

The Beet Queen Study Guide

The Beet Queen by Louise Erdrich

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Plot Summary

The Beet Queen is a critically acclaimed novel that follows the lives of Mary and Karl Adare after their mother abandons them at a fair to benefit orphaned children. After this shocking abandonment, Mary settles in the small North Dakota town of Argus with relatives while Karl chooses a more transient lifestyle. Their lives will intersect at various points, weaving events that will conspire once again to make them a family. It is a novel of inspiration, of love, and of forgiveness that will warm the heart of everyone who reads it.

Adelaide Adare has lived on a farm in Minnesota for many years, sharing her life with a married man who is the father of her two children, Karl and Mary. When Adelaide's lover dies, she is forced to leave behind everything she has counted on most of her adult life. Adelaide moves her children to a small apartment in Minneapolis where she learns that she is pregnant. Adelaide sells everything of value she owns in order to provide for her children. When that money is gone, Adelaide steals silver spoons from her landlady. After the birth of her baby boy, the landlady discovers this theft and tells Adelaide she and her children must leave by the end of the month. After a disheartening day of searching for housing, Adelaide takes the children to a fair, pays for a ride in a plane, and never returns.

Although Mary is the younger of the two older children, she takes charge of the situation. The baby is soon hungry and begins to cry. A kind man comes over and says that his wife just had a baby and could feed the little one. At first, Mary resists, but she trusts the man to bring her brother back. However, he does not. That night, Mary and Karl go home one last time. In the morning, they hide in a boxcar for the ride to Argus, North Dakota and the home of their mother's sister, Aunt Fritzie. Once there, however, Karl leaves Mary to find his own adventure. Mary is welcomed into the Kozka family by everyone but her cousin, Sita. Sita is jealous of Mary, jealous of the attention that her parents give to the orphan, and jealous that Mary has stolen her best friend. Things do not improve at school; especially since Mary becomes a local celebrity that winter when she falls off the slide and creates a face in the ice that appears to be the face of Christ.

Karl has not found the same sort of acceptance his sister has. Karl meets a man on the train that he hopes will care for him, but when he does not get a return on the affection he offers, Karl jumps off the train, breaking both his ankles. An Indian woman comes along and nurses him back to health only to drop him off at a monastery. The priest sends him back to Minneapolis where Karl grows up in the same orphanage that the fair he attended with his mother was created to benefit. Karl is a difficult child and when he reaches the appropriate age, the orphanage is glad to see him go. Karl becomes a traveling salesman, selling a variety of wares throughout his thirty-year career.

Several years later, Mary learns that her mother is still alive when her aunt shows her a postcard that Adelaide sent her. Mary takes the postcard and sends her mother a reply, telling her that all of her children have starved to death. Shortly after this, Fritzie becomes ill and is told to move south to ease her breathing. The butcher shop that



Fritzie and her husband own becomes Mary's responsibility because Sita is not interested. Sita moves to Fargo in order to become a model for a large department store. Many years later, a letter comes to the butcher shop addressed to the Kozka's. Mary forwards this to Sita. The letter turns out to be a response to some ads Fritzie ran in the Minneapolis papers after Mary came to live with them looking for news on Adelaide or the baby. This letter is from the woman who adopted the baby. Sita goes to Minneapolis to see the boy, but does not speak to him. Later, she goes to the pawnshop where Adelaide pawned her jewelry and retrieves the necklace.

Karl meets a man from Argus at a farmer's conference where he is selling a seeder. The two men spend the evening together and Karl falls from the bed, injuring his back. The man, Wallace Pfef, stays with Karl for a short time but does not expect to see him again. Several years later, Karl shows up on his doorstep. They live together for two weeks. Later, Wallace learns that Karl moved in with Celestine James, Mary's best friend. Months later, it is obvious that Celestine is having Karl's baby. Wallace finds himself in the position of delivering Celestine's baby. Soon, despite Wallace's jealousy over Celestine's relationship with Karl, which does not exist after the baby's birth except on paper, Wallace becomes a surrogate father to the baby.

Mary, too, becomes very close to the baby—so close that she often steps on Celestine's toes when it comes to the child, Dot. Once, Mary even went to the school and locked the teacher in a toy box because Dot convinced her that the teacher had locked Dot in the same box. Dot is a spoiled, temperamental child who injures a child during a Christmas play because he would not cooperate with her. Sita, who has been married and divorced during this time, has remarried after a disastrous turn at restaurant ownership and is fighting a battle with mental illness. Sita attends a birthday party Wallace throws for Dot and finds herself buried in cake after Mary, who Wallace has gotten drunk to calm her forceful personality, over winds the cake plate and causes it to become dysfunctional.

When Dot is a grown woman, she has many dreams, but she is angry and seems to resent the entire world. Wallace gets it into his head that if he arranges for a few of her dreams to come true, she will become more confident and less aggressive. To do this, Wallace organizes a festival to celebrate the sugar beet that he has brought to the area and that has made the area prosperous. At this festival there is to be a royal court and a queen. Wallace fixes the ballots so that Dot is made queen. When Dot learns the truth, she becomes angry, running off and boarding a plane much the way Adelaide did. However, unlike Adelaide, Dot comes back to face her family.



The Branch

The Branch Summary

The Beet Queen is a critically acclaimed novel that follows the lives of Mary and Karl Adare after their mother abandons them at a fair to benefit orphaned children. After this shocking abandonment, Mary settles in the small North Dakota town of Argus with relatives while Karl chooses a more transient lifestyle. Their lives will intersect at various points, weaving events that will conspire once again to make them a family. It is a novel of inspiration, of love, and of forgiveness that will warm the heart of everyone who reads it.

Two children jump from a train's boxcar in the small town of Argus, North Dakota. The boy is fourteen and his sister is eleven. They are looking for a small butcher shop their mother's sister runs with her husband somewhere on the east side of town. They walk slowly because of the cold, unsure of where the shop is exactly. The stores of downtown give way to homes. At one home, a tree in someone's yard entrances Karl. A woman comes out of the house with a dog, warning Karl off. When Karl does not move, the woman lets the dog go. Karl tears a branch from the tree in order to defend himself. Karl calls for Mary to run. Mary runs east, still hoping to find her aunt's shop, but Karl turns and runs back toward the train.

