

Beautiful Losers Study Guide

Beautiful Losers by Leonard Cohen

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Plot Summary

Beautiful Losers by Leonard Cohen is a stream-of-consciousness story of an unnamed folklorist living in a psycho-sexual hell. Having lost his wife and male lover, he turns to the history of an Iroquois saint for his salvation. The novel is a depiction of spiritual yearning in the orgiastic humanistic days of the mid-sixties.

In the first book, *The History of Them All*, the nameless narrator researches Catherine Tekakwitha, a nearly-sainted Iroquois from the seventeenth century. He has lost the two people he loves: his wife Edith and his childhood friend F. He had a sexual affair with both, but only after Edith's suicide did he learn that she and F. slept together. Now, the narrator masturbates frequently, suffers crippling constipation and no longer bathes, refusing to leave his apartment in Montreal.

After Edith's death, F. - who is a libertine, Member of Parliament, and general bully - proceeds to put the narrator through a series of tests, mostly sexual, forcing him to admit his desire for power and spiritual contentment. F. fakes a car-crash to scare him and drags him into the Free Quebec movement, for which F. has become a strong voice. F. is entering the late stages of syphilis, however, and is going mad. Before she died, Edith roped him into experimenting with holy items, and the two of them grow obsessed with total orgasms.

The narrator meanwhile, finally leaves his disgusting apartment and goes to F.'s tree-house, one of many assets bequeathed after his friend's death. There, he grows desperate and cold. He learns about Catherine Tekakwitha's chastity and her renunciation of her Iroquois beliefs. The narrator longs to be with her. He recalls the day F. told him about his plan to blow up a statue of Queen Victoria during Elizabeth II's visit to Canada.

In Book 2, *A Long Letter from F.*, F. - now imprisoned in a mental asylum after the bombing - writes the narrator to explain his methods. He tells him that both he and Edith decided that the narrator was the only one who could attain spiritual grace. He has been training him with his sexual-emotional tests. F. describes a night he spent with Edith where they nearly achieved their full-body orgasms and were baptized with a special soap. F. proceeds to tell the narrator about the death of Catherine Tekakwitha and her subsequent miracles. As the letter ends, F. says that the Free Quebec movement is breaking him out of the asylum.

The novel ends with *Beautiful Losers: An Epilogue in the Third Person*. In this epilogue, F. is a homeless old man who molests little boys and performs oral sex on women in cars. In the final passages, he is accosted by arcade patrons that recognize him. Before they can seize him, he transforms into a projection screen. The novel ends with a plea to pray to Catherine Tekakwitha and a farewell from the author.



The History of Them All: Chapter 1-9

The History of Them All: Chapter 1-9 Summary

Beautiful Losers by Leonard Cohen is a stream-of-consciousness story of an unnamed folklorist living in a psycho-sexual hell. Having lost his wife and male lover, he turns to the history of an Iroquois saint for his salvation. The novel is a depiction of spiritual yearning in the orgiastic humanistic days of the mid-sixties.

In Chapter 1 the narrator addresses the blessed Iroquois woman Catherine Tekakwitha. She died in the late seventeenth century, and now the narrator longs to be with her. He remembers his deceased friend and lover, F., who died in an asylum from syphilis. Now, our narrator is suffering from depression and crippling constipation.

In Chapter 2 our narrator introduces himself. He is a folklorist and scholar of the Canadian A——- tribe, a pitiful tribe that has been reduced to a handful of survivors. In Chapter 3 he explains that his goal in studying Catherine Tekakwitha is to understand her not as a Catholic symbol but as a human being. In Chapter 4 the narrator recalls F. telling him that he longs to have sex with a saint.

In Chapter 5 the narrator recalls the night that his wife Edith killed herself. He lives in a basement apartment and one day Edith, wanting to take revenge on him, climbs into the elevator shaft and is crushed. That night, F. sits with the narrator and tries to comfort him. F. admits to sleeping with Edith a few times and proceeds to perform oral sex on the narrator.

In Chapter 6, the narrator recalls a day when F. decides to paint a miniature model of the Greek acropolis with red nail-polish. He places the red model in the sun and comments that the Indians must have created a similar structure. The narrator protests that they didn't, and F. goes on a tirade, saying that the narrator needs to "fuck a saint."

In Chapter 7, the narrator enumerates the Iroquois nation tribes that nearly overcame the French. Among them were the Mohawks, of which Catherine Tekakwitha was one. He recalls a day when Edith covered herself in black-face paint and invited him to do the same so they could make love as other people, but he refused. In Chapter 8, the narrator explains how many French priests were killed proselytizing to the Canadian tribes, their hearts eaten by the chiefs. Catherine's mother, however, was an Iroquois convert.

In Chapter 9, F. is performing oral sex on the narrator. F. chastises him not to feel guilty for their activity, which he says is not exactly homosexual. The narrator acknowledges that Edith was an A——-.



The History of Them All: Chapter 1-9 Analysis

In the opening chapters of *Beautiful Losers*, we meet our unnamed narrator en medias res, midway through the story. The novel that follows will be something of a primal howl from this man, who has lost control of his life and seeks some form of grace.

The narrator has lost the two people he loves most in the world, his wife Edith and his childhood friend and lover F. Both have died in recent days: Edith by suicide and F. by the ravages of syphilis. The narrator is a folklorist with a focus on the Iroquois tribes of Canada. He specializes in the A——- tribe, which is especially obscure. Edith is an A——-, and both she and the narrator are caught in the spell of F.

F. is the ideological leader of this love triangle. He is a proponent of free love and absolute ascendancy of the human orgasm. He yearns for sexual gratification by any means necessary, giving him the aura of the Marquis de Sade. Like the Marquis, F. believes in the destruction of traditional iconography, typified by his assertion that "he'd never once heard of a female saint he wouldn't like to have screwed" (6). His iconoclastic streak will bring him to the forefront of a Canadian revolution and ultimately be his undoing.

The narrator, meanwhile, is left in agony after Edith and F.'s deaths. He turns to the story of Catherine Tekakwitha, an Iroquois woman who has been all but canonized by the Catholic Church. She is an unusually sexualized saint, and an Iroquois to boot. The narrator is fairly certain that she is his only hope for salvation.



The History of Them All: Chapters 10-13

The History of Them All: Chapters 10-13 Summary

In Chapter 10, the narrator longs to be an established voice in society, speaking publicly against any repressive institution, be it the Communist bloc, the Canadian Parliament, the Roman Catholic Church, or any other number of examples.

In Chapter 11, the narrator explains how the Iroquois lived in long houses that held several families and were considered immoral by French missionaries for their lack of privacy between the sexes. He compares it to a movie theater at night, stifling in its inherent sexuality.

In Chapter 12, he reads about the plague that spread through Catherine Tekakwitha's village when she was young. The reading depresses the narrator, and he distracts himself, thinking about the fleeting journey of Edith's lips over his body. He wants her to linger on his genitals, but he does not know how to ask. F. suggests that he either demand oral sex from her or learn to love her grazing tongue. F. argues that these glancing kisses are an expression of love, that both he and Edith love the narrator more than he can imagine. After Edith dies, F. admits that he and she played a little "telephone game" in a railroad station while the narrator was in the bathroom. They sucked each other's fingers and placed them in each other's ears. The narrator is heartbroken by this. Researching the Iroquois plague, after both F. and Edith have died, the narrator thinks of Edith's navel and lists every liquid - from semen to rainwater to tears - that it has held.

In Chapter 13, the narrator has stopped working since the plague reading and his list involving Edith's navel. He has also become constipated, going days without a bowel movement. He prays to any god that will help him and he resolves not to enter his bathroom until he can pass stool, forgoing showers.

The History of Them All: Chapters 10-13 Analysis

In this section, the narrator begins his descent into hell after the death's of F. and Edith. He develops crippling constipation and prays to Catherine Tekakwitha to loosen his bowels. As time goes on, and he stops washing, his basement apartment in Montreal, with its filth and its memories of his past loves, becomes infernal.

The scene in Chapter 12 where F. tells the narrator about his "telephone dance" with Edith is a heartbreaking and transformative scene. The narrator is aware that F. and Edith have slept together, but the notion that they shared a transcendent moment, experiencing the inside of each other's body in new ways, drives him mad. The "telephone dance," anyway, becomes central to F. and Edith's crusade to overthrow the dictatorship of the genitals for sexual pleasure.

