adam indicate that Henry may be changing for the worse; pushing another Harpooner to the point of vomiting seems alien to Henry's mild, generous nature. Unfortunately, all the people who could have helped Henry the most are preoccupied: Mike with Pella, and Owen with President Affenlight. Perhaps for the first time since his first year of college, Henry will have to fend entirely for himself.

Discussion Question 1

Does the bond between Mike and Henry seem to strengthen or weaken in these chapters?

Discussion Question 2

What, in your opinion, explains the attraction between Mike and Pella?

Discussion Question 3

Is President Affenlight's attraction to Owen meant to seem mostly touching or mostly ridiculous, at this point in the novel?

Vocabulary

anti-Semite, pert, quizzical, rote, winsome



Chapters 33-48

Summary

In Chapter 33, the Harpooners are returning from an away game by ferry boat. Mike and Coach Cox step away from the rest of the team and talk about Henry, whose skills and confidence are still not showing signs of real improvement. Coach Cox then raises another sensitive topic: the fact that Mike is running low on money. The coach (who is extremely thrifty but rumored to have a lot of money saved up) hands Mike \$1,000. Mike then discovers that Henry is pacing the boat and, apparently, dealing with a panic attack. With the help of Rick, Mike manages to calm the distressed shortstop.

Chapter 34 depicts the events that take place immediately after the Harpooners arrive back at Westish. Mike and Pella are in Mike's bed, but Mike is too worried about Henry's poor performance and increasing self-doubt to have sex. He communicates his worries to Pella, who thinks that Henry should see a therapist. Mike objects to this idea; tensions only escalate when the topics of money (a natural sore spot for Mike) and of Pella's husband (who is visiting Westish) arise. The discussion as a whole leaves both Mike and Pella in a bad mood. Pella taunts Mike over his upbringing in a poor neighborhood, then departs angrily. Mike realizes that his reasons for struggling and making an effort (law school, Henry, and Pella) are only leading him to harsh disappointment. He briefly considers setting Coach Cox's loaned money on fire, but cannot bring himself to do so.

At the beginning of Chapter 35, Pella considers going to Bartleby's, a local bar, and drinking her problems with Mike away. Instead she storms across campus, reflecting on how Henry's problems are pulling apart her relationship with Mike. In her anger, she begins hitting a small tree and injures one of her fingers. She walks away and, oddly enough, encounters Henry, who is doing pull-ups using the limb of a tree. When Pella finally arrives home, she finds that her father is awake and wants to talk; initially, she is unwilling to communicate with him, but eventually Pella admits that she and Mike have broken up and that David will soon be arriving on campus. She then decides to get some sleep. For his part, Henry is still outside doing pull-ups.

Chapter 36 depicts the morning after Mike's fight with Pella; Mike has gone to the VAC to print off copies of his senior history thesis. He calls Henry and tells the younger player to meet him there. After Henry arrives, Mike directs Henry to a room that contains DVDs and video equipment, and shows Henry an important document from Henry's own past: the tape of Henry fielding balls on the day he was discovered by Mike. The two of them watch the footage in an attempt to re-connect Henry to his former excellence. After they finish, Mike hands in his printed thesis and shaves off the beard that he had been growing while writing the paper.

In Chapter 37, the perspective of the novel switches back to Pella, who is working her early shift at the dining hall. Another worker, Hero, helps her to bind up her injured



finger. Eventually, Chef Spirodocus notices that Pella is tired and advises her to go home; however, he also compliments her work ethic and notices her interest in cooking. Thanks to his positive feedback, Pella begins to envision a future for herself as a chef and restaurant owner. Chef Spirodocus agrees to teach her about cuisine if she continues to be a dedicated employee.

Early in Chapter 38, President Affenlight is anxiously waiting for Owen to arrive at his living quarters. President Affenlight recalls an event from the day before, when Owen had been looking through old Westish registers and had discovered a picture of President Affenlight from his undergraduate days. The find reawakened some of President Affenlight's old doubts about whether Owen finds him desirable. While checking his watch and reflecting on his relationship, President Affenlight decides to make coffee. He opens his office door, and finds David standing outside.

Chapter 39 begins with a consideration of President Affenlight's thoughts towards David; over time, President Affenlight has ceased to hate the younger man, and finds David's appearance somewhat pathetic. David, for his part, is anxious to speak to Pella. She arrives shortly after David makes his appearance. Although David expresses concern about Pella's hurt finger and wants to talk through their recent problems, Pella is not receptive to his conciliating gestures. She agrees to have dinner with him, but stipulates that President Affenlight join them. President Affenlight, for his part, remains preoccupied with the thought that Owen may not be especially committed to their relationship.

At the start of Chapter 40, David and Pella have gone to prepare for dinner, and President Affenlight calls Owen's phone, to no avail. President Affenlight considers that his past romances with women have not genuinely prepared him for a homosexual relationship. Despite his qualms, he goes to Owen's dorm room and finds Owen, who has had a busy day and did not bother to notify President Affenlight of his whereabouts. Owen has been worried about Henry; he is also troubled that President Affenlight seems afraid to embrace their relationship. President Affenlight asks what he should do, instead of hiding his affection, and Owen suggests an offbeat yet romantic dinner and a night at a motel.

Chapter 41 shifts to the perspective of Pella, who is showering and dressing in preparation for her dinner with David. She looks out her window, and notices first her father and then Owen leaving the dorm building where Owen lives. Before she can process or analyze what she has seen, she hears David ringing and goes to meet.

Chapter 42 depicts the dinner that David and Pella have at Maison Robert, a French restaurant near the Westish campus. Pella notices Professor Eglantine, whose class she enjoys, yet David directs the conversation to other aspects of Pella's college life, such as her employment in the dining hall. David learns that Pella wants to be a chef and return to his upscale lifestyle; Pella, however, defends her choice to work at Westish. As the dinner progresses, David makes attempts to reach out to Pella. He praises some of her past artwork, recalls pleasant memories from their marriage, and even gives her a gift of a pair of earrings. Eventually, President Affenlight calls and



informs Pella that he will not be able to make it to Maison Robert. Throughout the dinner, Pella has resisted David's attempts to win her over. She tells him that she has begun seeing someone new and, in a dramatic gesture of defiance, even swallows one of the gift earrings, only to run to the bathroom and vomit it back up.

Chapter 43 also takes place on the night of Pella's dinner with David, but shifts to Mike's perspective. Mike is at home, when two surprise guests appear: Adam and Rick. The two ballplayers explain that they are concerned about Henry's recent poor performance and apparent loss of confidence. For these reasons, they want Mike to remove Henry from the starting lineup for the Harpooners' next game. Mike considers that doing so might improve the team's fortunes, but refuses. For him, the fate of the Harpooners is tied to the fate of Henry.

In Chapter 44, Henry is eager to talk to Owen, but finds that his roommate is not around. Instead, he calls his sister Sophie, who is excited that Aparicio Rodriguez will be coming to Westish and encourages Henry to keep enjoying baseball. Henry reflects on the future of the Westish team (which is within striking distance of a Conference title) and seeks solace by recollecting lines from Rodriguez's own *The Art of Fielding*.

Chapter 45 depicts the immediate aftermath of the discussion between President Affenlight and Owen in Owen's dorm. Owen settles into President Affenlight's Audi, and the two men drive to an all-you-can-eat restaurant. After a dinner of fish, fries, and salad, Owen and President Affenlight find a motel for the night. President Affenlight goes for a stroll, reflecting that he is on the verge of experiencing a kind of affection that was once mysterious to him.

Chapter 46 opens with the arrival of Coshwale, the team that will be facing Westish for the Conference title, on the Westish campus. The Coshwale players hail from a well-funded program. Initially, their composure and their crisp beet-red uniforms are somewhat intimidating to the Harpooners. The Westish team, however, is reassured by a few fortunate events: Owen's readiness to play ball, Henry's re-gained enthusiasm, and a motivational speech from Mike.

In Chapter 47, the novel focuses on Pella's activities on the day of the Westish-Coshwale game. Pella begins her morning by swimming a few laps at the VAC, then heads over to the Westish baseball field. She winds up in a seat among the Coshwale fans; for the most part, the Harpooners seem to be playing well. However, two of the men sitting near Pella begin to talk about Henry's recent, apparent loss of control. Pella challenges one of the two men, Gary, to a bet: Gary believes that Henry will throw a ball into the stands before the game is over, and Pella will win the bet if this prediction does not come true. A little later, Pella notices his father, who leaves his seat next to two other men to chat with Owen. It dawns on Pella that her father may be falling in love with Owen. Then Gary gets Pella's attention; Henry, it appears, has just made a bad throw.

Chapter 48 focuses mainly on Henry's perspective. Henry's bad throw was saved by Rick, who leaped into the air, caught the ball, and tagged out a runner. Yet as Pell and Gary watch, Henry's game only deteriorates further. He realizes that he needs to get out



of the game; he fields a ball and, instead of throwing it, walks to the pitcher's mound, hands the ball to Adam, and makes his way to the Westish dugout.

Analysis

By this point in the narrative, Henry's bad throwing has moved well beyond being a string of flukes or an isolated personal crisis. Now, his poor performance has begun to jeopardize the Harpooners at large. The stakes for the team, which finally has an opportunity to reverse its history of losses, have become exceptionally high. Mike, naturally, is concerned both about Henry and about the future of the team that is in so many ways the product of his efforts. Even Coach Cox and Rick are worried: an ominous sign, because these two characters are much more easygoing in temperament and accepting of failure than Mike is. If Henry's performance is getting to them, then something must really be awry.