The Branch Analysis

This introduces the two main characters and the basic premise of the story. Karl and Mary Adare have been forced to travel to North Dakota to find their mother's sister. This chapter does not say why they are alone or why they are traveling by boxcar rather than passenger train, foreshadowing the next chapter in which these things will be explained. This chapter also shows the two children going off in two separate directions, which is symbolic of the rest of the novel. These siblings will often find themselves on separate sides of things, foreshadowing events in the development of the novel that will surround these two characters in conflict.



Part 1, Chapter 1, 1932

Part 1, Chapter 1, 1932 Summary

Mary Adare. Mary looks for Karl behind her and finds him gone at the same instant she hears the train whistle. Mary realizes that Karl has left her and she feels weak without someone to care for. Although Karl is older, Mary has always been the strong one.

Mary reflects on her past, about the house where her family once lived on the edge of Prairie Lake. The house is isolated and they rarely have visitors except for Mr. Ober. Mr. Ober would often come to visit a couple of times a week, cheering their mother. Mary likes Mr. Ober for that reason, but Karl does not. Karl finds the article in the newspaper about how Mr. Ober died in a grain-loading accident. Adelaide, their mother, becomes upset, telling the children that Mr. Ober was their father. Everything Adelaide has is in Mr. Ober's name, except a car that she sells the next day. The family is forced to move to the city where Adelaide thinks she can get a job as a store model. However, she quickly learns she is pregnant.

After six months, they run out of money. Adelaide steals some silver spoons from the landlady, who Adelaide counted as a friend. Not long after, Adelaide goes into labor and sends the children down to the landlady's apartment. A while later the landlady comes down and tells Mary that they have a new baby brother and that she had found some of her silver spoons under Adelaide's mattress. The landlady tells them they have to get out by the end of the month. Adelaide is depressed and does not want to care for the baby. Adelaide refuses to give the child a name. Later, while they are out searching for a new place to live, Karl sees a fair going on and asks his mother to take them. It is a bazaar being held to benefit the homeless children of the local church.

Adelaide buys Karl a knife and offers to buy Mary some jewelry, but she refuses to accept. There is a stunt pilot putting on a show and Karl talks his mother into watching. When the show is over, the pilot lands and offers anyone in the crowd a ride. Adelaide immediately runs toward him to accept the offer. They take off and disappear. After a while, the crowd realizes they are not coming back and disperses, leaving Mary, Karl, and the baby alone on the grandstand. After a while, people notice them and try to talk to them, but Mary and Karl are not interested in their concern. The baby wakes hungry and begins to cry. One kind man comes up and offers to take the child home to his wife, who had just had a baby and had milk. At first Mary refuses, then agrees if the man would allow her to accompany him. When Karl refuses to let her go, Mary gives the baby to the man and makes him promise he will come back. He never does. Later, Mary and Karl give up their wait and returned to their apartment. When Adelaide still has not returned by the next morning, Mary packs a few things, grabs her mother's little blue box where she keeps her jewelry, and leaves with Karl. They lose their luggage when they leave the train once in search of food.



Mary's reflection on her past is over when, in Argus, Mary finds her aunt's butcher shop. At first, her aunt and uncle seem to think Mary has run away, but after she tells them about the plane and the baby, they believe her. Uncle Pete feeds her and then puts her to bed in his daughter, Sita's, bed. Mary immediately attempts to make herself a valuable member of the family, making breakfast for the whole family and helping out where she can in the butcher shop. This amazes everyone except Sita, who is outraged. On one of her first mornings there, Mary makes a big show of opening her mother's jewelry box, thinking that the jewels inside will pay part of her room and board. However, once it is open, she finds that there is nothing inside except a receipt for a pawnbroker's. Mary tries to forget the past from that moment on, losing all trust in what she had once believed in.

Karl's story is quite different. Karl jumps back into one of the boxcars on the train and hides behind a pile of hay. In the late afternoon, a man jumps into the boxcar. At first, Karl continues to hide, but then reveals himself. The man introduces himself and asks if Karl is a girl. Karl assures him he is not. Karl tells this man part of his hard luck story, about losing the house on Prairie Lake. The man offers Karl some ham and he devours it quickly. The man then picks up the stick Karl tore from the tree in Argus and threatens to keep it. Suddenly Karl bursts into tears, allowing himself to feel grief for his situation for the first time. The man holds Karl, comforting him, until he falls asleep. When Karl wakes, the train has stopped to take on grain. Karl is still in the man's arms. Karl seduces the man and they make love. Afterward, Karl tells the man he loves him, but the man does not return the sentiment. When the man falls asleep, Karl considers killing him, but does not. Instead, Karl jumps off the now moving train.

Part 1, Chapter 1, 1932 Analysis

The first part of the chapter is in the first person point of view of Mary Adare. Mary tells the reader what has happened to her family over the past few years and how they ended up separated, as foreshadowed in the previous chapter. By telling this story, Mary introduces the characters of Adelaide, Karl, and the baby brother. Adelaide is a free spirit, not used to the difficulties of being a single mother since she has always had a man to watch over her and provide for her. This man was married, however, suggesting that Adelaide's morals are not quite as pristine as they could be. This foreshadows the moment when Adelaide decides to leave her children behind. Clearly, Adelaide worries only about herself and not what other people might think of her behavior. Adelaide does try with her children, however, stealing from a woman she considers a friend in order to feed and clothe her children. However, in a direct contrast to that behavior, Adelaide refuses to name her baby boy because she does not believe he will survive. Again, in contrast, Adelaide cuts up all her clothing to make clothes for the baby. Adelaide's character is a mass of contradictions that will come to light in her children's personalities as well.

The introduction of the baby boy is important. The baby is lost shortly after Adelaide disappears, an act that Mary sees as her responsibility, just as Karl is also her responsibility. Therefore, this event will shape Mary and the person she will become



later in life. When Mary arrives at the Kozka's, she immediately sets out to make herself a valuable member of the family, perhaps in the hopes that this family will not abandon her as the last one did, again showing the reader how these events have and will shape Mary's personality. The tension between Mary and Sita, her cousin, will prove important as it will continue into the development of the plot and foreshadows more tension in later chapters.