The narrator's reading, meanwhile, into the plague in Catherine Tekakwitha's village depresses him utterly. This is the first of many low points in his reading about her.



The History of Them All: Chapters 14-19

The History of Them All: Chapters 14-19 Summary

In Chapter 14, the narrator remembers F.'s fevered tirades and begins to miss him terribly. He finds that F.'s personality is taking over his. He recalls the day that F. purchased the textile factory in which he used to work. He gallivants through the abandoned warehouse, recalling how he vowed to his employer that one day he'd own the factory. F. begins to tear up.

In Chapter 15, the narrator describes Catherine Tekakwitha's family's journey up the Mohawk River after the plague. They settle into a small village, where Catherine makes fine crafts and wampum. The chapter ends with an indictment of the Canadian government and the Roman Catholic Church for their subjugation of native tribes and general sexual repression.

In Chapter 16, the narrator describes the day in 1664 when Catherine was to be married off to a Mohawk warrior. She is being tended by aunts for the simple ceremony when the young man enters her tent, she gives him a piece of food, and they consummate the marriage. The young man enters with a massive erection, and though Catherine is aroused she flees into the forest. The young man follows her, but he cannot find her. Returning in shame, he is beaten by the men of the tribe and disowned by his family.

Chapter 17 is a secular prayer to God written by the narrator. In Chapter 18 F. and the Narrator eat olives, and F. is expounding upon man's desire to alter the world around him. F. gives the narrator an English-Greek translation book. He says it is a prayer book, translation being an inherently sacred act.

In Chapter 19 the narrator relates a story from Edith's childhood, when she was chased down in the woods by a group of white men who proceeded to rape her. The narrator admits that he cannot feel hatred for the men because he understands the irresistible power of the young native body. What strikes him most is Edith's assertion that she called to Catherine Tekakwitha for help, reducing one of her attackers to tears.

The History of Them All: Chapters 14-19 Analysis

Early in this section, the narrator states that he fears F.'s personality is taking over his own. F. has died and left his worldly possessions to the narrator. Now, the narrator finds himself becoming more and more like F. This raises the question whether F. is, in fact, a real person or an alter ego. F. could be the roving unencumbered id behind the narrator's fretting ego.

F. represents victory over every conceivable bond. We are aware that he is irresistible to either sex. In Chapter 14, though, we see his victory over social class. He makes good on a promise to his old employer that one day he would own the factory he worked in.



Cohen also juxtaposes two stories of sexual assault in this section: Catherine Tekakwitha's and Edith's. Catherine succeeds in eluding the man that she has been tricked into marrying; Edith does not succeed in eluding the her pursuers. Cohen is careful to humanize his monsters, however. The Mohawk brave in Chapter 16 is terrified that he will be punished severely if he loses his betrothed, and he is. One of Edith's rapists collapses in her arms. The narrator admits that her cannot feel anger towards that man. This is an example of this novel's ambiguous attitude toward sexual violence. The modern reader is horrified by it, but our libertine characters wonder if it is another step toward complete sexual immersion.



The History of Them All

The History of Them All Summary

In Chapter 20, the narrator recalls the night that Edith killed herself. He and F. ate together, and F. did not finish his meal. In Chapter 21, he inventories the fireworks that F. left to him after his death.

In Chapter 22, the narrator begins to lose his sanity, locked in his Montreal apartment after the deaths of Edith and F. He lights one of F.'s fireworks. Chapter 23 is another prayer to God made by the narrator, begging for blessing in exchange for forgetting the transgressions of F. and Edith.

In Chapter 24, the narrator burns himself with F.'s fireworks. He is setting them off indoors, covering his apartment in ash. He has stopped cleaning himself, and his living environment is getting filthy. In Chapter 25, he begins masturbating incessantly, covering his apartment in semen. He continues to burn himself with the fireworks. As he masturbates, he remembers making love to Edith. He recalls providing oral stimulation to Edith's anus, proof that they love each other. The chapter devolves into a nonsensical stream of sex terms.

In Chapter 26, the narrator reads a book about Catherine Tekakwitha written by Edouard Lecompte, a Jesuit priest who fell in love with her. In Chapter 27, he loses his sense of time. He is still constipated and constantly burns his hands with F.'s fireworks. He fears that Edith would have been disgusted by him in Chapter 28.

In Chapter 29, the narrator recalls how F. managed to lose weight and gain muscle mass with the Charles Axis fitness plan. F. learned about the plan from an advertisement in a comic book, telling the story of a skinny weakling who uses the Axis plan to bulk up and beat up the bully who stole his girl. The narrator thinks F. is crazy: the plan is meant for skinny weaklings, not fat ones. F. succeeds, though, in getting fit. One day on the beach, a muscular bully kicks sand in F.'s face, but he does nothing. The bully is Charles Axis.

In Chapter 30, the narrator finds a note from F. in the bottom of the fireworks box. It instructs him to turn on the radio. Playing is a song by Gavin Gate and the Goddesses, a pop group with a Supremes-esque love song. The narrator is swept up in the music, convinced that it is a chronicle of an orgy between Gavin and his Goddesses. After the song ends, he calls the DJ and shouts at her nonsensically about his constipation and burns. She hangs up on him, and he goes outside to call her again from a pay phone. Outside, he realizes the note is a ploy to get him out of his hellish apartment.

Chapter 31 is a false syllogism proving that the narrator is the king of France. In Chapter 32, the narrator relates how France sent missionaries throughout the Iroquois nation, who succeeded greatly in converting large swaths of natives and turn them into



Catholic missionaries. In Chapter 33, the narrator yearns to have every sort of religious medal possible. Chapter 34 details the French missionaries challenge converting the Iroquois, who would plug their ears when one talked to them. The French overcame this by painting scenes of natives with plugged ears being tortured in hell.

The History of Them All Analysis

In Chapters 20 through 30, the narrator's apartment begins to devolve into a literal hell. Haunted by memories of Edith and F. and yearning towards a saint he cannot reach, he stops cleansing. He is constipated and burns his hands daily with F.'s fireworks. He masturbates all the time. The floor of his apartment is covered with trash, gunpowder, and semen. In Chapter 30, however, F.'s posthumous note to the narrator lures him into the open air

This degeneration of the narrator and his dwelling is juxtaposed in Chapter 29 with F.'s reinvention through Charles Axis's fitness plan. Both F. and the narrator are fat weaklings, but only F. puts his faith into the comic book plan of Axis. This chapter is an example of F. and the narrator's veneration of pop culture as sacred. They deify Axis, Plastic Man, Marilyn Monroe, and Brigitte Bardot. They repeat comic exclamations (Pow! Zap!) as though they were prayers. These nihilistic figures struggle daily to find faith in a secular world.

Chapter 25, meanwhile, demonstrates the stream-of-conscious style of Cohen's work in its purest form. The freely associated sex acts of this passage resemble the final chapter of Ulysses. Reading this three-page sentence, the reader understands what is happening from the psychic state of the narrator. It is desperate, aroused, and frantic.



The History of Them All: Chapters 35-43

The History of Them All: Chapters 35-43 Summary

In Chapter 35, the narrator relates the mindset of Catherine Tekakwitha's uncle. He dislikes the French missionaries, who have converted a prodigious portion of the village, including Kryn, chief of the Mohawks. The local priest leaves the village in 1670, but he is soon replaced by another, Jacques de Lamberville. In Chapter 36, the narrator places the time frame of these events in historical context, naming other significant things that happened at this time. As he does this, he begins to think of F. and curses death for taking the two people who loved him away.

In Chapter 37, the new priest in Catherine's village begins to massage her feet. He starts to lick them, and Catherine shouts out that she wants to be baptized. As this happens, her uncle begins to sense the dying out of his people and grows weak. Catherine asks him if she can be baptized, and he consents with the caveat that she never leave the village. He tells her that their way of life is coming to an end.