Yet as the drama surrounding Henry intensifies, the drama surrounding Pella winds down to some extent. In one of her most important moves, she finalizes her break with David. Pella can now face the rest of her life unburdened by the prospect of returning to an unhappy marriage; she can now make choices without in any way being subject to David's approval. She even envisions for herself a future characterized by independence, imagination, and spontaneity: "Pella imagined in a flash the restaurant she would own: small and white, all painted white but warmly so. And every so often she would take a white chair or a white table and paint it according to her mood" (264). David's wishes (and his overbearing sense of culture) have nothing to do with Pella's vision. If anything, the restaurant "she would own," with its waiting expanses of white, symbolizes a wonderfully pure new beginning.

These chapters, however, also witness the dissolution of Mike and Pella's relationship. In some respects, this change is rather unexpected. Pella and Mike both have considerably more real life experience than the average Westish student; both of them can be blunt about their needs and capable of sarcastic humor. In fact, the two of them are even exactly the same age (23). Despite these sources of compatibility, the pressures on their relationship appear to have become too great. Henry (whom they both admire) has come to overwhelm Mike's thoughts. And the figure of David, who is richer than Mike, provides Mike with an unpleasant source of comparison.

With the comparison between David and Mike, and intensification of the affair between Owen and President Affenlight, these chapters offer Harbach the chance to explore potent sociological themes: class and sexuality. Mike's roots in a poor Chicago neighborhood still linger in his mind, and in his lifestyle. He drives a beat-up car, requires financial assistance from Coach Cox, and is belittled as a man who imagines "The weight of the world on his big ol' shoulders" (243) during his fight with Pella. President Affenlight, for his part, is trying to make sense of a new side of his personality, and a new set of social pressures. Even Owen realizes that President Affenlight's situation is a source of social and psychological pressure: "I know it's delicate. I know we can't just walk around holding hands. There are restrictions. My worry is that you find



these restrictions convenient" (282). Yet Harbach's aim, in raising these themes, is not to make a grand political statement about wealth distribution or gay rights. Instead, his main focus remains the psychology of his characters, who must juggle their duties and their impulses. President Affenlight's relationship, for instance, is problematic not because it is with another man, but because it conflicts with Westish protocol and may impede his duties as president.

The question of duty versus desire also arises for Henry, who is expected to lead his team (duty) but wants to end the anguish of making bad throws (desire). It can, indeed, be somewhat difficult to read Henry's motives for walking out of the Coshwale game. Is he, as seems likely at first, simply walking away in order to satisfy himself and end his personal disappointments? Or does he realize that the best thing to do is to sacrifice his pride and his starting position so that the team can prevail? Upcoming chapters may provide an answer. One way or another, a new source of drama has entered *The Art of Fielding*, as the Harpooners continue against Coshwale--and perhaps continue through the rest of a suspenseful season--without their best player.

Discussion Question 1

Which character has the best idea for restoring Henry's confidence?

Discussion Question 2

Why does it take Pella so long to realize her father's true relationship to Owen?

Discussion Question 3

How would the novel be different if David had never come to Westish?

Vocabulary

convalescence, demitasse, dissolute, punctilious, saccharine



Chapters 49-64

Summary

Chapter 49 deals with the immediate aftermath of Henry's decision to leave the Westish-Coshwale game. He walks into the dugout and approaches Izzy, a talented player who normally serves as a second-string shortstop. Henry tells Izzy to get in the game. Izzy takes over as shortstop, and Henry, after removing his jersey, sits next to Owen and watches the game progress.

In Chapter 50, the novel shifts to the perspective of President Affenlight, who is watching the Westish-Coshwale game in the company of Dwight Rogner and Aparicio Rodriguez. Dwight and Aparicio talk about a few baseball players who suffered from the kind of paralysis that now afflicts Henry; one of these was Steve Sax, who had played against Aparicio. President Affenlight discovers that Sax's kind of paralysis and self-doubt became prominent in baseball in the 1970s. For a moment, President Affenlight dwells on a hypothesis that connects the emergence of paralysis in baseball to other shifts in 1970s culture; Aparicio, however, declares that such doubt has always existed.

Chapter 51 records the result of the first game against Coshwale, which the Harpooners lose by 10 to 2. The team members take a break before their second scheduled game of the day. Henry goes to see his sister Sophie, and Adam, who catches a glimpse of the younger Skrimshander, expresses admiration for her looks.

Chapter 52 begins with the outcome of the second game of the day: a win for the Harpooners with a tied score in the tenth inning. Mike goes to the locker room to refresh himself. When Mike emerges from the VAC, he runs into Sophie, who cannot find her brother. While considering what to do about Henry's absence and Sophie's sudden appearance, Mike receives a call from Pella, who wants to talk about her father. Instead of talking to Pella, Mike arranges to leave Sophie with her. He needs to go to dinner with the rest of the Harpooners, and he might need to track down Henry.

In Chapter 53, Mike and Owen have finished up at the team dinner and are trying to track down Henry. After inspecting the campus and the athletic fields, they make their way to Bartleby's, a rowdy bar near campus. The two ballplayers head inside and discover Adam, who is with Sophie and is apparently trying to seduce her. Pella has disappeared. Owen escorts Sophie away, and Adam confronts Mike and belittles Henry's recent performance on the field. Unwilling to start a fight (or to incapacitate one of his best players), Mike delivers a single punch to Adam and leaves Bartleby's. Mike then receives a call from Pella, who is still anxious to talk to him about her father. He sends Sophie back to Owen's dorm and stays in the dorm himself, exhausted.

Chapter 54 depicts Henry's activities immediately after the second game against Coshwale. He avoids Aparicio and President Affenlight as much as possible. Then, he sets off on his own; eager to get away from baseball and from his companions, he



wades into the lake near Westish and begins to swim. Henry reflects that the life of simplicity and perfection that he had envisioned has begun to slip away from him. Taxed by his thoughts, and tired out by his exertions in the water, he heads back to shore and falls asleep outside.

At the beginning of Chapter 55, Henry wakes up and remembers a conversation from his days in elementary school; he had once asked a teacher why Anne Frank did not escape the Nazis by pretending not to be Jewish. He returns to his dorm and finds that only Pella is in his room. Mike has arranged for her to send Henry to the game, if Henry shows. Pella and Henry begin to talk. Pella observes that Henry and the other men she has met at Westish (Mike, her father, Owen) seem very attached to the school; Henry discovers from her that President Affenlight was himself a Westish graduate. Henry remains preoccupied with his recent breakdown on the field, but Pella has different ideas. She takes Henry's hand and settles into bed with him.

Chapter 56 considers the aftermath of Henry's intercourse with Pella. Henry wakes up late in the afternoon and finds Pella next to him, naked and bruised. She begins to dress; then, she offers Henry some of her thoughts on the affair between President Affenlight and Owen. However, Owen and Mike arrive back at the room before Pella can leave. Mike spies Pella's underwear in one of the room's nooks and realizes that she has slept with Henry; the couple begins to argue. Although Owen tries to smooth matters over, Pella confronts him about his affair with her father, rendering Owen silent. Mike, somewhat stunned by all that has happened, turns and leaves.

In Chapter 57, Pella arrives back at her father's residence; the housekeeper, Mrs. McCallister, observes that President Affenlight is agitated. Pella casually mentions Owen, but her father shifts the conversation to Henry's recent breakdown. Then, Pella announces that she is moving out of the Affenlight's residence. She then confronts her father about his affair; he explains that Owen is the only man he has had a relationship with and admits that he is in a situation that could be professionally risky. Pella packs her bags. She leaves her father on a tense note, convinced that Owen will break his heart.

Chapter 58 depicts a meeting between Henry and Coach Cox. Henry is sitting in the Coach's office, musing over Coach Cox's family photographs. Coach Cox arrives; Henry apologizes for abandoning the team (which nonetheless won two more games against Coshwale and thus a Conference title) and then announces that he will be quitting the team. Coach Cox takes Henry to see Mike, who, when consulted, says that Henry is free to quit the team because Izzy is now the shortstop. The sore subject of Henry and Pella arises, but Mike has no problem discussing Pella's infidelity. Coach Cox then sends the team out for an intense run, and Henry affirms that he will be quitting.

At the beginning of Chapter 59, President Affenlight is sitting in his Audi, which is parked outside the house that belongs to Professor Bremen. It turns out that Professor Bremen will be retiring from the Westish physics department and moving away. President Affenlight is interested in buying, so he approaches the door and is greeted by Sandy, the professor's wife, and Contango, the family dog. Sandy takes President Affenlight on



a tour; he considers whether the house is a good investment, and weighs increased cost and responsibility against increased freedom and stability. President Affenlight also consider that buying a house near Westish would indicate that he is more loyal to Pella (who will be enrolling) than to Owen (who is leaving for Tokyo). Professor Bremen soon arrives, and explains that Contango will also stay in the house, should President Affenlight decide to buy.

Chapter 60 deals with the aftermath of Henry's decision to quit the team. He stays in the locker room while the Harpooners file out, thinks over the fact that he has both failed Mike and betrayed his own dreams, and then goes to Bartleby's to have some drinks. While wandering around afterwards, he spots Pella trying to move a large, awkward desk down the street. He goes to help her; together, they successfully move the desk to Pella's new place of residence, a house that she will be sharing with two other girls. Once inside, Henry drinks some kitchen wine and tries to make love to Pella. He passes out on a couch, then goes into Pella's room to sleep.

In Chapter 61, Mike pays a visit to his orthopedist, Dr. Kellner. The Harpooners are headed to the regional tournament, and Mike's consistent problems with his back and joints only seem to be getting worse. He asks for a strong painkilling drug, but Dr. Kellner refuses to give him anything stronger than a shot of cortisone.

The brief Chapter 62 continues with Mike's perspective. Mike has heard rumors that Pella and Henry are staying with a girl he knows, Noelle Pierson. He parks his car outside Noelle's house, catches a brief glimpse of Henry, and drives away.