The final part of the chapter is in the third person point of view with Karl as the narrator. Karl has re-boarded the train as Mary thought and meets a man. Karl and the man have a sexual encounter that introduces to the reader Karl's maturity, or immaturity, in such matters and his homosexual behaviors that will foreshadow a time when Karl will have an affair with another man within the course of the plot development. Karl reaches out to this man for a reaffirmation of his feelings. Karl has just lost his entire family and needs to feel loved, to feel safe. This man refuses to give this affirmation, although he is not cruel about it, and Karl nearly reacts with violence, again foreshadowing Karl's reaction to being rejected, or the appearance of reaction, and how it will show up again in the development of the plot. This chapter also leaves Karl alone beside the train tracks, foreshadowing events that will develop from this situation.



Part 1, Chapter 2, 1932

Part 1, Chapter 2, 1932 Summary

Sita Kozka. Sita does not like Mary because her mother has given Mary half of her wardrobe, forced her to share a room with her, and her father has given Mary a cow's diamond that Sita had requested from him. Sita has been used to being the sole focus of her parents' attention and does not like sharing. When Mary steals Sita's best friend, the act is really the end of any possibility of the two girls getting along. Sita's best friend is Celestine James. Celestine is the daughter of a local farmer and his Indian wife. Both of Celestine's parents are dead, and her older half-sister and her half-brother Russell are raising her. One summer afternoon after Mary first comes to Argus, Sita takes her over to Celestine's house. Celestine is baking cookies, and Mary immediately jumps in to help. Celestine and Mary find so many things in common that Sita feels left out. Sita insists that Celestine goes with her to the small cemetery on the property that has been their clubhouse for several years where Sita shows Celestine her newly budding breasts. Celestine is unimpressed and returns to the house, leaving Sita to dance on the graves.

Mary Adare. Mary watches Sita from an upstairs window. When she goes back downstairs, she sees that a storm is blowing in. Sita leaves with her bicycle without Mary, leaving her to walk more than a mile in the rain. When school starts that fall, Mary is popular because she is new, again causing Sita to be angry, but the popularity quickly wears off and Mary prefers to be friends with Celestine, anyway. In March of that school year, the warm weather turns cold and an ice storm leaves everything coated with ice. The nuns at the school warn the children not to play on the slides, but Mary and a group of kids are determined to do it anyway because the ice makes the slide even better than before. However, Mary slides too fast and lands hard on her face in the ice at the base of the slide. When the nun comes to check her injuries, it is discovered that there is a face in the broken ice. The nuns think it is Christ, but Mary only sees the gaunt face of her brother, Karl. Everyone thinks it is a miracle. There is an article in the paper and Mary's picture, along with Celestine, is there too. Mary does not tell anyone that the face is only Karl.

Celestine James. Celestine follows Mary and the nun into the school; worried that Mary is severely injured from her fall. When the nun sees her, she sends Celestine to have another nun photograph the face. Celestine does not know what she is talking about, but does as she is told. Later, Celestine sneaks in to check on Mary. Mary is in a sort of daze, talking about Karl, but Celestine does not understand. Later, at home Russell and Isabel are talking about the face. They, too, believe it is a miracle. Russell drives Celestine to school the next day and asks to be shown the face. When they arrive, Russell kneels down to pray. Celestine stares at the ice but she cannot see a face, Karl or Christ.



Rescue. A young woman, Catherine Miller, is cutting an ad from the newspaper in Minneapolis. Her husband tells her she should not bother with the ads, but Catherine is worried that they might be arrested. Catherine's husband is the young man who took Mary's baby brother at the fair. Catherine had just given birth to a baby boy of her own a few days before the fair and he had died. Catherine lay alone in her bed, her breasts wrapped to discourage the milk from coming, when her husband came home with the crying baby. Catherine took it to her breast, named it Jude, and never looked back.

Part 1, Chapter 2, 1932 Analysis

The first section of the chapter is in the first person point of view of Sita Kozka, Mary's cousin. In this section, Sita outlines all the reasons she does not like Mary, most notably because her father gave Mary something he once refused to give to Sita, and because Mary stole Sita's best friend, Celestine. This later point introduces the character of Celestine, a young girl who is both Indian and white, a fact that will be an issue for Celestine all of her life because her mother's Indian blood has made her unusually tall and not a traditional beauty. In addition, the friendship that develops in this chapter between Mary and Celestine is one that foreshadows a long friendship. It is also important to note Celestine's friendship with Sita, as it foreshadows a time when Sita will play a role in Celestine's future.

The second section is in the first person point of view of Mary. This section describes a moment in which Mary falls from a slide and causes a face to appear in the ice. This face looks like Karl to Mary; an interesting interpretation since most of the nuns and the priest at her school believe it looks like Christ. Not only does this foreshadow developments in the plot with regard to Mary's relationship with God and Karl, but it also establishes a connection between Mary and supernatural events, foreshadowing a time when the supernatural will be an important element in Mary's life. The next section, told in Celestine's point of view, explores this a little further and announces that Celestine cannot see the face. This is also interesting because it further establishes Celestine's character as a down-to-earth person who does not believe in what she cannot see.

The final part, Rescue, is in the third person point of view of the woman who is raising Mary's baby brother. This is important for several reasons. First, the title of the section, Rescue, is important because it says exactly what the Miller's believe, that they have rescued this little baby from a hard life. This foreshadows a time when this idea will be reinforced or disproved. Second, it introduces a series of ads the Kozka's have had put into the paper in order to look for both the baby and Adelaide. This foreshadows a time when these ads will come back to create a revelation for some of the main characters of the novel.



Part 1, Chapter 3, 1932

Part 1, Chapter 3, 1932 Summary

Karl Adare. Karl has broken both his ankles and is unable to leave the field where he landed after jumping from the train. An Indian woman comes along the tracks, pushing a cart. The woman, Fleur Pillager, stops and sets Karl's ankles. When it becomes obvious that Karl has pneumonia, the woman warms him and treats the illness. Finally, the lady puts Karl on the cart and begins her travels again. The woman sells wares from her cart, going from farmhouse to farmhouse. During their travels, Karl thinks about his mother, imagining the pilot took her against her will. Karl fantasizes about tracking down the pilot and killing him in order to rescue his mother. Eventually Karl and Fleur find themselves at a church, where Fleur unceremoniously dumps Karl off and walks away. Karl stays there until his ankles heal and then is sent to the orphanage in Minneapolis, back to where he started.