Chapter 38 is another of the narrator's prayers to God. He asks why he has been placed in this position. In Chapter 39, he and F. are driving to Ottawa. F. has been elected to Parliament, and he is teeming with excitement. As they drive, F. begins to masturbate. The narrator watches and cannot help but be aroused. He begins to masturbate himself, and as he is about to orgasm the car careens off the road. The narrator is terrified, but F. admits that the near-death experience was arranged by him and Edith. The narrator is shocked that Edith knows of his sexual relationship with F. They continue on to Ottawa.

In Chapter 40, the narrator considers what F. meant by his recommendation to "fuck a saint." He considers that a saint is not a person that seeks to alter the world, but rather a person that exists at peace within it, that gives himself over to the world. He wonders how he can get closer to Catherine Tekakwitha. He announces her 1676 baptism in Chapter 41 and tells Edith that he misses her.

In Chapter 42, the narrator tells the story of a French banquet that Catherine attended. As the gentlefolk speak, Catherine spills her glass of red wine on the white tablecloth. The room falls silent as the cloth is engulfed in red. The narrator mentions, in Chapter 43, that the tale is thought of as an apocalyptic parable. He only finds it in certain texts of her life. He tells the story of a time in school when a case of warts spread and F. would bite them off. He laughed at the narrator for leaving his alone. In the bathroom, one day, F. drags the narrator in front of the other boys and holds him down while they forcibly cut off his warts.

The History of Them All: Chapters 35-43 Analysis

In this section, the novel enters the body of Catherine Tekakwitha's life. In her small village with her uncle and aunts, she finds her faith in the Catholic Church. This



discovery derives from the time and place. The French are sending missionaries throughout Canada. Jacques de Lamberville is the Jesuit who baptizes Catherine.

During these passages, we also meet Catherine's uncle, who represents the last generation of Mohawks before the arrival of Christianity. He says many times throughout the novel that there will be no harvest this year; the young of his village are not growing into Mohawks. His way of life is passing into oblivion, and he makes her promise him that if she converts she will not leave the village.

The section ends with the strange, apocalyptic story of Catherine Takekwitha spilling the wine at the French banquet. Catherine's conversion has disrupted her people, and this story implies that her presence among the Jesuit is disruptive in its own way. It silences them.

Interposed with this history is the story of the narrator and F.'s car trip to Ottawa. This strange lurid passage details a lesson that F. and Edith are trying to teach the narrator. Their intention is to achieve sexual transcendence, but we will learn later that they believe the narrator will be the one to succeed in this.



The History of Them All: Chapters 44-47

The History of Them All: Chapters 44-47 Summary

In Chapter 44, the narrator details how Edith explained the origin of the Catherine Tekakwitha banquet story to him. He, Edith and F. are lying underneath a sunlamp in their apartment, and they insist he do so in the nude. As he lies there, F. and Edith decide to shoot heroin. The narrator, who does not partake, excuses himself to rifle through Edith's drawers. There, he finds some mail-order holy water. He bursts in to wake them and demand to know the reason for their owning holy water. They have taken to shooting mixed holy-waters, Edith says. She then proceeds to calm the narrator, telling him the story of the feast. A week later, she kills herself.

In Chapter 45, the narrator - having at last left his disgusting apartment - is in F.'s tree house. He has been there days, and he wonders what is in the Top Ten lineup on the radio these days. He is humming the Top Ten from days ago but assumes they have been replaced. In this way, he reasons, the Top Ten are like a faith similar to the Iroquois.

In Chapter 46, Catherine Tekakwitha's uncle is dying. The priest Jacques de Lamberville is trying to convince him to accept Christ, threatening him with eternal damnation. The uncle is unfazed, calmly explaining to the priest that heaven is for the French. He asks Catherine to strip so she can see what an old Mohawk's body looks like. He explains the journey into the afterlife he must undertake and how he must be prepared for it. After Catherine leaves the tent, her aunts accuse her of seducing her old uncle and beat her. De Lamberville inspects her to ascertain that she is a virgin and declares her righteous.

In Chapter 47, F. wakes the narrator up and tells him to go outside with him. The narrator does not want to, and F. drags him to his feet naked and shames him. They go outside where a protest against the 1964 visit of Queen Elizabeth is raging. As F. and the narrator watch the goings-on, an anonymous woman slides her hand into the narrator's pants. As F. joins the surging crowd, the narrator and the woman pleasure each other. Just before he orgasms, though, the crowd abruptly disperses, and the woman slips away. The narrator panics and searches the square for her, causing a commotion. F. stops him and pulls him home. On the way, F. tells him that he has passed his second-to-last test.

The History of Them All: Chapters 44-47 Analysis

This section is largely about the passing of values into oblivion. The converse of this theme is the invention of new and iconoclastic ideas by the younger generation. This idea is illustrated in Chapter 45, as the narrator considers that his knowledge of the Top Ten hit songs on the radio has become obsolete. As popular as they were when he heard them, these songs have been replaced by new, younger, more popular hits.



This sentiment, of course, is reiterated by the scene that begins Chapter 46, where Jacques de Lamberville tries to convert Catherine Tekakwitha's dying uncle. He tells the old man that if he is not baptized he will burn in hell, but the old man is unimpressed by this selling point. He is aware that his way of life is disappearing, and he simply wants show his newly converted niece his old dying body so that she can see what is lost with the arrival of the new and shiny Catholicism.

Also central to this section are two events that add light to the characters of F. and Edith. Firstly, we learn in Chapter 44 that they are shooting up holy water. Edith admits that the water is changing them in some way. Later - through F.'s long letter - we will learn the full extend of their sexual-spiritual experimentation. The second bit of information is F.'s involvement in the Free Quebec movement. This revolutionary movement is a bold and controversial rejection of British rule by French Canadians. F.'s involvement will cost him his Parliament seat and make him a hero among the young.



The History of Them All: Chapters 48-52

The History of Them All: Chapters 48-52 Summary

In Chapter 48, the narrator is still in F.'s tree house, singing Hit Parade songs as the weather gets cold. He thinks about F.'s many happy dalliances and wonders why he could not have inherited F.'s memories instead of his possessions. Instead, he is yearning after a long-dead religious figure. He talks about the practices of Catholic missionaries in the Canadian wilderness and wonders what Catherine Tekakwitha's body looks like today. Catholic saints have a tendency of not decomposing in the ground, and the narrator enumerates several examples. He wonders why F. has led him into the woods to be alone with his dead.

In Chapter 49, Catherine's ailing uncle has an idea to save his life. He calls upon all the young, single girls in the village to come to his tent. When they are assembled, he asks each what young hunter they will sleep with that night. All name their chosen men, except Catherine who says she would rather have sex with a thorn. The men are gathered, and in the tent an orgy commences. The uncle crawls amid the copulating young people, chanting a prayer for metamorphosis. The priests call it a heathen ceremony.

In Chapter 50, the narrator calls out to Edith and F. in the howling wind. In his dreams he lay with both of them and wakes in agony. F. eventually visits him in a dream and tells him that he has a task to perform. F. believes that the Free Quebec movement has grown soft and intends to make a bold statement during Queen Elizabeth's visit. He will blow up a statue of Queen Victoria during Elizabeth's speech. The narrator begs F. not to go. He pledges his love and fidelity to F. who departs. In Chapter 51, he calls madly upon Catherine Tekakwitha. Sex, history, religion, music, and pain are intermingled in his frantic cry.

In Chapter 52, the narrator opens the English-Greek phrase-book that F. gave him as a prayer-book. With deep conviction, he proceeds to pray to Catherine Tekakwitha with each of the categorized conversations in the book: conversations for the dry cleaner, barber shop, post office, bookstore, etc. The phrase book is badly written, and the prayers break down into broken English.

The History of Them All: Chapters 48-52 Analysis

By Chapter 48, the narrator has abandoned his basement apartment and is slowly freezing in F.'s tree-house. Here, his thoughts have become a pained primal howl against his loneliness and iniquity. He has researched the life of Catherine Tekakwitha in the interest of finding the woman behind the saint; ironically, she has become even more of a symbol - consequently, less of human - to the narrator. She represents the faith and love that he has lost in recent years.



In the research, we learn of the orgy that Catherine's uncle holds with all the young people in his village. In many ways this seems a final rebellion against the Jesuits who have taken over. It gives him strength to rise from his bed one last time and prepare for the gauntlet he will face on his route to the afterlife.