Chapter 63 depicts a day of practice for the Harpooners. Mike's bad knees have keep him from participating, but while soaking in the VAC whirlpool he overhears some of the other ballplayers speculating about their chances in the tournament games ahead. Rick declares that the team will party regardless of what happens. This easygoing attitude infuriates Mike. He storms into the locker room and begins destroying everything in sight, determined to show the Harpooners how high the stakes really are.

Early in Chapter 64, Pella leaves her new residence to go to work at the dining hall. In order to avoid Mike and Owen, she has stopped auditing classes. However, she has begun taking informal cooking lessons from Chef Spirodocus, who is currently teaching her how to make Eggs Benedict. Once the lesson is over, Pella packs a container of soup to bring home to Henry, who has been staying in her room. He seems unwilling to leave the house; Pella, for her part, is not sure that she is the best possible caretaker for the distressed young man. The two of them get into bed and have sex that evening. Afterwards, Henry goes and sits in the house's bath for as long as he can.

Analysis

Any predictions that the Harpooners would be helpless without Henry are firmly defeated in these chapters. Izzy, whom Henry himself had mentored, proves to be an able replacement. As Henry fades from the scene and the Harpooners rack up victory,



the message of *The Art of Fielding* appears to change radically. Initially, Harbach's novel can read as a celebration of individual talent and hard work, namely Henry's. Now, the narrative conveys the message that the qualities that matter much more than individual skill are teamwork and cooperation. If the Harpooners can win decisively without Henry, then surely their morale and their reputation hinge on much more than the work of their strongest player.

Since Harbach does not need to depict a crisis of confidence among the Harpooners at large, he can focus much more on Henry's personal breakdown. (Even a narrative as sprawling as *The Art of Fielding* can only take so many crises.) Henry has let his team down; he also, however, feels that large social and even cosmic forces have betrayed him: "All he'd ever wanted was for nothing to ever change. Or for things to change only in the right ways, improving little by little, day by day, forever. It sounded crazy when you said it like that, but that was what baseball had promised him" (345). Perhaps the saddest part of Henry's fall from grace is that he was not undone by any flaw of character or personality. All he desires is predictability, not fame or power or anything that might justify a tragic comeuppance in the reader's mind.

As these chapters progress, Henry's depression only intensifies. Yet this focus does not by any means prevent Harbach from introducing a series of subplots and side topics: President Affenlight considers buying a house; Pella moves into a place of her own; and Mike deals with his sore joints and bad back. Some of these strands of the narrative, however, are tied to Henry in clever ways. Because Henry moves in with Pella, Harbach is frequently capable of dealing with these two characters at once. President Affenlight himself often mulls over Henry's case; at one point, President Affenlight relates Henry to a dejected writer he once knew at *The New Yorker*: "he'd be wandering the hallways with this blank, stricken look on his face. He was done for and he knew it" (361).

For the second time in the course of the novel, President Affenlight considers a major change to his way of living. The first change, of course, was his affair with Owen; now he contemplates buying the Bremens' house, a move of great symbolic and emotional significance. President Affenlight, who lives on the Westish campus and whose living space resembles a glorified dorm room, is intensely devoted to the college and its student body. Buying the house would shift him off campus and out of the vicinity of students, but would serve as a supreme expression of his loyalty to Westish, one symbolizing his desire to be fully rooted within the area of the campus.

However, President Affenlight's desire to make an empowering, adult investment is overshadowed by the dramatic negative changes that take place in Henry. The onetime shortstop begins consuming alcohol, has needy and uncomfortable sex with Pella, and eventually stops eating food and going outside. Harbach's treatment of this material is unusual: sex and alcohol, after all, are two staples of comedies that depict American colleges. The fact that sex and alcohol, here, are the material of darkness and depression--not of adventurous humor--shows just how intense *The Art of Fielding* seems determined to become as it nears its final segments.



Discussion Question 1

Why does Pella choose to go to Mike when she learns about her father's affair?

Discussion Question 2

What is the significance of the fact that the Harpooners keep winning even without Henry?

Discussion Question 3

How would the novel be different, thematically, without the subplot about the Bremens' house?

Vocabulary

coalesce, commiserative, postmodern, surreptitious, tortuous



Chapters 65-82

Summary

Chapter 65 begins by considering the activities of President Affenlight, who is driving to the University of Wisconsin-Chute to see the Harpooners play an away game. When President Affenlight arrives, the Harpooners are trailing by 3-0. Owen, however, soon steps up to bat; he manages to rattle the confidence of the UW-Chute pitcher, and the prospects for the Harpooners improve. Westish manages to load the bases. Then, Mike steps up to bat and hits a home run. The Harpooners win the game and President Affenlight approaches Duane Jenkins, the Westish athletic director, with the intention of rewarding Mike for leading the team to a victorious season.

Chapter 66 depicts the Harpooners' victory celebration; after beating UW-Chute, the team heads to the locker room and uncorks a few bottles of champagne that Mike bought. Mike himself manages to obtain a few painkillers from Owen, who held onto them after his surgery. Although Mike is burdened by the idea that he has never measured up to his own expectations, and by Henry's absence, he eventually joins the rest of the team in their enthusiastic response to the recent win.

In Chapter 67, Owen and President Affenlight return to campus and make love. President Affenlight seems tense afterwards, but the conversation soon turns to his idea of purchasing the house. At first, Owen is enthusiastic, but then points out that a large house would waste energy. President Affenlight then considers that he could install solar panels to keep his house environmentally friendly. But for the most part, he thinks over the pleasant prospect of having a permanent situation of his own (and a home to share with Owen and Pella) in Wisconsin.

Chapter 68 shifts focus to Henry, who is standing in Pella's kitchen and washing dishes. He has made a pot of coffee, but over time he has lost his interest in most activities, including eating. Pella arrives home. She explains that she does not want Henry simply hanging out in her house all day. She encourages him to return to his old job in the dining hall, but he refuses. She then suggests that he take some of her psychiatric medicine, but he refuses to do so, or to seek any sort of therapy for his problems. Pella realizes that her communication with Henry is breaking down completely; Henry, for his part, simply feels more out of place and resolves to stop drinking even coffee. Ultimately, Pella urges Henry to leave and Henry returns to his dorm room.

At the start of Chapter 69, Schwartz is supervising Izzy in batting practice. He is reflecting on Izzy's potential to become an outstanding ballplayer when Duane Jenkins appears. The two of them head to Duane's office, and Duane, after praising Mike's outstanding performance as an athlete and a mentor to athletes, offers Mike a job as an assistant coach and assistant athletic director. Mike declines the offer; Duane presses him for a reason, but Mike simply continues to refuse, even though he needs the money.



Chapter 70 opens with a depiction of President Affenlight, who is in his office with Contango. The Westish president is preparing his speech for the year's commencement ceremony, reflecting on his relationship with Pella and on the wisdom that he hopes to transmit to his students. He then receives a phone call from Owen; the Harpooners have won another game, and are headed for the Championship face-off. President Affenlight himself intends to be at the game, which is in South Carolina. He also explains to Owen that he has not seen Henry recently, even though he has attempted to check in on the distressed shortstop. President Affenlight then hangs up then hears a knock at his door soon after.

In Chapter 71, President Affenlight answers the knock at his door; Bruce Gibbs of the Board of Trustees and Dean Melkin of Student Affairs enter. It quickly becomes apparent that the two Westish officials have discovered President Affenlight's affair with Owen; Dean reveals that Owen and President Affenlight were seen leaving a motel together. As Bruce indicates, President Affenlight's only real option is to leave Westish and seek a position elsewhere, on account of the school's policies. President Affenlight reflects, bitterly, that he is being judged harshly for having an affair with another man. He makes sure that Dean and Bruce will treat Pella (who will enroll at Westish in the fall) with great consideration. It is agreed that her tuition will be waived, but President Affenlight is also required to leave Westish by the end of the year, since Owen will be staying on campus as a Drama Department instructor.

President Affenlight arrives at Henry's dorm room as Chapter 72 opens; he uses his key to open Henry's door, but encounters an unpleasant stench. President Affenlight finds Henry lying in a full bath. Henry gets out, and President Affenlight tells Henry to go to South Carolina to join the rest of the team. Henry begins to cry; President Affenlight does his best to comfort Henry, and makes the younger man a bowl of cereal. As President Affenlight explains before leaving, there will be a car waiting to take Henry to South Carolina in the morning.

As President Affenlight leaves Henry's dorm room early in Chapter 73, he discovers that Pella has left a container of Boston Clam Chowder outside. He takes it with him and consumes it, in great pleasure and admiration, while sitting on the base of the Melville statue. President Affenlight then returns to his office, begins smoking, and notifies Pella, by e-mail, that Henry is doing better. He reflects on his dilemma and becomes convinced that Owen and Pella will be able to fend for themselves. Then, President Affenlight lies down; he dreams first of his days on the Westish football team, then of being a child and cutting pumpkins in the autumn.

Chapter 74 depicts the preliminaries for the Championship game between Westish and Amherst. The Harpooners watch a country singer named Eric Strell sing the National Anthem; Izzy makes a few snide remarks about the performance. Afterwards, Mike scans the stands and notices that a large number of Westish players' mothers are in attendance. Coach Cox then gathers the team, announces the batting order, offers a few words of encouragement, and asks if Mike wants to say anything. Mike had thought up a speech that would have encouraged the Westish players to demolish the elite Amherst team and prove their own worth and ambition, but decides not to deliver it.



Instead, Mike and the gathered players (many of whom have grown beards) exchange intense stares. Mike declares his fellow Harpooners "some scary motherfuckers" (454), and with that, the team takes the field.