Aerial View of Argus. One day Fritzie calls Mary into her office where she does the bookkeeping for the shop. Fritzie gives Mary a postcard from Florida. The card is from Adelaide, asking how the children are. Fritzie tells Mary that she can contact her mother if she wants; she can even go live with her if she wants. Mary makes it clear she is not interested, but she takes the card anyway. Mary later buys a postcard that has an aerial view of Argus on it. On the back, she carefully prints that all of Adelaide's children are dead of starvation. The card eventually finds its way to the pilot of the stunt plane on which Adelaide left. The pilot is in love with Adelaide. Thanks to Adelaide, he has finally made a success of his stunt shows. Adelaide is in the hospital after a flight accident. Adelaide's injuries are not life threatening, though she is healing slowly. The pilot will have a permanent limp. The pilot watches Adelaide, listening to her talk of her daughter and how she needs to send her a sewing machine so she will have a talent to fall back on if she ever has to make a living.

Part 1, Chapter 3, 1932 Analysis

The first part of the chapter is in the first person point of view of Karl. Karl has broken both his ankles when he jumped off the train and is stuck where he is. Some time later, an Indian woman comes along, fixes his ankles, and treats his pneumonia. The woman takes Karl with her as she sells things in the area. Then she dumps Karl off at a church. Ironically, Karl ends back in Minneapolis as one of the orphans that the fair where his mother left him was meant to benefit. In the next section which is written in the third person, first through Mary's eyes and then the pilot's, the reader learns that not only is Adelaide alive, but that she left her children willingly, despite Karl's fantasies that she was forced to leave them. This section also introduces Adelaide's desire to send Mary a sewing machine, foreshadowing a time when she does just that, concerned that Mary have a way of providing for herself should the need arise. This gives the suggestion that Adelaide is not as unconcerned with the fate of her children as her actions might imply.



Part 2, Chapter 4, 1941

Part 2, Chapter 4, 1941 Summary

Mary Adare. As Mary grows up, the town's fascination with the miracle she caused subsides. Mary grows unhappy with her appearance, but is content to have Celestine a large part of her life. Mary has grown to love the butcher shop, so when Fritzie becomes ill and is advised to move south, it is an easy choice to allow Mary to take over the shop. Sita has no interest in the shop and has decided to move to Fargo anyway in order to be a model for a department store. Before Fritzie and Pete leave, Celestine's brother, Russell, becomes injured in the war. Russell comes home a war hero with scars on his face and chest. The manager of the bank gives Russell a job as a teller. Mary goes to see him there and finds the scars attractive. Mary arranges a dinner for Russell at the shop. Russell is quiet at dinner, making Pete nervous, but comes alive later when Mary pulls out her playing cards to tell everyone's fortune. It is then that Russell announces he never intends to marry and Mary loses interest. The night before Sita is to leave for Fargo, Mary cleans the tables in the butcher shop and must have used too much cleanser because in the middle of the night her hands begin to glow. Sita wakes, sees this, and leaves the room to sleep on the couch out in the living room. Later, when Sita leaves, she takes the blue box that Adelaide once kept her jewelry in.

The Orphan's Picnic. Karl arrives at the orphan's picnic and waits quietly at a table for the priests and nuns who took charge of him at the orphanage to recognize him. They do not. Karl becomes bored until he sees a young man manning a nearby booth who looks familiar. Karl knows him right away as the baby that Mary gave to a strange man the night their mother left on the airplane. Karl goes over to the booth and pretends to be a customer, asking the boy his name. The boy tells him it is Jude Miller. Karl then begins to bully the boy, frightening him, then leaves without telling him what their relationship is.

Part 2, Chapter 4, 1941 Analysis

The first part of the chapter is in the first person point of view of Mary. In this chapter, she catches the reader up on what has happened to her in the past nine years since the last chapter, which is very little. Mary has become content living and working at the butcher shop and her relationship with Celestine has also continued. Mary has a crush on Russell, but it does not last long when she learns that he has no interest in ever getting married. This explores Mary's issues with personal relationships. Although Mary likes Russell, she is unwilling to do anything to change his mind about marriage, and quits before she has even begun. This shows her lack of trust in people and her desire to stay free rather than having to rely on other people and have them let her down. The final part of the chapter is in the third person point of view with Karl as the narrator. Karl is at the orphan's picnic some years after having left the orphanage. There he sees a young man who has Adelaide's red curls, causing him to suspect that this boy is his



missing brother. However, Karl does nothing to let the boy know who he is. This shows Karl's lack of interest in family, a foreshadowing of his attitude toward family later in the novel. This also foreshadows a time when Jude will once again become a part of the plot development.



Part 2, Chapter 5, 1950

Part 2, Chapter 5, 1950 Summary

Sita Kozka. Sita is now thirty and is living happily in Fargo, North Dakota. Sita is still modeling for a local department store. Recently, Sita ended a relationship with a married man and is now being pursued by an Argus man she knew from childhood, Jimmy. Sita knows he wants to ask her to marry him, but she keeps putting him off. Today she is thinking about a letter Mary forwarded to her that is addressed to the Kozka family. The letter talks about a baby that a woman took into her home and now feels that it is the right time to tell the family where he is. The woman says the boy is to be ordained later that month and invites the family to attend. Sita has no idea what the letter is talking about. However, while ice-skating with Jimmy, she finally puts it all together. Sita decides to travel to Minneapolis to see the boy's ordination.

Sita has big ideas of what she will do while in the city, but the city is so large that she cannot make herself do everything she wants. Sita goes to a department store and is intimidated by the clothing styles. There is a dress there she would like, but it is too expensive. Sita goes to the church for the boy's ordination, thinking that now that she is there, she has information that could ruin the boy's life since he cannot be ordained if he is an illegitimate child, which he is. Sita leaves the church without ever seeing or speaking to the boy. While in the taxi going back to her hotel, Sita takes out the blue box Adelaide kept her jewelry in and finds the pawnbroker's receipt. Sita has the taxi take her there. The pawnbroker finds the necklace, but not the diamond ring. Sita takes the necklace home, has it cleaned and repaired, and keeps it for herself. Finally, back in Fargo, Sita writes a response to the boy's mother, telling her to do what she wants with the boy. Then she puts it on a table and quickly forgets it.