In Chapter 50 we learn of the last meeting between F. and the narrator before the event that drives F. to the mental asylum where he dies. F. plans to bomb a statue of Queen Victoria during the visit of Queen Elizabeth. The narrator begs him not to go. He declares his love for F., but F. has always been more committed to ideas and gestures than people. He is ready to pass from this world in the name of a grand idea - and other reasons he will explain in his letter.

As the first book ends, the narrator is frantic and cold. He prays to a new-world saint with a secular book. He is lost and deperate.



A Long Letter from F.

A Long Letter from F. Summary

F.'s long posthumous letter to the narrator begins with the speculation that the narrator, having inherited all of F.'s worldly belongings, has begun to co-opt his personality. He also denotes the inherent difference between men and women. Women hiss at the world, while men try to shush it. F. argues that man has been trying to shush a primal voice for centuries.

As F. writes the letter, he is sitting in an asylum in the final stages of syphilis. A nurse named Mary Voolnd comes up behind him and watches him write.

F. talks about Edith, whom he disparages and whose relationship he dismisses out of turn. F. believes that his recent humiliations and his expulsion from the Parliament are fading from the public consciousness. He is a hero of the young Canadian counterculture. Mary invites him, as he writes his letter, to massage her vagina. He obliges, fingering her as he recalls his days at the Jewish-owned textile factory. He remembers, in particular, a derelict that used to panhandle on the factory floor. The owners didn't have the heart to kick him out.

F. wonders why he has dedicated so much of his life to the narrator and Edith, when he could have become President if he wanted. He pledges his undying love to the narrator, saying the triangle between the two of them and Edith was a truly mystical arrangement. As Mary begins to have her orgasm, F. tells the narrator his essential lesson that he has been building to his whole life: God and magic exist despite Man's efforts to destroy them.

As F. writes this, he notices something in Mary's vagina. She has smuggled in a message from their "friends."

F. tells the narrator that he gave him too small a box of fireworks. In addition, he should have given him his collection of soaps and sex toys that he prized. F. considers himself and the narrator to be the New Jews. A New Jew, he says, is a person that delves into every theory and aspect of society until he or she goes mad.

F. goes on to warn the narrator that he should not commit suicide. In general, F. fears that he has done the narrator a disservice by "immunizing" him to passion. He didn't know exactly how to go about educating him. F. goes further, admitting that he never really knew what he wanted in life. He never even committed fully to the Free Quebec movement, even though it was the reason he was expelled from Parliament.

F. tells a story about a night he spent with Edith. He took her to an expensive dinner and then up to a hotel room. This is during their experiments to make their whole bodies orgasmic, and F. breaks down in Edith's arms when she blames him for ruining her relationship with the narrator. She can't have an orgasm of late; so, F. goes to work with



his whole library of sexual texts. Without touching her, he brings her to the brink of total orgasm. When he runs out of texts, F. regales her with stories of the torture of French missionaries by Iroquois tribes. Edith is in agony, and F. brings her to orgasm with a Danish vibrator. She begins to use the vibrator on him, and the device takes on a will of its own. It ravishes Edith again before leaping from the window into the Atlantic, where it swims away.

The exhausted lovers are interrupted by the attractive Argentine waiter from the restaurant. He proceeds to make love to both of them, and then he guides them both to the bathtub where they all wash with a special soap. The soap is made from human flesh and purifies them. Edith stops the waiter on the way out and holds him; she believes he is an A——. F. and Edith agree that they love the narrator and that he will achieve perfect transcendence. If he does so, though, he will have to do it alone. This conversation, F. says, is the beginning of Edith's suicide.

F. talks about the Iroquois belief that a soul must undergo a journey through a gauntlet before entering the afterlife. He suggests that his ordeal in F.'s tree-house may be his gauntlet. F. mentions his successful bombing of the Queen Victoria Statue, for which he lost his Parliament seat and a thumb. F. argues that he does not want Quebec independence simply because he is French; he wants to tear Canada apart before he dies. F. closes this section of his letter - a preamble of sorts - by promising the narrator deliverance from his agony. He intends to detail the final weeks of Catherine Tekakwitha. The section ends with two poetic - and heavily footnoted - invocations of history.

A Long Letter from F. Analysis

If the first book of *Beautiful Losers* is an examination of the madness of secular spirituality in the post-Christian era, F.'s letter in the second book is an explanation and a thesis underpinning that madness.

His essential thesis - the one that he claims binds together all of his tests, protests, deviations, and proclamations - is simple and surprisingly structural: God and magic exist, though man tries to destroy them. He has not discovered this by means of any particular religious tradition but in his own experiences with the flesh. This letter contains two pieces of corroborating evidence for F.'s assertion, one from his life and one from history. The second half of the letter will concern the last days of Catherine Tekakwitha, but this section tells an almost more fantastical story involving the F. and Edith.

F.'s night in the hotel room with Edith is a harrowing story of spiritual sexuality and animation of objects. Edith nearly achieves her total orgasm, and when she gives up and uses a marital aid it springs to life, jumps out the window and swims away. Later that night, the mysterious Argentine waiter comes to the room and baptizes them with a bar of special soap made from human flesh. From this strange night's experience, F.

and Edith agree that the narrator will be the one to achieve transcendence, but he will have to do it alone. From F.'s point of view, this night is the beginning of Edith's suicide.

Early in the letter, F. comments that mankind struggles constantly in a futile endeavor to silence the wilderness, ostensibly so that God's voice can be heard. F. contends that the din of the wilderness is the voice of God. It exists in the braying of the crowds and the moaning of copulation.

He says at the end of this preamble that he intends to relieve the narrator of the "History" that weighs him down. He will detail the end of Catherine Tekakwitha's story.



A Long Letter from F.: Chapters 1-16

A Long Letter from F.: Chapters 1-16 Summary

With Chapter 1, F. begins to tell the story of Catherine Tekakwitha's final weeks. In 1677, Catherine hears of the Mission of Saint-Louis from a Onneyout missionary. Father de Lamberville arranges for her to travel upriver to the Mission. She does not worry about breaking her promise to her uncle. De Lamberville blesses Catherine, and she leaves the village. In Chapter 2, she is met at the mission by the head priests, Claude and Pierre. She carries a letter of introduction from de Lamberville. She is assigned a mistress, and Iroquois convert christened Anastasie. Catherine prays daily at a cross by the river.

In Chapter 3, the priests and Anastasie try to convince Catherine to marry. They have a young man in mind, but Catherine does not want to marry. She also wants to begin to fast.

In Chapter 4, F. paints a horrific portrait of the native converts at the mission. They undergo any number of painful acts of contrition, from wearing belts that dig spikes into their skin to submerging themselves in freezing water. Catherine begins to forsake all food. In Chapter 5, Catherine prays in the forest, cutting her body with stones. In Chapter 6, she walks throughout the fields and woods, observing the animals of the forest and the crops. She questions God as to why human beings need to eat to live. F. cites a scientific study that compares the skulls of Iroquois to those of Caucasians in Chapter 7.

In Chapter 8, F. discusses Catherine Tekakwitha's best friend at the mission, a widow named Tegaigenta. She is a beautiful woman who lost her husband during a hunting trip during which the group fell short of food. The group was reduced to cannibalism, and Tegaigenta is wracked with guilt over her complicity. Catherine asks her what human flesh tastes like. Tegaigenta says it tastes like pork. In Chapter 9, the two women strip together to whip each other. Catherine compares her body to her friend's. These beatings and fasting continue over the course of Chapter 10. Catherine prays to God about her iniquity. In Chapter 11, F. describes the atrocities of the war between the French and the Iroquois. One night, as Catherine whips Tegaigenta, Tegaigenta becomes a virgin again.

In Chapter 12, F. compares Catherine Tekakwitha's fast to those of other saints, some of whom went years without food. Catherine asks Pierre if she can take an oath of chastity in Chapter 13. She is the first Iroquois to do so. As days go on, Pierre and Claude are mystified by strange bleeding wounds that appear on Catherine's body. In Chapter 14, they come up to her lodging to find her wrapped tightly in a blanket. Then they pull the blanket away they find that she has lined it with spikes and thorns. Horrified, they try to extricate her, but they seem captivated by her body.