Chapter 75 begins with Henry's arrival in South Carolina; he never did see Affenlight in the morning, and has some trouble convincing a stadium usher to let him in. Despite these difficulties, he makes it in and joins the team. Coach Cox orders Henry to coach first base, and Henry complies. He also learns that the team is facing a major obstacle: the exhaustion of its two best pitchers, Adam and Sal Phlox. While coaching first, Henry is taunted by a few female Amherst students who have come to cheer on their school's team. The situation with the Harpooners' pitchers, meanwhile, seems headed towards a crisis; Adam's throws begin deteriorating, but he regains some of his power after Mike (in a suspicious move) has him direct a throw straight at one of the Amherst batters.

The Harpooners keep the score close until the final innings, when an Amherst pitcher named Dougal takes the mound. Dougal is known to throw dirty; Owen is set to face him, but this plan is interrupted by a phone call from Pella, who has sad news. President Affenlight has died, and Owen is too shocked to go on. Henry takes his place. Although Henry is nowhere near the top of his game, he projects a sense of confidence and skill that seems to unnerve Dougal. Still, Henry decides not to swing at one of Dougal's pitches. Instead, he walks straight towards home plate.

Chapter 76 continues the portrayal of Henry's perspective. Henry wakes up in a medical facility, with Mike sitting next to him. Because Henry does not recall the end of the Championship game, Mike fills him in. Henry was hit in the head by Dougal's pitch and went on base; then, Mike made a powerful hit and Henry ran hard to score the game's winning point. Then, as the Harpooners celebrated, Henry blacked out. In fact, Henry's self-starvation has reached a point of crisis and landed him in the psychiatric wing of a South Carolina hospital. Mike leaves Henry there for the time being, since he needs to return to campus and deal with President Affenlight's death.

In the brief Chapter 77, Henry receives a call from Dwight Rogner. Despite Henry's recent difficulties, the Saint Louis Cardinals have decided to draft Henry on the thirty-third round. Henry is stunned, but Dwight explains that Henry is eligible for a \$100,000 signing bonus. Dwight also reveals that Adam was drafted by the Cubs, exactly one round before Henry.

Chapter 78 moves forward to the August after the Harpooners' Championship win. Pella has continued with her life at Westish; even though her father's death was a harsh blow, she is still working at the dining hall and is planning a tutorial under Professor Eglantine. That August, Pella goes to meet with Dean Melkin to finalize her enrollment for the fall. He allows her to live off-campus with Mike (even though first-year students must normally stay in the dorms) and agrees to waive her tuition. However, Dean Melkin also brings up a distressing subject: the possibility that President Affenlight committed suicide after the affair with Owen came to light. Pella, upset and enraged, dismisses the possibility. But she decides that she must honor her father and strike back at the Westish administration's presumptions, and devises a strange plan. She will unbury her



father and re-bury him in the lake that abuts Westish. She leaves her meeting with Dean Melkin and goes to meet Mike.

In Chapter 79, Mike returns from his temporary job as a bouncer at Bartleby's. He has watched Pella recover from her grief, and has also taken it upon himself to go through President Affenlight's books and papers. Pella finds him in President Affenlight's old office; she reveals her plan for President Affenlight's re-burial and argues that her father's love of the sea justifies her idea. Mike is still hesitant. He contacts Owen, and Owen (rather than refusing) decides to bring Henry along.

Chapter 80 depicts Henry's return to Westish; his feud with Mike is now over, and he joins Mike, Pella, and Owen in digging up President Affenlight in the dead of night. Contango also tags along. The four companions have packed beer, Scotch, and some light food for the ceremony; it is raining as Henry and his companions approach the cemetery where President Affenlight is buried. They create a wide hole around President Affenlight's casket, which Mike heaves to the surface. Mike and Henry then take out President Affenlight's body and place it in a vinyl bag. Together, the small party sets off and rows out into the middle of the lake.

In Chapter 81, Pella and the others have made it to the middle of the lake and are preparing to sink President Affenlight's body. Owen wants to say a few words; he praises President Affenlight as a man of remarkable personality and generosity, a man who transformed those around him for the better. Pella wants to speak, but is too overcome with emotion. Owen hands her a typed copy of "The Lee Shore," her father's favorite chapter of *Moby Dick*, which she can recite by heart. After she is done speaking Melville's words, Mike and Henry drop President Affenlight into the lake.

Chapter 82 finds Pella, Owen, Henry, and Mike returned to shore. Pella departs for her job in the dining hall, and Owen bids Henry farewell and leaves for Tokyo. Mike and Henry then go to fix up President Affenlight's empty grave. When they return to Westish, Henry declares that he wants to return and play ball for the Harpooners; Mike says that Henry can, but that Henry will need to prove his worth now the Izzy is the starting shortstop. Henry agrees to this arrangement. Mike then unlocks the VAC and takes out a bucket of balls; he starts hitting them to Henry, who must field each one and then throw it at an improvised target, the head of an upright shovel. Henry's throws keep missing, until Mike hits the last ball. Henry catches it and, despite his weariness, directs it successfully at the shovel's head. Mike then reveals that there is another ball left. He hits it to Henry, and the novel breaks off.

Analysis

As a realistic novel, *The Art of Fielding* cannot end by fulfilling the wishes of every single character. President Affenlight never manages to buy his house, and Henry redeems himself not by playing shortstop or hitting a home run, but by taking a hard pitch to the head. But on balance, the concluding chapters of Harbach's narrative offer peace or at least hope to the major characters. President Affenlight dies after finally finding love,



after re-connecting with Pella, and after giving Mike a new opportunity to contribute to Westish. Henry demonstrates that he has not abandoned his team; he also breaks out of his depression and, almost simultaneously, reconciles with Mike.

In sum, Harbach's treatment of his characters tends to be generous and positive rather than critical and satirical; much the same could be said of the author's total approach to college life. Although Westish is not the most impressive college (and is eventually paired off against the real, upscale Amherst), it is never made to seem dysfunctional or ridiculous. Westish has its share of mediocre employees (Coach Cox, Dean Melkin) but they are not horrible at what they do. It is also a place that the characters themselves love, whether they admit it or not. In terms of his own commitment to Westish, President Affenlight muses that "He spent half the time frustrated with, ambivalent with, annoyed at the place. But anything that happened to alter the fortunes of Westish college, however small; anything that was done or even said about Westish College, Affenlight took more seriously than if it were happening to himself" (430). This approach is characteristic of the novel as a whole, which portrays Westish not as a perfect world, but as an intensely endearing one.

The real value of life at Westish, perhaps, is Westish provides a place where hidden talents can be discovered and nurtured. Pella's knack for cooking, Mike's ability to inspire a team, and Henry's prowess as a ballplayer are all skills that would never have found expression without the encouragement and guidance provided by the school. President Affenlight himself seems to owe his greatest ability--not his learning or his writing, but his power to bring people together--to Westish's role in his life. It is no coincidence that he spends some of his final moments reflecting on the contract he has offered Mike and ruminating on his upcoming graduation remarks. Unifying gestures such as these represent President Affenlight's real excellence as a man; even in death, he plays a role in getting Henry, Mike, Pella, and Owen all in the same place, and in easing their strained relationships.

Henry's own fate, in a way, can seem too good to be true. At the South Carolina game, he is re-accepted by his teammates almost without question. Nor does his disastrous recent performance alienate the world of professional baseball. As Dwight Rogner explains, Henry would find a nurturing community as a member of the Cardinals: "We'll bring you along slowly. Nobody's expecting you to play in the majors tomorrow. We just expect you to work hard every day. To follow your dream" (481). Such an attitude seems to erase the significance of Henry's suffering; in the conversation with Dwight, Henry "wanted to talk about what was real," his recent ordeal, but is instead offered the chance to forget his pain. In a way, Henry's ending may not be as good as it seems. Although he gets to continue playing baseball, he does so at the cost of watching the people around him ignore or disregard his recent sufferings: the things that are most "real" to him.

Yet by the final pages of *The Art of Fielding*, the courses in life that will be taken by Harbach's major characters are clear. For this reason, the novel can terminate abruptly--with Henry waiting to field one last throw--and not really leave the reader in a state of suspense or confusion. It is possible, and actually quite easy, to imagine Henry finishing



his senior year and then moving right into the major leagues. Mike seems bound to keep up his good work in the Westish athletic program, Pella is on track for a pleasant freshman year, and Owen (whose personality was always quite stable anyway) will keep being his ironic, gifted self. The events of *The Art of Fielding* have helped these characters discover the best versions of themselves; President Affenlight, whose soul exists "in this school, and also in each of us" according to Owen (504), helped each of them reach that state of fulfillment.

Discussion Question 1

Why is it significant that President Affenlight breaks Henry out of a cycle of depression?

Discussion Question 2

How would the book be different, in terms of theme and message, if the Harpooners had lost the Championship?

Discussion Question 3

What is the main reason, in your opinion, for Henry's decision to stay at Westish for his senior year?

Vocabulary

beleaguered, imperturbable, magnanimous, shambling, superfluous



Characters

Henry Skrimshander

Henry is a remarkably talented shortstop who becomes a team leader and a star player for the Westish Harpooners. Though mild-mannered in daily life, he is capable of passion, inspiration, and sacrifice when playing baseball. Henry's skills as a ballplayer were honed during his childhood in South Dakota. As a boy, he developed an affection for the St. Louis Cardinals and for the (fictional) shortstop Aparicio Rodriguez, whose book *The Art of Fielding* has often guided Henry.

However, Henry had not considered playing college baseball before Mike Schwartz entered his life. The young South Dakotan makes his way to Westish with little more than an old Cardinals shirt, a copy of *The Art of Fielding*, and his glove Zero (named for the fact that Henry normally commits zero errors). Eventually, Henry finds an accepting community among the other members of the Westish baseball team.