Sita's Wedding. Sita has married Jimmy. At the reception, Jimmy's brother and a couple of cousins are drunk and think it will be funny to steal the bride and hide her from Jimmy. The boys grab Sita, put her in their car, and drive around for a while, unsure what to do with her. Finally they drop her off at a bar on the Indian Reservation where Russell is entertaining two women.

Part 2, Chapter 5, 1950 Analysis

The first part of the chapter is in the first person point of view of Sita. Sita has gotten a letter meant for her mother that tells how Mrs. Miller took and kept Mary's younger brother the day Adelaide left. Mrs. Miller feels guilty and is now attempting to repent. Sita goes to Minneapolis to see the boy, but ends up leaving without talking to him, partly because she does not want to hurt him, which is a rare stroke of humanity on Sita's part. Sita is normally harsh and angry with people. This is an example of character growth. Later, Sita finds the necklace that Adelaide pawned many years ago in order to provide for her children. Sita's life has become somewhat of a parallel to that



of Adelaide's. Sita and Adelaide have both had relationships with married men, both have or wanted to work as models in department stores, and both are somewhat self-centered, concerned only with their own best interest. When Sita finds the necklace, it seems only fitting that she keep it.



Part 2, Chapter 6, 1952

Part 2, Chapter 6, 1952 Summary

Karl Adare. Karl is at a farmer's convention selling an air seeder when he meets a man from Argus that he finds attractive. Karl buys the man a few drinks before inviting him up to his room. In the room, the order dinner and then Karl allows himself to be seduced. Karl knows it is this man's first time with another man and he enjoys it. Later they begin to talk and Karl feels insecure. Karl begins to jump on the bed, attempting to show off. However, he falls off the bed and injures himself. While waiting for the ambulance, Karl tells the man the name of his sister in Argus.

Wallace's Night. Wallace Pfef is parked on the side of the highway in an area popular to young lovers. Wallace is trying not to think about his encounter with Karl Adare in Minneapolis. Wallace thinks of his job taking care of the town pool, and of the bank where he is a board member. A car comes up behind him and Wallace sees it is the town sheriff. Wallace tells the sheriff that he is sitting here thinking about the sugar beet, something he learned about at the conference, and what a difference it could make to the area.

Part 2, Chapter 6, 1952 Analysis

The first part of the chapter is in the first person point of view of Karl Adare. Karl is at a farmer's convention, trying to sell an air seeder. While there, he runs into a man from Argus that he finds attractive. Karl takes him to his room, but he feels insecure once there and begins to act like a child. This is an interesting way for the author to illustrate Karl's immaturity when it comes to relationships. Unlike Mary, Karl searches out lovers. However, like Mary, Karl finds it hard to trust his lovers. This foreshadows a time when Karl will find himself on the opposite side of this situation. The last part of the chapter introduces Wallace Pfef. Wallace is the man who spent time with Karl in Minneapolis and he cannot get Karl off his mind. This introduces the theme of sexual obsession as Wallace sits on the side of the road thinking about everything but Karl. This part also introduces the idea of the sugar beet as a product to be grown and refined in Argus. This foreshadows a change that the sugar beet will bring to Argus.



Part 2, Chapter 7, 1953

Part 2, Chapter 7, 1953 Summary

Celestine James. Russell has been injured, this time in the Korean War. Russell no longer works at the bank, but he works as a handyman for Mary at the butcher shop. Celestine and Russell's sister, Isabel, has died. Russell attempts to go to the funeral, but Isabel's husband and family keep him away. Sita has become dark and sour, never talking to Celestine and Mary. All they hear of Sita they hear through their customers. One evening, Wallace Pfef comes into the store and shows Celestine an article in the newspaper introducing a new restaurant, Chez Sita. Sita's husband owned a restaurant and Sita has gotten it in the divorce, changing it to a more formal type of restaurant rather than the nice, family restaurant it was before. Mary comes into the shop and Wallace gives her an invitation to the restaurant's opening night. Mary refuses to go. Mary changes her mind the day of the opening and decides to go. She, Celestine, and Russell all go together in Mary's van. When they get there, they find the restaurant too dark for them to see their menus. Then Sita comes out and tells them that the chef and most of his crew have food poisoning and she needs them to cook. Reluctantly, Mary agrees. They spend the night frying the exact same food that Sita criticized her husband for serving when the restaurant was his. Afterward, Sita gives them cursory thanks.

Several weeks later, rumors begin to fly that the health inspector has visited Sita many times and that the visits are not always for business reasons. Celestine sees them in Fargo and wonders if she will ever find a man with whom rumors will fly and she can share things with. While still thinking about this back at the shop, a man walks in and immediately upsets her by saying she is not pretty. After a few minutes, Celestine realizes he thinks she is Mary. Celestine introduces herself and learns that the man is Karl Adare, Mary's brother. Mary is out and Celestine takes Karl into the kitchen for coffee while they wait. Somehow, they find themselves making love on the floor of the kitchen. Afterward, Celestine is embarrassed and a little surprised that the actual act was not more than this experience. Then Karl puts on a show with some knives that he is selling. Celestine watches, trying to be polite, and buys one although she does not believe them to be good knives. A few weeks later, Karl shows up on Celestine's doorstep again. Celestine allows him to move in, pushing Russell out of the house they share. For two months, Celestine and Karl live together. Karl sees Mary once and Mary throws a can of oysters at his head. Mary begins to pressure Celestine to throw Karl out. When Celestine finally tells Mary she is going to do it, Mary tells her that Karl will hurt himself if she does. Celestine does not believe it and tells Karl to leave. Karl tells Celestine she is pregnant with his baby. Celestine realizes he is right, but kicks him out anyway. As a parting gift, Celestine gives him a Bible she won in a raffle.