In Chapter 15, F. contends that his study of Catherine Tekakwitha, he too has become enamored of her. He wonders about the other women he has worshiped, like Brigitte Bardot, Eva Peron, and Madame Bovary. He apologizes to Mary Voolnd for thinking of other women while touching her. She assures him it is alright. In Chapter 16, Catherine is dying, and she wants to take communion. The priests agree, and she begins receiving the penitent in her lodging. They confess their sins to her. Days before her death, Catherine crawls into the woods and whips herself. The day before she dies, she takes communion.

A Long Letter from F.: Chapters 1-16 Analysis

In Catherine Tekakwitha's final weeks on earth, she moves from his village to the Mission Saint-Louis upriver. F. paints a portrait of this encampment that is similar to a painting by Bosch or Bruegel. At the camp, native penitents mortify their earthly body with spikes, thorns, whips, and frigid water.

This location, on the other hand is perfect in Catherine's mind. She wants a place where she can truly repent of her sins, a place where she will not be stymied by the likes of her Aunts and Uncle. Thus Catherine begins on a long process of fasting and self-mortification. Little by little, she gives up all food, and she and Tegaigenta spend hours whipping each other. Pierre and Claude, the head Jesuits at the Mission, show concern for her wellbeing, but there is an undercurrent of lurid fascination to their concern.

F. comments that as he has research Catherine Tekakwitha's life, he has found himself drawn to her not as a woman but as a symbol. He likens her to some of the sexy women in the movies that he has worshiped in his secular faith, particularly Brigitte Bardot. Moreover, as all this is happening, F. is continuing to gratify Mary Voolnd, the nurse with connections to the Free Quebec movement. When she entered the scene in the last section, she appeared simply to by a nurse with an eye for F. Now, she is clearly an apparatchik with some sort of mission.



A Long Letter from F.: Chapters 17-24

A Long Letter from F.: Chapters 17-24 Summary

Catherine Tekakwitha dies in Chapter 17. The first miraculous event occurs immediately after, when her face turns white and her pock-marked skin heals to an alabaster glow. The priests are amazed and begin to prepare her coffin. In Chapter 18, F. comments on the racial implications of Catholicism's obsession with whiteness, typified by this episode involving Catherine.

In Chapter 19, Catherine is prepared for burial and given a large funeral at the mission. Claude argues that she should be buried in the church, but Pierre insists that she be interred at her favorite prayer location, at the cross by the river. The next day, the mission is fevered with penitent acts. Some beat themselves and others take vows of chastity. Claude makes a rosary in Catherine's honor. In Chapter 20, F. cites a French military commander who is cured of gout in 1696 after praying to Catherine Tekakwitha.

F. optimistically plans, in Chapter 21, to leave his asylum with Mary Voolnd, return to the Parliament and continue his bid for the Presidency.

In Chapter 22, F. discusses the various visions of Catherine Tekakwitha that are reported in the later 17th century. Soon after her death, she appears to Claude. Later, Catherine appears to both Anastasie and Tegaigenta, informing her how best to whip herself. She appeared several other times to Claude, who began painting likenesses of her, one of which still exists. F. recommends that the narrator see it.

In Chapter 23, F. enumerates the many miracles associated with Catherine. A Montreal woman is saved from the brink of death in 1681 by Catherine's crucifix. After this miracle, she keeps a vile of mud from Catherine's grave around her neck. She is stricken with pain whenever she removes it, even for a moment. In 1693, the superior of a monastery regains use of his arms while praying to her. A French aristocrat is cured of a chronic cold. Later, both a cow and a steer are saved from death by mud from Catherine's tomb. A doctor turned priest cures a woman of painful syphilis sores with a prayer to Catherine. In Chapter 24, F. describes the final resting place of Catherine Tekakwitha's body.

In his closing to the letter, F. describes the modern scene on St. Catherine Street in Montreal, with its famous System Theatre. Groups of weak-willed vegetarians hang around there, and angry ticket-takers verbally abuse customers. F. hears dogs barking outside, and Mary Voolnd demands he remove their friend's message from her vagina. The note indicates that Free Quebec militants will break him out of the asylum that night. The radio announces that he escapes to the woods and Mary, his accomplice, is mauled by dogs. F. tells the narrator he loves him, and begs him to live life as F. tried to.



A Long Letter from F.: Chapters 17-24 Analysis

This section of F.'s letter largely concerns Catherine Tekakwitha's death and the visions and miracles that follow it. Most striking and strangely unnerving of these miracles is the fact that immediately after dying, Catherine Tekakwitha becomes white. F. comments on the obvious racial undertones of this particular story. Catherine, meanwhile, becomes a focus of New World prayer, with many illnesses and injuries - both human and bovine - cured in her name. In reality, Catherine has not yet been canonized but beatified, the step just below sainthood.

The closing passages of F.'s letter have a strange, surreal quality to them. He describes St. Catherine Street at length, with its roving vegetarians, arcades, and System Theatre. In F.'s secular spirituality, St Catherine Street is a cathedral. The final passages of the novel will take place there in fact.

The final page of the letter is the most confounding. From the beginning of the narrative, we have heard that F. dies in the asylum, but in this section he describes his escape with Mary Voolnd with the help of Free Quebec revolutionaries. He tells the narrator that he loves him and disappears into the woods.



Beautiful Losers: An Epilogue in the Third Person

Beautiful Losers: An Epilogue in the Third Person Summary

The Epilogue begins on the first day of spring and an old dirty man - presumably F. - is walking along the beach, excited that winter is over. A young boy appears, and the old man tries to convince him to take off his clothes, but the boy simply wants to hear a story about the Iroquois. The old man tells him some Mohawk words, and the boy says that the Canadian police have interviewed him. He told them about his sexual relationship with the old man.

The old man hitchhikes on the sparsely populated highway. An attractive woman pulls over and curtly invites him in. She is naked from the waist down and orders him to perform oral sex on her. He obliges until they arrive downtown.

It is now night, and the old man wanders down St. Catherine Street, stopping by the System Theatre to see a triple-feature. He cannot see the movie, however, because his eyes are blinking in time with the projector. After he leaves the theatre, he makes his way to an arcade. After being admitted, he is recognized by the people inside: some recognize him as F. and others as the pervert the police are searching for. As they are about to seize him, he transforms into a movie screen, showing a Ray Charles performance.

The narrator announces that the end of his novel has been rented out to the Roman Catholic Church. The Church implores the reader to pray for miracles in the name of Catherine Tekakwitha, so that she can be canonized. The narrator closes with a thank-you and farewell to the reader.

Beautiful Losers: An Epilogue in the Third Person Analysis

The end of the novel is something of a goof, a wild shaggy-dog story involving an older, more grotesque F. He wanders the beaches and streets of Montreal, a derelict old codger, having sex with women and little boys alike, always on the run from the police. Polite society catches up with him at an arcade on St. Catherine Street, but he morphs into a movie screen before they can attack him. The section ends with a vaudeville-esque reaction from the mob: "Thank God it's only a movie" (242).

Beyond the author's clever joke about renting the end of his novel out to the Catholic Church, there is a coda at the very end where he assures the reader that he will forever

write about "Him" - perhaps F. or God - and we are welcome to join him. This novel is a secular howl in defense of not only a spiritual past but also a spiritual present.



Characters

The Narrator

The unnamed narrator of the novel is the central character in the story. He is a folklorist from Montreal who specializes in the A——- tribe, a pitiful all-but-decimated Iroquois tribe.

The narrator grew up in an orphanage or boarding school of some sort, where he met the domineering and hypersexual F. As the narrator begins his work with the A——- tribe, F. begins sleeping with all the remaining A——- women. Eventually, the narrator marries an A——- called Edith. A secret love triangle between the married couple and F. develops.

The narrator is a sexual malcontent. He is turned on by Edith, but she has a lightness in bed that infuriates him. Likewise, his homosexual encounters with F. leave him angry since his friend insists on prodding him for information as they copulate. F. and Edith plan a surprise for him the day F. makes his first speech in Parliament. They stage a car crash intended to give the narrator the best orgasm of his life. Days later, he walks in on F. and Edith shooting up holy water instead of the heroin they normally use. They are reaching toward some sort of extreme he does not understand.