In several respects, Henry can be understood as the central figure of *The Art of Fielding*. His junior year and his remarkable streak of error-free games are both ruptured by single bad throw that incapacitates his roommate and close friend Owen Dunne. Indeed, much of the action of Harbach's novel is guided by Henry's relationship with Mike Schwartz, Henry's crisis of self-doubt, and Henry's search for redemption on the baseball diamond.

Mike Schwartz

Mike is skilled Westish athlete who mentors Henry Skrimshander and, more broadly, reinvigorates the Westish baseball and football programs. He is a determined, strong-willed student, capable of both locating and developing the hidden talents in other players. To some extent, Mike's desire to mentor others can be explained by his upbringing in a troubled Chicago neighborhood; athletics and academics gave him a way out of poverty, and he hopes to give other young men the same chance at a better life that Westish gave him.

Despite his attainments in Westish athletics and academics, Mike aspires to a leadership role well outside the Westish community. His goal is to attend an Ivy League or elite law school and, eventually, enter politics. When Mike fails to garner any law school acceptances, he is forced to reassess both the direction of his life and the value of his contributions to Westish, such as the years he has spent fostering Henry's astonishing talents.

Mike must also deal with the physical toll that years of athletic competition are taking on his body; he needs spends the later stages of *The Art of Fielding* seeing doctors and attempting to obtain painkillers in order to keep playing. Gruff in manner but at times



sensitive, capable of both unbounded rage and risky calculation, he possesses a strong personality--but cannot always bend circumstances to his will.

Owen Dunne

Owen is a brilliant student who is both Henry's roommate and Henry's teammate in Westish baseball. Owen is calm, thoughtful, well-read, and dryly humorous. As a ballplayer, he frequently spends his time on the bench reading, but can prove himself a devastatingly precise and powerful hitter when he is called to bat. His reserved, almost philosophical personality earns him a philosophical nickname: Buddha.

Owen is also openly gay, and develops attachments to two older men: Jason, an attractive Westish student, and Guert Affenlight, the president of Westish itself. As the novel progresses, Owen must simultaneously deal with the after-effects of an athletic injury and with the budding, complicated romance between Affenlight and himself.

President Guert Affenlight

Affenlight is the president of Westish College. While studying at Westish as an undergraduate, Affenlight discovered that Herman Melville had at one point visited the campus; this find led to Westish's general fascination with all things Melville and prompted Affenlight himself to study Melville and other great nineteenth-century authors. The celebrated author of *The Sperm Squeezers*, a book on this branch of literature, Affenlight taught at Harvard for much of his career before returning to Westish as its top administrator.

Affenlight's personal life was defined by a series of affairs with different women; one such relationship produced a daughter, Pella, his only child. At Westish, Affenlight maintains a leisurely bachelor lifestyle, inhabiting quarters that feel like a glorified dorm room. His routines, though, are disrupted by Pella's re-emergence and by his first gay affair, his romance with Owen Dunne.

Pella Affenlight

Pella is the sensitive, intelligent, and troubled daughter of Guert Affenlight. Rather than pursue a traditional higher education, Pella dropped out of her prestigious high school, Tellman Rose, to pursue a marriage with a respected architect named David. Her relationship with Affenlight has never been antagonistic, but at times has been marked by breakdowns in communication and gestures of rebellion on her own part.

In *The Art of Fielding*, Pella must deal with the collapse of her marriage, and must carve out a desirable new situation for herself as a student and dining hall employee of Westish College. She arrives at Westish with a history of depression and insecurity, and with few contacts other than her well-intentioned yet distant father.



Adam Starblind

Starblind is the talented pitcher for the Westish Harpooners. Though known for his vanity and his womanizing ways, Starblind possesses a passion for baseball that rivals Mike's and Henry's.

Rick O'Shea

Rick is the first baseman for the Westish Harpooners. Rick is an able player, but is also known for his laid-back and good-humored temperament.

Coach Cox

Coach Cox is the devoted but somewhat secretive coach of the Westish baseball team.

David

David is Pella's well-read architect husband, who is presented as her antagonist in much of *The Art of Fielding*.

Izzy

Izzy is a talented young baseball player who, after Henry's breakdown, takes over as shortstop for the Harpooners.



Symbols and Symbolism

Owen's Painting

The large abstract painting that hangs in Owen's dorm room symbolizes Owen's unique combination of intellectual and athletic passions. In terms of composition, this painting consists of "a large rectangle, smeary and green, with thin white streaks that could easily have marked the foul lines of a baseball diamond" (22). It turns out that the painting was created by Owen himself and is meant to recall the work of renowned abstract artist Mark Rothko; the painting also recalls a baseball field and naturally brings to mind Owen's status as a powerful hitter. It is worth noting that, of all Owen's possessions, this painting is one of the items that most captivates Henry; as a work that recalls the sport that the two roommates cherish, the painting may also be understood as a symbol of the bond between Henry and Owen.

The Melville Statue

A prominent feature of the Westish campus, the statue of author Herman Melville can be taken as a symbol of self-determination and independence. During his freshman year, Henry notices this solitary figure: "a stone figure on a cubic marble base. Pensive and bushy-bearded, he didn't face the quad, as might be expected of a statue, but rather gazed out toward the lake" (23). The Melville statue pointedly looks away from the Westish community, signaling the trait of self-reliance. Ironically, though, Melville is also the figure that brings the students of Westish together by giving the school its identity; the statue may thus be understood, somewhat paradoxically, as a symbol of community and belonging.

The Lake

The portion of the Great Lakes that is near Westish takes on a few different significances as the novel moves along: The campus "lake" begins as reminder of Affenlight's love of water; it then transforms into the site of Henry's spiritual crisis and eventual sense of release: "He treaded water for a long long while, feeling an endless spontaneous power unspooling from his limbs" (346). Finally, the lake becomes the site of Affenlight's re-burial and repose. In a large novel such as *The Art of Fielding*, which is premised on the considerable changes in its characters, it is natural that some of the main symbols will also change radically.

Bella's Blue Pills

In her early days at Westish, Pella is dependent on a blue pill that symbolizes her troubled past, not the release or serenity that might be expected from its soothing color. This pill even has a somewhat ironic name: "a tiny sky-blue pill called Alumina,



presumably to connote the light it would bring into your life, though Pella couldn't help seeing the word Alumna and interpreting it as a snide remark on her failure to finish high school" (85). Pella herself makes a pointed observation about what the pill symbolizes: it is in indication of a personal failure that she is trying to medicate her way past. However, as Pella settles into Westish, she accesses the possibility of becoming a true, fulfilled alumna--and of breaking her dependence on the pills.

Beards

Throughout *The Art of Fielding*, beards are a prominent symbol of dedication and intensity. The intensely intelligent Melville and Affenlight sport beards, and Mike grows a beard while he is working passionately to finish his thesis and get into law school. And during the Championship season, all of the Harpooners grow beards. Mike, for instance, is impressed by the gathered ballplayers before their final game: "He tried to take The Stare to an 8, let it level of when he noticed that the stares coming back at him were like 9, maybe 9 1/2. Plus beards" (454). Beards are signs that Harbach's characters are fearless, manly--or perhaps simply have better things to do than shave.

Affenlight's Tattoo

Affenlight sports a secret tattoo, which symbolizes his love of Melville's whaling novels: the tattoo itself is simply the image of a sperm whale rising from the water. Yet this tattoo is not unique to him, since Pella obtained an identical tattoo during her teenage years. Initially, Pella's action seems to undermine something precious and unique to Affenlight: "His tattoo, then thirty years old, now close to forty, had always been a secret, sacred, sentimental part of him" (93). Yet the identical tattoo, by the end of the novel, could be better taken as a symbol of the difficult yet enduring bond between the strong-willed Affenlight and his equally strong-willed daughter. Though often in conflict, they have kindred personalities.

The Cardinals

One of Henry's distinguishing traits is his obsession with the Cardinals, and this dedication to the team is symbolized by the faded red Cardinals jersey that Henry wears throughout the novel. The Cardinals, indeed, stand for the highest form of success for Henry, and are his ideal destination in the major leagues. Yet even when Henry is at his worst, his loyalty to the Cardinals remains one of the staples of his identity--a fundamental part of who he is. Late in the novel, Mike catches a glimpse of "A figure in a faded red T-shirt" (391): Henry himself, his talents and self-discipline in question but his team affiliation still strong.



Affenlight's Furniture

Many of the contents of Affenlight's old-fashioned office are symbolic of the rich history of Westish. In fact, even the chair on which Affenlight normally sits is rich in Westish lore: "The chair was sturdy and comfortable, suitably presidential--it had supported the buttocks of every Westish president since Arthur Hart Brink himself" (428-429). It is now Affenlight's turn to sit in the chair, which symbolizes his own dedication to all things Westish and his own presumed place in Westish history. Affenlight's life is bound up with the long life of the school itself--a possible reason (on the level of symbolism) why Affenlight dies so soon after learning that he will leave his furniture, his office, and his very place within Westish.

Aparicio's "The Art of Fielding"

One of Henry's greatest symbols of prowess and calm is a baseball tract called "The Art of Fielding," which was authored by legendary (and completely fictional) shortstop Aparicio Rodriguez. This is one of the few books that Henry explores with any discernible dedication or passion, but it is just as much a sacred book for him as Moby-Dick is for the more scholarly Affenlight. After all, this volume gives Henry a code of conduct for his own life: "You couldn't choose to think or not to think. You could only choose to work or not to work. And hadn't he chosen to work?" (305). In doing so, it embodies a set of ideals and symbolizes a kind of excellence (the effortless control of Rodriguez himself) that Henry hopes to replicate.