Mary's Night. After talking to Celestine on the phone about Karl and Celestine's pregnancy, Mary goes out to the utility room where she has stored a box that arrived last month from Florida. Inside she finds a sewing machine with a wood cabinet. Mary immediately goes into the house and calls Sita. Mary tells Sita that Adelaide has sent



her a sewing machine and she should come pick it up. Then Mary sits looking out over the stock pens, thinking. Soon she has a vision of a baby with red, curly hair. A girl baby like the baby brother she lost.

Part 2, Chapter 7, 1953 Analysis

The first part of the chapter is in the first person point of view of Celestine James. Celestine relates how Russell has been injured in another war, foreshadowing a time when the town will honor him as the town hero. Celestine also talks about how Sita has distanced herself from the family, but they are still aware of what is going on in her life because of town gossip. Sita and Jimmy have divorced and now Sita is attempting to open a classy restaurant in town. The restaurant has a troubled first night with Mary forced to rescue her cousin in an ironic turn of fate if the reader considers how often Sita went out of her way to hurt Mary or to steal from her.

When Celestine and Karl meet, they instantly have an attraction for each other. Celestine moves Karl into her house and they become lovers. However, Mary is not happy to see her brother again, touching on the theme of abandonment since Mary's issues with her brother are more likely related to the fact that he abandoned her in a time of need. Celestine and Karl's relationship is rocky, with Celestine sending him away as soon as she has the strength. However, now Celestine is pregnant, foreshadowing the rest of the novel in which the birth and life of the child is chronicled in the development of the plot.

The final part of the chapter is in Mary's third person narration and it introduces two interesting events. First, Mary has received a sewing machine from Florida. Thanks to a previous chapter, the reader knows that this machine has come from Mary's mother. Mary knows it, too. She and wants nothing to do with it and gives it to Sita. This too touches on the theme of abandonment as Mary still clearly does not forgive her mother for walking out on her and does not want to have anything to do with her or her gifts. This also illuminates Mary's reaction to Celestine becoming involved with Karl. Perhaps to the casual reader, Mary's reaction is petty and unfair, but if one takes into account Mary's lack of trust with people and her fear of being left, perhaps it would illuminate the fact that Mary is worried that Karl might take Celestine away from her. Mary is afraid and this is how she reacts to fear. Finally, this chapter shows Mary having a vision of the baby to come. This vision foreshadows the birth of the baby and the relationship Mary will have with it when the reader compares this yet unborn baby with her missing baby brother.



Part 2, Chapter 8, 1953

Part 2, Chapter 8, 1953 Summary

Sita Kozka. Sita is married to the health inspector, Louis, who has quit his job and become the county extension epidemiologist. They live in the house Jimmy built. Louis grows worms in their backyard to experiment with their effects on certain crops. They no longer go to church and Sita worries about this lack of religious servitude. One afternoon, Sita goes outside to work in her garden and finds Karl asleep in the bushes. Karl introduces himself. Sita offers to allow him to stay for lunch. Karl goes into the house while she is preparing the meal and asks to use the bathroom. When he leaves, he leaves a book on the table that he has been holding. Sita at first thinks he is trying to sell the books and picks it up to look at. Then Sita recognizes it as a Bible Celestine won in a raffle. Later, while they are eating lunch on the back deck, Sita becomes convinced that Karl has stolen the Bible from Celestine and that he intends to rob her, too. Sita goes into the house and calls the sheriff. When the sheriff arrives, he searches Karl and does not find anything. Sita hallucinates that the lawn devours Karl.

Russell's Night. Russell has built a shack that he has dragged onto the ice to use when ice fishing. Russell is convinced that Celestine has been to his shack and cleaned up, so he has started putting a lock on the door. While fishing, Russell feels a discomfort in his body before a pain and darkness descend. Hours later, Celestine comes down to check on him and finds him barely conscious. Celestine goes for help.

Part 2, Chapter 8, 1953 Analysis

The point of view of the first half of the chapter is in the first person with Sita as the narrator. Sita has now remarried and is living in her ex-husband's house with her new husband. Sita finds Karl sitting in her backyard and becomes convinced that he is there to rob her, as she believes he has done to Celestine. Sita shows her character elements, especially her more self-centered side, the part of her who believes that no one could possibly have innocent intentions, jumping to conclusions with little evidence. After calling the police and learning she is wrong, Sita has a hallucination in which she sees Karl devoured by the earth. This could be symbolic of her fear that not going to church is going to condemn her to hell, or it could symbolize her belief that Karl is evil and will go to hell. This could also be foreshadowing of a time when Sita's mental health will be called into question. The final part of the chapter, a third person narration that is both in Russell and Celestine's voices, tells the story of how Russell has a stroke while fishing alone. This foreshadows Russell's future in the remainder of the novel and the impact of his illness on the other characters in the novel.



Part 2, Chapter 9, 1954

Part 2, Chapter 9, 1954 Summary

Wallace Pfef. Wallace tells everyone that a pretty young woman in a photograph he keeps in his home is his fiancée who has since died. However, the woman in the picture is not someone Wallace has ever known; rather, it is simply a picture that was in the frame when he bought it. This lie makes it possible for Wallace to remain single without people questioning it. Wallace knows he is homosexual after his affair with Karl, and he is still in love with Karl. When Karl returned to town the year before, he came to stay with Wallace for two weeks. Wallace did all he could to make Karl happy, but Karl still left. A few weeks later, while following a stray dog to Celestine's, a few miles down the road from his home, Wallace saw Celestine and Karl together. Wallace was jealous, especially when he learned later that Celestine was pregnant. The following January, there is a blizzard. Wallace, who has taken in the stray dog, wakes in the middle of the night to the sound of the dog barking. When Wallace goes outside to see what the dog is barking at, he finds Celestine in labor. Since the ambulance cannot make it out in the storm, Wallace has to deliver the baby. Later, Celestine names her daughter Wallacette Darlene after Wallace. However, Mary soon gives the baby the nickname Dot. Celestine makes Wallace the baby's godfather at the baptism. All through the ceremony, Wallace must struggle with Mary, who is the godmother, to make himself heard over her own replies to prayers.