The narrator's wife commits suicide soon thereafter, and he begins to spend all of his time with F. He learns about F. and Edith's full relationship. F. tells him about their attempts to experience a sexual ecstasy in their full bodies. The idea drives the narrator mad. He begins intensive research into the life of an Iroquois virgin-cum-Catholic icon called Catherine Tekakwitha. F. draws the narrator into the Free Quebec movement. Soon, F., ravaged by syphilis, is arrested for bombing a statue and sent to an asylum where he dies.

The narrator grows depressed and desperate after F.'s death. He refuses to leave his basement apartment, which he sullies with refuse and discarded semen. He immerses himself in the life of Catherine Tekakwitha. He becomes constipated and stops washing. F. bequeaths a package of fireworks to the narrator that he sets off inside the apartment, frequently burning himself. Finally, F. - in a note - tricks him into leaving the apartment, and the narrator goes to F.'s old tree-house. There, he huddles through the cold nights and prays to Catherine Tekekwitha.

F.

F. is the narrator's best friend and lover since childhood. He is domineering libertine who used to publicly humiliate his friend when they were in boarding school together. F. is also an iconoclast and hero of the Free Quebec movement.



As the narrator and F. grew up together, they developed a mythology around comic books. F. ordered a fitness program from Charles Axis - advertised in these comics - and became incredibly muscular and toned. He continually browbeats the narrator for having not believed in Charles Axis. F. has slept with an inordinate amount of women and men, including many of the A——s that the narrator studies. When the narrator marries Edith, F. begins secretly sleeping with her. He and Edith also begin shooting heroin.

F. is elected to Parliament, and he brings the narrator along to see his first speech. They begin mutually masturbating on the drive to Ottawa, and F. fakes a car crash, which he planned with Edith to give the narrator his best orgasm ever. Soon thereafter, F. and Edith engage in a series of actions intended to bring them to a new plane of sexual pleasure: the telephone dance and the shooting up of holy water. One night in a hotel room, they achieve full-body orgasms and are baptized with a special soap. Not long after, Edith kills herself.

In the aftermath of Edith's death, F. comforts the narrator as best F. can. He drags him along to Free Quebec rallies. By now, F. is losing his mind as a result of syphilis. One day, he bombs a statue of Queen Victoria during his visit from Elizabeth II. F. loses a thumb in the blast, and he is admitted to a mental hospital.

While inside, F. is supposed to have died, bequeathing all his worldly goods to the narrator. However, in his long letter in the second book, he claims to be assisted in an escape by Mary Voolnd, a Free Quebec revolutionary disguised as a nurse.

In the Epilogue, an elderly and homeless F. wanders the streets of Montreal in the spring. He touches young boys and performs oral sex on women who give him rides. In an arcade on St. Catherine's Street, he is accosted by an angry mob and transforms into a projection screen.

Edith

Edith is the narrator's wife and a member of the A—— tribe, the all-but-decimated Iroquois tribe that the narrator studies. She is the most elusive persona in the love triangle of the narrator, F., and her.

When Edith was young, a group of white men chased her into the woods outside Montreal and raped her. She cried out to Catherine Tekakwitha for help, reducing one of her attackers to tears. She held him, as she does many men who are drawn to her throughout the novel.

Edith marries the narrator, and they live in a basement apartment in Montreal. Both the narrator and F. are enamored of her strange sexuality and her ridiculously long nipples. One day, Edith covers herself in blackface paint and invites the narrator to do the same. He refuses.



Edith's affair with F. is centrally concerned with achieving a fully orgasmic body. This begins in a railroad station, when she and F. stick each to hers fingers in their ears. After they, they begin to shoot heroin and later holy water together. One night in a hotel, they spend hours trying to achieve a full-body orgasm. After only moderate success, they are joined by an Argentine waiter, who baptizes them with a strange, mystic soap. Edith and F. agree that they love the narrator and that he must achieve transcendence without them.

Days later, Edith lets herself into the elevator shaft of her building and is crushed by an elevator.

Catherine Tekakwitha

Catherine Tekakwitha is an Iroquois woman who converts to Catholicism in the 1600s and after her death becomes a religious icon and near-saint.

Catherine Tekakwitha loses most of her family in a plague when she is a child. She moves upriver with her uncle. Catherine is betrothed to a Mohawk boy, but she does not want to lose her virginity; so, she refused to marry him. As a result, she becomes an embarrassment to her aunts. At this time, the French are sending Jesuit missionaries throughout Canada, and a particularly effective Jesuit called Jacques de Laberville comes to Catherine's village. Her uncle senses the end of his people approaching.

One day, de Lamberville speaks to Catherine - making vaguely sexual overtures - and she asks him to baptize her. Her uncle consents to this on the understanding that she never leave the village. She is baptized and becomes a pariah in her family. One day, another Iroquois comes to the village and speaks to her about a beautiful mission upriver. Breaking her promise to her uncle, Catherin arranges with de Lamberville to move to the mission.

While there, Catherine begins to fast, whip herself regularly, and sleep in a blanket lined with thorns. She takes a vow of chastity, and her health begins to deteriorate. Right before Catherine dies, the priests of the mission give her communion despite the fact that she is Iroquois. After she dies, her skin mysteriously turns white as alabaster.

Since Catherine Tekakwitha's death in the later seventeenth century, miracles and visions have been connected with objects she owned and prayers to her.

Catherine Tekakwitha's Uncle

Catherine Tekakwitha's Uncle takes care of her after she loses her family in the plague. She does not like the Jesuits coming to his village and initially forbids Catherine to be baptized. As he falls ill - realizing that his way of life is ending - the Uncle grants her permission so long as she never leaves the village. She eventually breaks her promise to him. As her uncle begins to die, she insists she undress him so that she can see what



an old Mohawk body looks like. Later, he has an orgy of all the young people in the village to give him strength for his journey into the afterlife.

Mary Voolnd

Mary Voolnd is a revolutionary in the Free Quebec movement who, disguised as a nurse, infiltrates the mental hospital where F. is imprisoned. She asks him to massage her vagina, where she has hidden a message from the movement. When they escape, Mary is attacked by dogs and nearly killed.

Jacques de Lamberville

Jacques de Lamberville is the Jesuit priest that baptizes Catherine Tekakwitha. One day, he comes to her lodging and begins to massage and lick her feet. She tell him that she wants to be baptized. Later, he arranges for her to travel to the Mission Saint-Louis.

Catherine Tekakwitha's Aunts

Catherine Tekakwitha's Aunts - who attend to her grooming and care - are spiteful and antagonistic to her. They prepare her for her nuptial night without telling her that she will lose her virginity. When they see Catherine remover her uncles clothes, they accuse her of seducing him and beat her.

The Argentine Waiter

The attractive Argentine Waiter with the mustache is a strange and mystic character. He serves Edith and F. at an expensive Montreal restaurant. Later, he meets them in their hotel room, and all three make love. He then proceeds to wash both of them with a strange soap made from melted human flesh. Before he leaves, Edith takes hold of him cradles him in her breast.

Charles Axis

Charles Axis is a fitness spokesman who advertises his work-out regiment in comic books. F. finds success with the program, and he and the narrator begin to deify Axis. One day, Charles Axis kicks sand in F.'s face on the beach, and he is awestruck.

Pierre and Claude

Pierre and Claude are the Jesuit priests that run the Mission Saint-Louis. They are enamored of Catherine Tekakwitha and try to stop her from fasting and whipping



herself. When she is about to die, they give her the sacrament of communion. After her death, Claude begins painting likenesses of her, and she appears to him in a vision.

Tegaigenta

Tegaigenta is Catherine Tekakwitha's best friend at the Mission Saint-Louis. She is an attractive widow haunted by the memory of the hunting party where she lost her husband and resorted to cannibalism to survive. She and Catherine whip each other for penance, and she is one of the first people that Catherine appears to after her death.



Objects/Places

The English-Greek Phrasebook

This badly-written phrasebook is given to the narrator by F., who says that translation is an act of worship. At the end of the first book, the narrator prays from it.

F.'s Fireworks

This large box of fireworks is one of F.'s possessions that he bequeaths to the narrator after he dies. The narrator sets them off in his apartment, badly burning his hand and covering the floor with ash and gunpowder.

The Danish Vibrator

F. uses this marital aid on Edith during their marathon love session in a swanky hotel room. After she orgasms and uses the vibrator on F., it comes to life, penetrating Edith again before jumping out of the window and swimming away in the Atlantic.