Henry's Glove

Henry's glove, which bears the name "Zero," is an obvious symbol of Henry's excellence as a ballplayer: "When he came home from Little League games, his mother would ask how many errors he'd made. 'Zero!' he'd crow, popping the pocket of his beloved glove with a balled-up fist" (8). Zero accompanies Henry to Westish, and thus also symbolizes Henry's long history of low-key excellence as a ballplayer. Yet first when Henry's error-free streak is broken, and then when Henry breaks down completely, the name of Henry's beloved glove begins to seem more like a taunting reminder of a glorious, abandoned past.



Settings

The Westish Baseball Field

In some ways, the Westish field registers the lackluster athletic history of Westish College itself. The baseball facilities that host the Harpooners during their away games are more impressive, and a dysfunctional scoreboard that reads "Vi-itor" for "Visitor" looms over the field. However, the Westish baseball diamond is where students such as Mike, Henry, and Owen prove their worth. It may not be an impressive space in most respects, but it is a place that they and the other Harpooners can call their own.

The VAC

The Varsity Athletic Center at Westish College plays a few significant roles in the life of Mike Schwartz. On one level, it is a space that he has in some ways claimed for his own; he is a leader on the football and baseball teams, and has even settled into the VAC to write his senior thesis. Yet the VAC is also the site of one of the most important changes in Mike's personal life: his meeting with Pella Affenlight, which sets the groundwork for an affectionate and perhaps enduring relationship.

Owen's Dorm Room

Although Owen shares his dorm with Henry, Owen has in many ways claimed the space as his own. His books define the space, as do his meticulous cleaning habits and, occasionally, the smell of his marijuana. Henry, however, does not find the strength of Owen's personality oppressive, and Owen's decorations include a few items (a copy of *The Art of Fielding*, a painting that recalls a baseball diamond) that Henry finds familiar and welcoming.

Affenlight's Quarters

The apartment that President Affenlight occupies at Westish College can in some ways seem like a glorified set of dorm rooms; students such as Owen and Mike visit, and President Affenlight surrounds himself with books and random mementos. As Harbach's novel progresses, the nature of President Affenlight's living space changes. Although still in the Westish President's personality, President Affenlight's quarters become the scene of romantic encounters with Owen, discussions with Pella, and eventually tense moments with other members of the Westish administration.



The Dining Hall

After the collapse of her marriage, Pella Affenlight is eager to establish a new lifestyle-- even if that new lifestyle seems to take her backwards into student life. She decides, for instance, to take a menial job in the Westish dining hall. This new employment places Pella in an environment that seems unremarkable, since the dining hall serves standard undergraduate fare. However, the dining hall is a place that allows Pella to prove that she is capable of holding steady employment and that introduces her to Chef Spirodocus, a superior who accepts and values her.



Themes and Motifs

Athletic Competition

Many of the most important characters in *The Art of Fielding* work to prove their value--to themselves and to others--through competitive sports. Henry, for one, struggles to live up to the example of excellence set by his idol, famed shortstop Aparicio Rodriguez; as the narrative progresses, Henry also faces a crisis of self-doubt that is set off by a mishap on the baseball field. Without the certitude and confidence that baseball had given him, he loses control over every other aspect of his life; the rest of his existence, from his family to his friendships to his schoolwork, is intimately bound up with the self-image of calm command that Henry had cultivated as a shortstop.

Nor is Henry's competitive nature (with the judgments it entails) confined to the baseball field. One episode that reveals the true extent of how competitive Henry can become is the sprinting contest between Henry and Adam Starblind, a contest that has no witnesses other than Henry and Starblind themselves. This fact does not matter to Henry; he is driven to score a moral victory over Starblind, another athlete true prowess, and does so by developing a strategy that forces Starblind to over-exert himself, lose, and vomit at the end of the sprints. This idea, that athletic competition does not end when the game ends, is revisited once more at the end of the novel, when Henry learns that both he and Starblind have been drafted to play minor league ball. This time, though, Starblind wins out, getting the earlier draft pick and dealing a private blow--but one that feels almost like retaliation for Henry's sprints.

The idea of athletic competition as an expression of self worth also informs much of Mike Schwartz's life, but in a very different capacity than this concept informs Henry's. Mike must, of course, prove himself as the Harpooners' first-string catcher. His investment in the Harpooners goes even deeper; as a figure who guides the other players, he often rivals and sometimes completely overwhelms the easygoing Coach Cox. Mike was behind the workouts that shaped Henry and Starblind into the ballplayers they are, and is eager to see that other promising Harpooners (such as Izzy, who is in many ways a younger iteration of Henry) succeed under his guidance as well. Success for the Westish team is a sign that Mike is a truly outstanding mentor; failure or mediocrity is a sign that he has failed both as an athlete and as a competitive leader.

More broadly, the Harpooners as a whole are struggling to shake off years of losses and create a respected team. Signs of past failures and deficiencies linger with the team; perhaps the most prominent of these is the out-of-repair scoreboard that looms over the Westish baseball diamond and reads "VI ITORS" instead of the proper "visitors." Well-funded teams such as Chute and Coshwale remind the Harpooners that Westish is the characteristic underdog, and not a glorious one at that. Together, Mike, Starblind, and the rest must demonstrate that Westish's relatively unimpressive facilities and lackluster history are not in any way indicative of the team's future.



Friendship

The Art of Fielding is in many ways a study of how friendships--often among unlikely pairs of characters--are formed, broken, and healed. Harbach walks his readers through exactly how Henry Skrimshander and Mike Schwartz form a close bond, then begin to patch up that same bond after Henry's personal crisis causes a rupture. In some ways, their bond is unexpected, as there are few easy similarities between the gruff and worldly-beyond-his-years Mike and the nimble, mild-mannered Henry. Nor does Henry really share in the scholarly interests that drive Mike as a student of the humanities. What the two young men do have is a friendship formed from their shared passions as ballplayers: both crave strength and fitness, both aim to inspire younger players, and both feel that Westish has given them a home and a sense of direction.

Perhaps the nature of the volatile yet durable friendship between Mike and Henry is best summed up by Pella at the very end of the novel: "Men were such odd creatures. They didn't duel anymore, even fistfights had come to seem barbaric, the odd casual violence all channeled through institutions now, but still they loved to uphold their ancient codes. And what they loved even more was to forgive each other" (496). To an outsider, the rapidity of how quickly Mike forgives Henry's desertion of the Harpooners can indeed seem remarkable. But this forgiveness is understandable; Henry has long been an essential presence in Mike's life, a ballplayer whose accomplishments validate Mike's role as Henry's friend and mentor. By the end of the novel, it is possible that the friendship between Henry and Mike has been strengthened and refined, now that it has been tested by Henry's depression and survived this trial.

However, not all of the friendships in The Art of Fielding are quite so dramatic; Henry and his roommate Owen are mutually affectionate and understanding, yet Owen's ironic temperament and Henry's air of reserve do not make for the kind of drama that marks Henry's friendship with the strong-willed Mike. In fact, Henry and Owen do not seem to miss one another particularly much when they are apart; their final parting at the end of the novel is quick, sudden, and matter-of-fact. But if their relationship has few of the dark lows of Mike and Henry's, it certainly has a few pleasant highs: Owen and Henry buying clothes, Henry checking in on Owen after the injury, Henry taking Owen's place at bat in the Championship game. Often, these gestures are executed with little display of emotion, but that does not mean that emotion is absent--either for the appreciative Henry or for the quietly soulful Owen.

Ironically, the one man in The Art of Fielding who does not form any strong male friendships--Guert Affenlight--has written an entire book on the subject of male bonding. Affenlight's respected scholarly tract *The Sperm Squeezers* is a study of male fellowship that in nineteenth century culture and literature, and in light of Affenlight's lifetime of solitary habits, it may be interpreted as a book-length expression of repressed desires. Affenlight after all enjoys Owen's conversation and gravitates to other men, from Henry to Aparicio Rodriguez, as figures of interest and respect. He perhaps wants to be a part of a male community, one that experiences the dramas and triumphs of the Harpooners baseball team, but may not fully know how. A life-altering love affair - Affenlight's



relationship with Owen - may be as much a romance as a way of beginning a meaningful male friendship.

Family

In *The Art of Fielding*, family is neither a source of total bliss nor a source of total anguish; rather, family relations bring with them a complex combination of more subtle emotions, both positive and negative. This ambivalent approach to family is set in place by the novel's most prominent family unit: Guert and Pella Affenlight. The relationship between the two Affenlights is defined in large part by distance, failures of communication, and passing differences of opinion. But there is also a firm, quiet bond between Affenlight and his daughter, who share the same Moby-Dick-inspired tattoo yet respect each other's need for privacy and independence.

Henry and his family have a relationship that, though structured differently, is similar in its combination of nuanced positives and equally nuanced negatives. Initially, the Skrimshanders seem incapable of grasping why Henry would be interested in playing college baseball; Henry's parents, moreover, are at first disconcerted by the fact that Henry's roommate is gay. Yet Henry's parents and his sister Sophie eventually embrace the route Henry has chosen, even showing up at the Westish campus on a day designated to honor Henry's baseball achievements. For his part, Henry firmly yet respectfully stands his own when his parents oppose him (for instance, when they want him to abandon Owen for a straight roommate). His bond with them is built not on demonstrative affection but on communication and resolution, while his contact with Sophie is distinguished largely by its air of quiet, trusting friendship.

One last small family unit--Owen and his mother Genevieve--shows how thoroughly Harbach's carefully balanced approach to family informs the narrative. In many ways, these two characters are a mirror image of the Affenlights: a second pair of headstrong, well-educated, well-spoken individuals, but mother-and-son instead of father-and-daughter. Genevieve and Owen quibble over literature (namely, whether Owen has grown out of his high school liking for Walt Whitman), but their conflicts never rise beyond passing barbs and occasional tensions--some of the latter brought on by the possibility of an affair by Affenlight and Genevieve.