Celestine's Night. Celestine brings the baby to work with her and lays her in an old shopping cart fitted for her. Celestine feels a passion for her baby that she has never known before, and always keeps the baby close to her. One night Celestine sees a spider making a web in the baby's head; and, like the struggle she will face with her baby later in life, she finds it difficult to kill the spider.

Part 2, Chapter 9, 1954 Analysis

Wallace is the first person point of view character in the beginning of this chapter. Wallace touches on the theme of sexual obsession when he admits to the reader that although the entire town believes he is heartbroken over a dead lover, he really has never had a female lover and is obsessed with Karl Adare. Wallace never knew he was a homosexual and believes that he is destined to be unhappy with his life. To illustrate this unhappiness, Wallace tells the reader how he learned of Celestine and Karl's relationship soon after Karl left his home. Wallace is heartbroken, but not only says nothing to the parties involved, but delivers Karl and Celestine's baby months later. This birth and his subsequent appointment as the baby's godfather open the theme of non-traditional families, as Wallace becomes a sort of surrogate father to his namesake, Wallacette Darlene. Not only does this chapter explore Wallace's character elements such as his kindness and his loneliness more deeply, but also begins a new direction in the plot development of the entire novel. In the final section of the chapter in which

Celestine is the third person narrator, the reader also sees Celestine's deep devotion to her new child and a foreshadowing of things to come in the description of the spider in the baby's hair, a symbolism of the difficulties Celestine and the baby will face in their future relationship.



Part 3, Chapter 10, 1960

Part 3, Chapter 10, 1960 Summary

Mary Adare. There are three hard winters after Dot's birth that cause the starving wildlife to come out of the woods and invade Mary's stock pens. Mary has kept her distance from Celestine's baby for the first five years of her life, partly because of her name and partly because she has a sense that Dot was not comfortable as a baby. Mary sees more of herself in the child the older she becomes, and she does all she can to encourage it. When Celestine enrolls Dot in the first grade she is bigger and more spoiled than the other children, using force to get the kids to do as she pleases. Once, during this first year of school, Dot comes home and tells Mary that the teacher made her sit in a red box at the back of the classroom for being bad. Celestine has already told Mary that the day before Dot pulled out a child's tooth with a brick and that she had sent a note to the school, a note that Dot clearly did not give the teacher. When Mary hears Dot's story of the box and sees the pain on her face, Mary marches down to the school and forces the teacher to get into the box, too. The teacher manages to escape and later calls the police who come to arrest Mary. When Mary tells the story Dot told, the charges are dropped.

That summer Karl sends Dot an electric wheelchair he has won in as a door prize at a medical supply show. Celestine tells Dot they should give the chair to Russell. Although Mary does not agree, she does agree to drive the wheelchair out in her van. When they reach Eli's house where Russell has lived with his brother and Aunt Fleur since his stroke, they are met with resistance until Aunt Fleur is reassured that they do not plan to take Russell away. Russell cannot speak and barely responds to people. This upsets Mary. Dot, in the meantime, is determined not to give up her wheelchair and struggles with Aunt Fleur until the old woman forces Dot out of the chair. Celestine, who is depressed by the visit and concerned about Dot's behavior, suggests they leave earlier than planned.

Sita's Night. Sita is refusing to speak. Sita pretended to have laryngitis because she liked the way people treated her and after a while, she simply forgot how to talk. Louis has been taking her to doctors and they have decided to put her in a hospital. Sita is not happy in the hospital. Her roommate claims to be a cannibal. Finally fed up with the hospital, Sita calls Louis the next day and speaks, telling him she is cured and ready to go home.

Part 3, Chapter 10, 1960 Analysis

The first part of the chapter, which is told in Mary's first person point of view, deals with the first few years of Dot's life. Mary saw the child as an adult stuck in a child's body. Mary has decided that Dot is just like her and that it is her job to guide her. This foreshadows a tension between Mary and Celestine that will become more evident in

later chapters. This chapter also reveals parts of Dot's personality that also foreshadow tension later in the novel. Dot is a spoiled child, violent with other children and willing to tell lies if it will get her what she wants. The most obvious symbol of Dot's willingness to manipulate people and Mary's willingness to be manipulated is when Mary believes that her teacher has abused Dot, and Mary goes to the school to take care of it herself. This also foreshadows moments of tension later in the novel as well as illuminates the theme of non-traditional families as Mary makes herself an important part of Celestine and Dot's family. The part of the chapter where Mary takes Celestine and Dot to see Russell is important because it shows the reader the depth of Russell's illness and its effect on both Mary and Celestine. Mary is saddened by the frailty of a man she once loved and Celestine is depressed by the frailty of the brother she looks up to. Finally, the last part of the chapter is told in the third person point of view of Sita. This section shows Sita in a mental hospital, confirming the suspicions of a previous chapter regarding Sita's mental health, and foreshadowing more difficulties for Sita and her husband in the development of the plot.



Part 3, Chapter 11, 1964

Part 3, Chapter 11, 1964 Summary

Celestine James. A section of the butcher shop has burned and, although the living quarters were not affected, Mary moves in with Celestine while repairs are being done. Immediately there is trouble because Mary horns in on Celestine and Dot's relationship. She undermines Celestine's rules as often as possible and is the friend where Celestine is the disciplinarian, which causes Celestine to feel like the bad guy all the time. Dot is to be Joseph in a Christmas play about a donkey who helped Mary and Joseph before Jesus' birth. Dot is excited, but Celestine is saddened when Dot tells Mary before she tells Celestine, and Mary signs up to bring a dish to the potluck dinner that is to happen afterward. Mary also knows that Dot likes one of the boys playing the donkey and is the one to tell Celestine rather than Dot herself. Celestine decides to get back at Mary for what she sees as her betrayal. Celestine takes the day of the play off from work, and after she sees Dot to the bus with her sandals and borrowed robe for her costume in a bag, Celestine makes a special dish for the play.