The Cross by the Lawrence River

This cross at the Mission Saint-Louis is Catherine Tekakwitha's favorite place to pray. She is buried by it after she dies.

The Free Quebec Movement

This movement in Montreal - consisting largely of students - pushes for the cessation from Canada by French-speaking Quebec. F., a Member of Parliament, is a hero of the movement.

The Mission Saint-Louis

This is the Mission on the Lawrence River where, in the later seventeenth century, Catherine Tekakwitha travels to take her chastity vow and fast until her death.

The Basement Apartment

This is the apartment shared by the narrator and Edith - and later by the narrator and F. - in Montreal. After both F. and Edith die, the narrator begins to lose his mind, and this apartment becomes soiled with ash, gunpowder, refuse, sweat, urine, and semen. It begins to resemble hell.



F.'s Tree-House

This tree-house is another of F.'s worldly possessions that he bequeaths to the narrator. After the narrator leaves his filthy apartment, he comes to this tree-house in the frigid winter months.

Comic Books

F. and the narrator read comic books incessantly, and they begin to deify certain figures from them, like Charles Axis and Plastic Man.

The Argentine Waiter's Soap

The bar of soap brought to F. and Edith's hotel room by the Argentine waiter is made from melted human skin. It is supposed to have near-religious purifying powers.

Themes

Love is Hell

The narrator of *Beautiful Losers* is a man consumed by his two great loves: F. and Edith. F. and Edith have slept together for as long as they have known each other. This love triangle is central driving spiritual force in the novel, for love and sex are not mere physical and emotional entities for these characters. They are revelatory experiences. However, this revelation, by and large, is more focused on the agony of the soul than the ecstasy.

F. is the sexual driving force of the novel. He prods the narrator incessantly to give himself over to pulse of humanistic outpouring in mid-1960s Montreal. These tests manifest themselves their mutual masturbation on the road to Ottawa and the narrator's anonymous fondling in the Free Quebec rally. The narrator wants to give himself over to this transcendent sexual energy, but he is frustrated. He cannot have an orgasm. In his more standard love life - his relationships with F. and Edith - he cannot experience pure pleasure. He hates F.'s constant interrogation that invariably accompanies sex. Edith loves kissing his body, every inch of it, but the narrator longs for her to simply perform fellatio. He knows that these two loves are his one bit of grace, but he cannot simply love them.

Meanwhile, F. and Edith are experimenting with each other, striving to overcome the sexual hegemony of the genitals. They dream of a full orgasmic body. They press fingers into new orifices, and they shoot up holy water. Their experimentation culminates in the night in the Montreal hotel room, where F. employs his full arsenal of texts and toys to give Edith a perfect orgasm. She becomes stuck however, just short of ecstasy, and is consumed by yearning. Even after she orgasms, though, she is disappointed. She and F. realize that only the narrator can find this elusive sexual heave, but they must be dead for him to do so.

F. and Edith's deaths are the driving force in the narrative, because they plunge the narrator into paralyzing depression wherein his life becomes a mess of yearning, constipation, refuse, and semen. He is trapped in a hell that his love has created.

The Old Gods Are Dead

Catherine Tekakwitha's uncle tells his niece that there will be no harvest in his village. Christian missionaries have begun converting Mohawks and Catherine is among those who wish to be baptized. This old Mohawks hunter's way of life has fallen into the seer, it seems.

In the late-1960s, the period during which the body of the novel takes place, revolutionary counter-cultural sentiment has created a worldwide explosion of secular sentiment. Traditional values seem to be going the way of the Mohawk faith in the late-



seventeenth century. As such, the beautiful losers of the novel have formed a new faith system consisting of the idolatry of popular culture. For F. and the narrator, two deities are the comic book icons Charles Axis and Plastic Man. These two figures represent two of the cardinal virtues of their faith system: strength and flexibility. They also worship pop icons:

Who will exhume Brigitte Bardot and see if her fingers bleed? Who will test the sweet smell in the tomb of Marilyn Monroe? Who will slip with James Cagney's head? Is James Dean flexible? O God, the dream leaves fingerprints. (205)

F. longs for these figures to rise from the dead like Jesus. For him, movie theaters and arcades are sacred spaces.

After the deaths of F. and Edith, the narrator feels a sort of nostalgia for the established faiths, and he fixates on one beatified Iroquois woman. The old gods may be dead, but he longs for the old grace.

Entropy

Entropy, the notion that all systems break apart over time, is central to the narrative of *Beautiful Losers*. The three protagonists are anarchists and iconoclasts. They believe in the upturning of the status quo.

F. is the most anarchic of the group. He grows up in a boarding school and works long hours at a bottom-of-the-ladder position at a textile factory, and he longs to destroy the system that has subjugated him. He can play the game within the system, making money and becoming a Member of Parliament. As soon as he achieves this level of power, he uses it to go to work on the system. He buys his old factory and becomes a voice for the Free Quebec movement. Near the end of the novel, in his long letter to the narrator, F. admits that his support of an independent Quebec has little to do with his being French himself. He wants to break a country in two before he dies.

More than anything, this theme is inherent in the time during which the novel was written and is set. More than anything, the sixties represented a widespread reaction against the traditional systems and values of the previous generation. F. can be seen as the quintessence of this era, standing against the tide of those that came before.

Style

Point of View

Beautiful Losers has three points-of-view, one for each book in the novel. The first two chapters are first-person - each from a different character's vantage point - and the epilogue is third person omniscient. None of these points-of-view is particularly reliable from a narrative standpoint.

The first book is told from the Narrator's point-of-view. This book is perhaps the least reliable as a straight narrative. The narrator is profoundly depressed after the deaths of the two people he loves. This section is nonlinear and free-association in its style. The narrator routinely confuses past and present and himself and F. In his pain and desperation, he forms a system of beliefs and rituals that he thinks will cure his depression, constipation, and burns.

The second book is a letter from F., and thus, it is from his point-of-view. F.'s letter is more carefully constructed than the Narrator's, but it does degenerate into madness near the end. F., at the time that he writes this letter, is dying from syphilis. The late stage madness has set in, so he routinely shifts freely between the setting of his asylum and the memories and history he relates. Nonetheless, this book is still coherently divided into an introduction, a thesis, a story of Edith, a series of historical notes, and a conclusion.

The third book, an Epilogue, is told in the third person. It is short and focuses on the character of F. in his old age. The section seems like a fantasia throughout, with no coherent storyline. The end is entirely nonsensical and seems to end with the Narrator's final farewell to the reader. Still, this incoherent final narrative is told in a more lucid style than either of the previous two books.

Setting

Beautiful Losers takes place in Montreal in the mid-sixties with long stretches of historical narrative from the same area, taking place in the 1670s and 1680s. Both of these settings are colored, however, by the unstable psyches of the Narrator and F.

The central location of the action in the First Book is the basement apartment in Montreal. His wife has recently died in the elevator shaft she accessed through their wall. Throughout this book, the apartment transforms into a vision of hell, with the narrator setting off fireworks, covering the floor in ash and gunpowder. This mingles later with sweat, urine, refuse, and semen, as he gives up on life utterly.

Book 2, the letter from F., ostensibly takes place in a mental asylum, but its narrative take place in two disparate locales: a swanky hotel room in Montreal and a Mission on the Lawrence River in the 1680s. The hotel room is torn apart in a marathon night of



lovemaking between F. and Edith which ends with a Danish vibrator coming to life and an Argentine joining in to baptize them.

The Mission, as described by F., is a Boschian nightmare of self-flagellating converts in the wilderness, but it is beautiful place to die for Catherine Tekakwitha, who wants a location where she can fast, pray, and whip herself.

By the end of the novel, St. Catherine's Street has attained a sort of crude grandeur, with its dilapidated movie theater, arcades, and roving gangs of vegetarians. F. has lionized it as an outpouring of the human spirit, and he faces his last stand at the hands of an angry mob in one of its arcades.

Language and Meaning

The language of Cohen's book is varied and vulgar. It alternates between semi-formal historical narrative to slangy, referential conversation. Even the historical passages are peppered with modern, informal reference. The text contains a mixture, too, of English, French, and Greek. On occasion, chapters - mostly in the form of prayers - are written with every word capitalized like a proper noun.