However, *The Art of Fielding* is also notable in that it presents "families" of a much more loosely defined kind. The Harpooners' baseball team has a family dynamic of sorts, with Mike, Henry, Rick, and Starblind serving as a sort of older generation, almost as mentoring parents for the younger players. There has probably not been a day when the Harpooners have been a completely harmonious family; at the very least, Mike and Owen are prone to the occasional argument about the Israel-Palestine conflict. But there is nothing about the atmosphere of the team that could justly or accurately be described as toxic. Instead, the Harpooners have bonded by facing competition together, and by occasionally working through the passing dramas that have disrupted life on the team. They are, perhaps, the book's most intense expression of Harbach's conception of family: a unit rife with imperfections, yet constructive in its final influence.



Academics

The life of study and scholarship that Westish College embodies has a transformative effect on several of the principal characters in *The Art of Fielding*. Perhaps the character who is transformed most radically by such academic pursuits is Guert Affenlight, who in his earliest days at Westish is mostly interested in playing football and pursuing science. However, a chance encounter with one of Herman Melville's manuscripts sets Affenlight along an unforeseen course in life. Inspired by Melville's nautical narratives, he decides to go to sea and starts writing a novel of his own. While this book remains unfinished, Affenlight matures into a Harvard-trained literary professor and the author of a respected work of literary scholarship, *The Sperm Squeezers*. Without Westish--which brought the young Affenlight into contact with the hard-to-find Melville text that inspired this entire course--the life's story of the eventual Westish president would have been quite different.

Exposure to the humanities also guides the younger Westish generation. It is easy to overlook the fact that Mike Schwartz (who must deal with such a large array of conflicts in *The Art of Fielding*) is a talented student of history and the classics. His pursuit of these subjects has elevated his mind and helped him to shed something of his rough roots; though he remembers coming from a poor neighborhood, his main identification is with the Westish campus community. Owen also is changed by his time at Westish, though more subtly. Outwardly, he seems to do little more than consume one book after another. Inwardly, however, he is consuming the knowledge that he needs to refine his intellect and win a competitive scholarship, the Trowel. Without the repose and opportunity that Westish offers, his own academic growth might not have been so rewarding.

Westish academics also offer both a haven and a means of advancement for one more character: Pella Affenlight. She arrives at Westish determined to put a bad marriage behind her and, ironically, to mature by actually returning to college. Her initial regimen on the Westish campus includes auditing classes in literature; when she decides to enroll full-time, she works with Professor Eglantine to develop an independent study course in the humanities that will provide a uniquely fulfilling learning experience. A regimen of studies that is under Pella's own control is an important first step in Pella's growing independence. Previously, Pella's domineering husband David had tried to direct Pella's intellectual evolution; now, Pella will direct that evolution herself.

With Pella, however, we do not get to see that evolution's end product. *The Art of Fielding* ends just as Pella is beginning her fall term, and does not in fact depict any of that term's events. But there are signs that Pella may arrive at a synthesis of life and academics that is every bit as original as the one that her father had achieved. Along with formal courses, Pella takes informal cooking lessons under Chef Spirodocus, the disciplined and (from a culinary standpoint) probably quite underrated supervisor of the Westish dining hall. She treats these lessons as a form of serious education; indeed, she may one day arrive at a fusion of culinary study and classic scholarship that is



every bit as unique as the fusion of cultural studies and American literature that Affenlight himself devised in *The Sperm Squeezers*.

Leaving a Legacy

In *The Art of Fielding*, the question of how to leave a legacy--and of whether such a legacy can endure--is a preoccupation of both younger and older characters. As the narrative moves along, Affenlight reflects on his lifetime of learning and lecturing; he does not in any way see himself as an outright failure or disappointment, but he does seem to wonder how his accomplishments and lifestyle will add up. He has published one book (*The Sperm Squeezers*, a work of scholarship), and he is a well-liked and well-respected member of the Westish community, though not a man who seems established on the campus as well as he could be. A drive to settle down, to perhaps make Westish his greatest legacy, pushes Affenlight to consider buying a house towards the end of the novel. With such a settled and stable lifestyle, he would have a chance to devote himself to projects that assure his legacy--from the eco-friendly initiatives Owen adores to the composition, perhaps, of influential new books.

Questions of legacy at their most intense are not confined to Harbach's older characters by any means. Mike Schwartz, for instance, realizes that the direction he sets in his life after college will determine the kind of legacy--and the extent of the legacy--that he is able to leave. This knowledge is part of what drives Mike to apply to law schools, since a law degree would equip him to influence communities far larger than Westish College. When these plans (and Mike's eventual ambition to enter politics) fall through, Mike must re-assess the type of contributions that he is best equipped to make in life. Initially, he resists the assistant coach job offer that Westish sets forward. However, accepting this new role is a wise move, and one that takes Mike's talents and accomplishments to the logical next level; Mike has already left something of a legacy as the student-athlete who turned around the Westish baseball and football teams, and he can leave even more of a legacy as the assistant coach who revitalizes the entire athletic program.

In terms of legacy, Henry faces a different dilemma: his legacy is assured, but it is a legacy that brings him conflict and disappointment. As a junior at Westish, Henry ties a record set by his idol, shortstop Aparicio Rodriguez, for most error-free games. Westish organizes a day of celebration in Henry's honor, and even invites Rodriguez to the campus. Henry, however, must deal with the unusual burden of now being placed on the same level as his hero; this sudden shift of status for Henry is only complicated by the fact that, in the process of matching Rodriguez's record, Henry made a bad throw that incapacitated his roommate and close friend Owen. While Mike and Affenlight have not faced much personal anguish in the process of forming and solidifying their legacies, Henry has already learned the hard lesson that accomplishment sometimes goes hand-in-hand with disaster.

Yet Harbach's novel ultimately suggests that individual accomplishment is not the only powerful legacy that one can leave. Part of Affenlight's legacy is his power to bring Owen, Henry, Pella, and Mike together, to create a bond that encompasses all of these

Westish students even in his death. Owen acknowledges as much in the final pages of *The Art of Fielding*, when he speaks during Affenlight's re-burial in the lake. Describing Affenlight's remarkable soul, he explains that the deceased president gave "of it so unstintingly. It exists in your book, and in this school, and also in each of us" (503-504). Individual accomplishment may validate men such as Mike and Affenlight, but connecting with others is as much a legacy--and as durable a legacy--as any form of individual excellence.



Styles

Point of View

In his novel, Harbach directly explores the perspectives of four characters: Henry Skrimshander, Mike Schwartz, Pella Affenlight, and Guert Affenlight. The narrative as a whole can be understood as a set of limited third-person narrations that toggles among these individuals, relaying their observations, opinions, and desires to the reader.

Through them, we come to understand the texture of life at Westish College and gain considerable insight into other important figures in the narrative, such as Owen Dunne and the other members of the Westish baseball team.

Language and Meaning

The narration of *The Art of Fielding* is notable for its uses of literary allusions involving authors such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Herman Melville (particularly *Moby-Dick*), and T.S. Eliot. Several of these references are provided by two well-read characters, Pella Affenlight and President Affenlight, whose psychologies are explored at great length. References to Melville, Emerson, and Whitman, for instance, can be explained in part by President Affenlight's background as a scholar of nineteenth-century American literature.

Harbach's own style is notable for its uses of metaphor, simile, and time jumps, including sequences that flash back to characters' pasts and flash forward through stages of development. Henry's metamorphosis from a promising freshman ballplayer into a powerful junior-year shortstop, for instance, only consumes a few chapters of the book. Mike's life before Westish is covered in relatively quick flashbacks, as is Pella's life with David. These sequences are vivid and sometimes include powerful symbols (such as the avocado that Pella, lonely and longing, rolls between her hands), but are not long enough to distract from the novel's main focus on Henry's breakdown and redemption.

Structure

Overall, Harbach's novel moves forward in a linear fashion, and deals mostly with the events of a single academic year. However, without truly interrupting the chronological structure of *The Art of Fielding*, Harbach fills in much information about his characters' pasts. Memories, thought associations, casual conversations, and mementos of earlier activities (such as the college picture of Guert Affenlight) help us to understand what the main characters were like well before the main events of the novel.

Quotes

Fifteen minutes to game time. Schwartz, still dizzy hauled himself to his feet. He would need two quarts of Gatorade to get through the final game, then a coffee and a can of dip for the long midnight drive. But first he headed for the far dugout, where the kid was packing up his gear. He'd figure out what to say on the way over. All his life Schwartz had yearned to possess some single transcendent talent, some unique brilliance that the world would consent to call genius. Now that he's seen that kind of talent up close, he couldn't let it walk away.

-- Narration (Mike) (chapter 1)

Importance: Positioned early in the narrative, this quote efficiently defines some of the major aspects of Mike's character: his determination, his ability to think on his feet, and his drive to exert himself physically, even in the face of pain or fatigue. The relationship between Mike and Henry will also play out according to premises established here; Henry is remarkably talented, and Mike will foster that talent. Yet in ways that may be more difficult to appreciate, Mike is himself a gifted individual. His ability to recognize and develop greatness in others is his real talent.

He had also, from his first days on campus, fallen in love with Lake Michigan--having grown up in landlocked farmland, he was amazed by its vastness and the combination of its steadiness and its constant fluctuations. Walking along its shore called forth some of the same deep feelings that his reading of Melville did, and that reading explained and deepened his love of the water, which in turn deepened his love of the books. He resolved to get himself to sea.

-- Narration (Affenlight) (chapter 6)

Importance: The Art of Fielding is populated by relentlessly resolute and devoted characters, and this quotation establishes President Affenlight as one of them; his love of Melville drives him to study literature and his love of water does, in fact, lead him to spend time at sea. For President Affenlight, Melville and water are inseparable, sources of "the same deep feelings" (53). While it would perhaps be possible for President Affenlight to keep his scholarly or literary interests separate from the rest of his life--to study Melville in a detached and purely analytic manner--President Affenlight has never followed such an approach. His identity as a Melville scholar can be traced to a personal passion.