The book is also very profane, in that it regularly uses vulgar terminology for sexual acts and body parts. These terms are not used as though they were vulgar, but rather as logical alternatives to antiquated or imprecise options.

Whole sections of the novel, additionally, are told in a sort of free-form stream-of-consciousness. This manifests itself in pages-long single sentences without clear subjects or clauses. The most apparent example of this is in Chapter 26 of the first book:

... are we not awesome lovers Edith are we not filthy postcards are we not meals Edith are we not conversing miraculously darling pink evil fartrisk terror position darling I swear I loved darling ... (66)

The result of these language choices is the impression that we are experiencing these events through the eyes of a fevered, unstable libertine.

Structure

Beautiful Losers consists of three books, each of which has a distinctive framing structure. This difference in structure among these three books reflects the change in point-of-view that occurs between each.

The first book, The History of Them All, consists of 52 chapters, varying in length from two sentences to twenty pages. These chapters - from the point-of-view of the unnamed narrator - vary in top from historical research to fevered tirades. Interspersed with the

prose are occasional clippings of advertisements and pages from the English-Greek phrasebook. The effect created is that of a scrapbook or a found materials art piece.

The second book, *A Long Letter from F.*, is exactly what the title implies. It consists of a forty-page preamble of sorts, followed by 24 chapters dedicated to the life of Catherine Tekakwitha and a short conclusion. These 24 chapters, by and large, are shorter than those in the previous book and never exceed seven pages. The letter seems garbled but essentially consists of two parts: a personal thesis with corroboration and a brief historical sketch.

The third book, *Beautiful Losers*, is an Epilogue consisting of one fifteen-page chapter. This is the most traditionally structured of the books, with a straightforward - albeit surreally odd - narrative.



Quotes

"I am a well-known folklorist, an authority on the A——-s, a tribe I have no intention of disgracing by my interest. There are perhaps ten full-blooded A——-s left, four of them teen-age girls."

The History of Them All, Chapter 2: p. 4

"The bottom of the elevator shafter is accessible through the sub-basement. While I sat downtown preparing a paper on lemmings she crawled into the elevator shaft and sat there with her drawn-up knees (so the police determined from the mess). I came home every night at twenty to eleven, regular as Kant. She was going to teach me a lesson, my old wife."

The History of Them All, Chapter 5: pp. 6-7

"What a perfect night! I swear I can still feel the warmth of it, and what he did with Edith matters not at all, indeed, I marry them in their unlawful bed, with an open heart I affirm the true right of any man and woman to their dark slobbering nights which are rare enough."

The History of Them All, Chapter 6: p.13

"you are stuck with two great loves, F. said. What a poor custodian I have been to those two loves, an ignorant custodian who walked his days in a dream museum of self-pity. F. and Edith loved me!"

The History of Them All, Chapter 12: pp. 25-26

"If Hitler had been born in Nazi Germany he wouldn't have been content to enjoy the atmosphere. If an unpublished poet discovers one of his own images in the work of another writer it gives him no comfort, for his allegiance is not to the image or its progress in the public domain domain, his allegiance is to the notion that he is not bound to the world as given, that he can escape from the painful arrangement of things as they are."

The History of Them All, Chapter 18: p. 55

"I was outside in the cold ordinary word, F. had led me here by many compassionate tricks, a gasp of praise of existence blasted my chest and unfolded my lungs like a newspaper in the wind."

The History of Them All, Chapter 30: p. 78

- And you want to be baptized?

- Yes, Father Tekakwitha.

- I will allow you to on one condition: that you promise never to leave Kahnawake.

- I promise.

- There will be no harvest, my daughter. Our heaven is dying. From every hill, a spirit cries out in pain, for it is being forgotten.

The History of Them All, Chapter 37, p. 89



"Thus we existed in some eye for a second: two men in a hurtling steel shell aimed at Ottawa, blinded by a mechanical mounting ecstasy, the old Indian sunk sunk in soot behind us, two swelling pricks pointing at eternity."

The History of Them All, Chapter 39: p. 93

- Do not let any of your water fall on me, I have seen many die after you have touched them with your water.

- They are in Heaven now.

- Heaven is a good place for Frenchmen, but I wish to be among Indians, for the French will give me nothing to eat when I get there, and the French women will not lie with us under the shadowy firs.

The History of Them All, Chapter 46: p. 112

"Why can't I have memories like that? What good are all your gifts, F., the soap collection, the phrase books, if I can't inherit your memories, too."

The History of Them All, Chapter 48: p. 124

"I want to be the light in the morgue."

The History of Them All, Chapter 48: p. 128

- Don't do it, F. Please.

- Why not?

I know nothing about love, but something like love tore the following words from my throat with a thousand fishhooks:

- BECAUSE I NEED YOU, F.

The History of Them All, Chapter 50: p. 135

"Now what is it about this silence we are so desperate to clear in the wilderness? Have we labored, plowed, muzzled, fenced so that we might hear a Voice? Fat chance. The Voice comes out of the whirlwind, and long ago we hushed the whirlwind ... Some men, some of the time have remembered. Was I one?"

A Long Letter from F., pp. 147-148

"See me at this moment of my curious little history, nurse leaning over my work, my prick rotten and black, you saw my worldly prick decayed, but now see my visionary prick ... which I do not own and never owned, which owned me, which was me, which bore me as a broom bears a witch, bore me from world to world, from sky to sky."

A Long Letter from F., p. 149

"God is alive. Magic is afoot. God is alive. Magic is afoot. God is afoot. Magic is alive. Alive is afoot. Magic never died. God never sickened. Man poor men lied. Many sick men lied. Magic never weakened. Magic never his. Magic always ruled. God is afoot. God never died."

A Long Letter from F., p. 157

"It is not merely because I am French that I long for an independent Quebec ... I want a country to break in half so men can learn to break their lives in half. I want History to jump on Canada's spine with sharp skates. I want the edge of a tin can to drink



America's throat. I want two hundred million to know that everything can be different, any old different."

A Long Letter from F., pp. 186-187

"I promised you a joyous letter, didn't I?

It is my intention to relieve you of your final burden: the useless History under which you suffer in such confusion. Men of your nature never get far beyond the Baptism."

A Long Letter from F., p. 188

"We only wish the miracles to demonstrate past as joyously prophetic, and that possibility occurs to us most plainly on this cargo deck of wide lapels, our kerchief sacks filled with obsolete machine guns from the last war but which will astound and conquer the Indians."

A Long Letter from F., p. 215

"Suffice it to say that [F.] disintegrated slowly; just as a crater extends its circumference with endless little landslides along the rim, he dissolved from the inside out."

Beautiful Losers, p. 241



Topics for Discussion

The narrator is unable to understand the extent of Edith and F.'s love for him until they die. Can love be quantified? How do we express love to those we care about, and are our expressions useful in any real way?

F. and the Narrator struggle to understand Catherine Tekakwitha as a woman and end up viewing her as a symbol. Discuss the idea of a historical legacy? Is it possible to understand certain figures (Abraham Lincoln, Jesus Christ, Mother Theresa) as human beings?

Compare Catherine Tekakwitha's time period with the narrator's. How are they similar? What traditions and practices are being challenged and who is challenging them?

Why does Edith kill herself? Several events and discussions are mentioned as catalysts for the act. Did she do it to help or to punish the narrator?

How does the narrator's basement apartment become hell? What forces and emotions drive him to create a hell on earth for himself?

Discuss the merging of the secular and sacred in the novel. What secular objects and ideas take on sacred auras over the course of the narrative? What purpose do they serve?

What is F.'s over-all objective? Using his letter as corroboration, discuss the method behind his madness. What is he hoping to achieve with his tests of the narrator?

Discuss the idea of sex as a spiritual act in the novel. What are Edith and F. trying to achieve with their experimentation in bed and what do they succeed in achieving?

What collective impression does Cohen present of the Catholic clergy in the novel? Are they presented as exclusively honest, exclusively venal, or somewhere in the middle?

Discuss the fate of F. Is he a real person or an alter ego? Using this assertion as a starting point, explain whether he has died or escaped at the end of the second book. What, then, is the meaning of the Epilogue?