Why, in Henry's experience, was a question an athlete shouldn't ask. Why had he made such terrible throw, so bad that Rick couldn't even get a glove on it? Was it because of the scouts? He'd tensed up because of the scouts? No, that made no sense. For one thing, the scouts weren't even there, they'd left after the eighth, and he'd seen them go. And anyway he had no fear of scouts in his heart, at least not that he could detect. Was it because he didn't want to break Aparacio's record, be the one to wipe his name from the history book, because Aparacio was Aparacio but he was just Henry? Maybe.

-- Narration (Henry) (chapter 11)



Importance: Here, readers are presented with an intense depiction of Henry's thoughts on his catastrophic throw. Henry weighs a few different reasons (the scouts, the possibility of beating Aparicio's record) that might explain why he did not perform with his usual accuracy. He does not arrive at a single explanation here, but he has begun to fall into a danger that he does cite: looking back on his failures as an athlete and asking "Why." While this is an early and somewhat isolated moment of troubled reflection, moments such as this will add up to the personal crisis that becomes one of Henry's primary conflicts in *The Art of Fielding*.

Pella felt, again, both older and younger than the situation required. She'd skipped this whole era of roommates and beer pong and Salvation Army furniture--it wasn't necessarily something you wanted to go back to once you'd lived in a clean decorated place of your own. And yet being here, with Mike's huge hand wrapped around hers, she sensed a certain long-felt pressure lifting from her sternum. She imagined hiding out for a year or two, pacing her way through the brittle paperbacks, and finally emerging, rested and fine.

-- Narration (Pella) (chapter 18)

Importance: As a woman in her early 20s who has already been through a dissatisfying marriage, Pella realizes that she is somewhat out of place within the Westish student body. However, she has found the fully adult world that she is accustomed to extremely stressful. A student lifestyle may not be glamorous, but it may offer Pella a sense of solace and community that her mature life so far has not afforded. She has also, importantly, gravitated to Mike Schwartz, another character who is linked to Westish but is in many ways more grown up than the average Westish student.

Affenlight needed a cigarette more than he ever had when he smoked half a pack a day. What year did they finally ban smoking in hospitals? What happened if you did it anyway? He both did and didn't want Owen to find him out--like that dirty picture on Owen's laptop, the possibility of being figured out made things more real, more thrilling and terrifying--but what he certainly did not want was for Owen to figure him out in front of his mother. Affenlight was glad that Genevieve had said what she said about the poet of democracy; otherwise he would have said it, or something like it, and felt like a fool.

-- Narration (Affenlight) (chapter 22)

Importance: Outwardly, President Affenlight is a man of great authority and self-assurance. But inwardly, as a result of his attraction to Owen, he is a man who must deal with intense emotions and fraught moments of confusion. The quotation above reveals the course of President Affenlight's thoughts as he reflects on his own habits, on his relationship to Owen, and on the arrival of Owen's mother Genevieve. Even though President Affenlight has not been "figured out" by all of the characters around him, Harbach's narrative allows readers to gain a privileged perspective and "figure out" the exact course of President Affenlight's thoughts (169).

It was Owen's first appearance in the locker room since his injury. 'Owen,' Henry said. 'How's your face?' It was funny how glad he could feel to see his roommate, even though they were roommates and saw each other all the time. And yet over the winter



holidays or during the summer, when Owen went to Egypt, as he'd done last summer, or home to California, as he'd done the summer before, Henry didn't miss him much at all. The more he saw of him, the more he missed not seeing him.

-- Narration (chapter 29)

Importance: Here, *The Art of Fielding* describes a meeting between Henry and Owen after Henry's wayward, catastrophic throw. The friendship between the two students has not truly been disrupted, and Harbach uses this meeting to describe the terms of that friendship in an extremely precise manner. While Henry does experience strong feelings upon seeing Owen, the two young men remain reserved in their interactions. Nor does Henry tend to view his relationship with Owen in a sentimental manner; if anything, Henry is calmly and analytically aware that he does not miss Owen "much at all" when Owen is absent (210).

On a shelf in his office Schwartz kept a long row of DVDs of Henry taking batting practice. Labeled and arranged by date, they formed a complete record of Henry's progress as a hitter under Schwartz's tutelage, week by diligent week, from his fresh person season till now. Together they'd spent hundreds of hours watching these tapes, breaking down and rebuilding Henry's swing frame by frozen frame. If you had editing equipment and time to kill, you could take a frame from each day's session and splice them together chronologically, so that the Henry who awaited the pitch would be skinny and indefinite, the bat wavering timidly above his bony white elbow, while the Henry who finished the swing, following through with such forceful purpose that he bat head wrapped around and struck him between the shoulder blades, would be chiseled and resolute, his eyes hardened, his curls shaved down to a military half inch. The making of a ballplayer: the production of brute efficiency out of natural genius.

-- Narration (chapter 36)

Importance: This quotation occurs in the context of Henry's crisis of self-confidence; in an attempt to re-invigorate Henry, Mike has decided to screen footage of Henry's past feats in an attempt to inspire the younger ballplayer. This attempt is ultimately unsuccessful, yet video footage has played an important role in Henry's baseball career in other ways. Henry, in fact, was admitted to Westish on the evidence of a tape of him fielding. Later, as the excerpt above indicates, Mike and Henry used video footage to help Henry examine and refine his techniques.

This was the way it had always been--everything David said so multiplicitous, so full of broad assessments and tiny recastings of truth, that to begin to dig in and issue corrections seemed petty and futile. Of course he'd believe that her 'anxiety' stemmed from not painting, instead of from being married to him; of course he'd believe that her 'anxiety' had lasted a few months and not the bulk of their curdled marriage.

-- Narration (Pella) (chapter 42)

Importance: This excerpt demonstrates how well Pella knows the ways of her estranged husband David, calling attention to the way "it had always been" in terms of David's approach to problems (289). Pella is capable of mapping out his beliefs in detail; she is aware of his specific misconceptions and of his habit of adhering to those



misconceptions in a self-serving manner. Taken from one of the few direct depictions of David (who only appears at Westish once), this excerpt casts him in a thoroughly negative light. Such negativity makes him a rarity among Harbach's characters (who are often given both positive and negative aspects) but helps the reader to fully grasp the intensity of Pella's aversion to him.

The Harpooners in the dugout--Arsch, Loondorf, Lensen, and on down the line--lowered their eyes as he came down the steps. It was eerie, the calm he exuded. The fans had fallen silent. The players on the field stood frozen, dumbfounded, staring into the dugout. The umpires stared too. Coach Cox's jaw worked at his wad of gum. No one knew what to do. It was not clear that they could continue without him; it was not clear what the other options were.

-- Narration (chapter 49)

Importance: In this dramatic excerpt, Henry is stepping down from his position as shortstop. Because Henry is both a fixture on the team and a player of immense talent and promise, the Harpooners are temporarily cast into confusion. "No one knew what to do," with one exception: Henry himself (324). His stepping down is the first step towards changing the composition and fortunes of the Harpooners, since Izzy turns out to be an excellent replacement as shortstop. Yet even as he sacrifices his position to help the team, Henry himself lapses into a self-destructive state of depression.

She was the wrong caretaker, or coach, for someone so depressed. She was too indulgent, too empathetic. He'd be better off with someone tougher, someone who'd never really been depressed and didn't know what it was like. At least he'd managed to get his clothes from the washer to the dryer and back on his body. That was something.

-- Narration (Pella) (chapter 64)

Importance: Here, Pella considers her role in dealing with Henry's state of depression. She is not capable of taking the hard-line approach that someone like Henry, who is accustomed to discipline and challenges, might find beneficial. However, she is "empathetic" enough to see that Henry does need an approach such as this. While Pella can diagnose and understand what is wrong with Henry, it takes a very different character--her father, who in fact has "never really been depressed"--to snap Henry out of his state of hopelessness (397).

The giddiness deepened into bliss. His limbs lacked energy to move, but a different type of energy was moving through them, originating somewhere in his bones and organs and spilling outward, scrubbing and scouring him from within, suffusing him to his skin. Maybe it was Schwartz's presence, maybe it was the fact that the Harpooners had won the national championship--but the bliss laughed at those things, and Henry realized the they were irrelevant where the bliss was concerned. Maybe this was what dying felt like.

-- Narration (Henry) (chapter 76)

Importance: Henry's recovery from depression is a dramatic process, though not necessarily a sudden one. His desperate feats during the Championship game land him in the hospital, and he will need to spend time both working through his psychological



issues and gaining back his physical strength. Here, however, Henry manifests a strong positive emotion, a "giddiness" that "deepened into bliss" (477). He has not yet re-gained control of his life, and has certainly not re-gained his former powers as a baseball player, but he is beginning to think anew about parts of Westish life-- Schwartz's presence, baseball victories--that had energized him before his depression.

Owen's voice wavered. He closed his eyes, opened them again. "You told me once that a soul isn't something a person is born with but something that must be built, by effort and error, study and love. And you did that with more dedication than most, that work of building a soul--not for your own benefit but for the benefit of those who knew you.
-- Narration, then Owen (chapter 81)

Importance: Known for his calm demeanor and precise intelligence, Owen does not manifest emotion on many occasions in *The Art of Fielding*. Yet this excerpt, taken from President Affenlight's burial in the water, represents an exception. Here, Owen hints at feelings of heartbreak. These emotions are still filtered through an intellectual statement about President Affenlight himself, in part because such intellectualism will always be part of Owen's character, in part because such a calm, thoughtful elegy does honor to the academic President Affenlight.