That night Celestine goes to the play with Wallace, meeting Mary there. They all sit together in the front row. At first, all goes well. The donkey comes out on the stage with its owner, who gives a monologue about having to sell the donkey. Then Dot comes out looking like Joseph in Wallace's robe and a fake beard. However, when Dot takes the donkey's lead and tries to take it off stage, the donkey refuses. Dot takes the wooden maul she carries, and Celestine suspects Mary gave her, and knocks the front half of the donkey in the head. Then Dot runs off. Celestine and Mary go to look for her, eventually finding her at home. Celestine tries to comfort her daughter, but Mary reaches her first. Dot pushes Mary away and runs up to her bedroom. Celestine follows, comforts the child, and holds her until she has been asleep for a long time. Finally, Celestine goes downstairs and finds Mary having tea. It is then that Celestine tells Mary that she made a Jell-O dish for the potluck dinner and put bolts in it, marking the dish with Mary's name. Mary goes back to her shop that night.

The Birdorama. In Florida, Omar the pilot is walking around the house on eggshells because he knows that Adelaide is about to have one of her angry fits. Adelaide has these fits quite often, falling into a rage at the smallest provocation, with no explanation or apology afterward. Omar goes into the aviary they run and watches the birds, comparing their stupid behavior to Adelaide's unpredictable behavior. Then he hears something break in the kitchen and waits until he hears the dustpan empty three times before going into the kitchen to check on her.

Part 3, Chapter 11, 1964 Analysis

This chapter is told in the first person point of view of Celestine. Mary has moved in with Celestine; and, as predicted in the previous chapter, her influence and behavior with Dot



cause tension for Celestine. Celestine does not like having competition when it comes to her daughter and she does not like that Mary is more of a friend to her daughter than she is. This is one of the difficulties with a non-traditional family, which is one of the themes of the novel, that no one is quite sure of their role in the family and therefore they often overstep their boundaries. Mary seems to do this quite frequently and seems to enjoy it. To get back at her, Celestine makes a Jell-O salad with nuts and bolts in it, making fun of Mary's habit of putting unusual objects in her own Jell-O salads.

Dot makes a scene at the play when the boy she likes does not cooperate within the frame of the play and makes people laugh at her. Dot hits him over the head and runs away. This foreshadows another time later in the novel when things do not go quite the way Dot thinks they should, and she strikes out at another person. It also illuminates Dot's character elements, those of selfishness and a penchant for violence, and shows that there has been little character growth in Dot so far.

The last section of the chapter is in the third person point of view of Omar, the pilot that Adelaide left with. Omar waits and watches as Adelaide has a fit of rage, something that has happened quite a few times before. This episode symbolizes one of two things. Either Adelaide is suffering some sort of mental disease, paralleling Sita's struggle for her own mental health, or Adelaide is filled with grief over the loss of her children and is still struggling with it now. Perhaps it could be a little of both. This interpretation is up to the reader.



Part 3, Chapter 12, 1964

Part 3, Chapter 12, 1964 Summary

Wallace Pfef. Wallace thinks that Dot's behavior is due to the fact that they all love her too much. Wallace thinks it might also have something to do with Mary and Celestine's fighting all the time. Wallace talks about a time when Dot once ran away to be with Karl and stopped at Wallace's house. Wallace told her that Karl was a bad man and she would be better off staying with her mother. Eventually, Dot allowed Wallace to call her mother. Wallace thinks of Dot as the one person in the world that he loves more than anyone and he feels that he let her down that Christmas after the play fiasco. Wallace saw her on stage dressed in the same robe he had allowed Karl to wear and he saw Karl. Later that night, when Dot appeared on his doorstep, he could not stand to look at her and sent her away despite her obviously fragile emotional state. Therefore, to make up what he sees as a moment of failure, Wallace volunteers to throw Dot a birthday party.

Mary has a habit of taking over these parties and terrorizing the other children, so Wallace invites Sita and Louis, hoping Louis can help keep Mary under control. However, Mary is out of control the moment she walks into the house. As a drastic attempt to keep Mary calm, Wallace fixes her a drink with Everclear. After three drinks, Mary is quite drunk and willing to let Wallace and Celestine run the party. While everyone waits around the table for dinner, Mary lights the candles on the cake and turns on the musical, spinning cake plate. Only Mary winds the cake plate too tight and the spring breaks. The cake flies off the pan and lands on Sita. Wallace is immediately concerned for Mary, although he should have worried about Louis since he has been having trouble with his heart and is grabbing for his pills at that moment. Louis takes Sita home and Celestine takes the children home. Dot tells Wallace it was the best birthday ever. Afterward, Wallace sits with Mary while she sobers up. Mary tells Wallace he should marry Celestine, although she had married Karl in a marriage of convenience after the baby was born.

The Motel. Karl comes to town, calls Wallace but hangs up without saying anything, and then invites Celestine and Dot to lunch. This is the first time that Dot meets Karl and she is clearly not impressed with what she sees. The lunch is tense and awkward and Dot is less than gracious when Karl asks if she likes the stereo he sent her or if she would like him to send records for her to use on it.

Part 3, Chapter 12, 1964 Analysis

Wallace is the first person point of view character at the beginning of the chapter as he begins to describe what he believes to be wrong with Dot's behavior and what he has done to add to it. Wallace thinks that he hurt Dot because he sent her away the night of the play. Dot wore a robe that Karl once wore and Wallace found himself struck by how



much Dot resembles her father in the robe. This again touches on the theme of sexual obsession since Wallace is so hurt by the sight of Dot in the robe that he cannot take her into his home when she is clearly hurting and needing him. To make up, Wallace throws her a birthday party, getting Mary drunk in the hopes that she will not interfere with this party as she has most of the others in the past. However, Mary manages to ruin it anyway, although Dot sees it all as a success. This again illustrates the theme of non-traditional families as Wallace and Mary fight for what they both see as their part in Dot's life and manage to ruin things in their struggle. At the end of the chapter, Karl shows up. Karl calls Wallace first, but does not have the courage to talk to him. Just the fact that Karl calls Wallace shows the reader that Karl still has deep feelings for Wallace; however, perhaps touching on the theme of abandonment, Karl is still afraid to reveal these feelings. Karl instead has lunch with Dot and Celestine, a meeting that ends Dot's fantasies about her father and ends rather tensely.



Part 4, Chapter 13, 1972

Part 4, Chapter 13, 1972 Summary

Celestine James. Celestine has a dream that Sita is ill and asking for her. Celestine tells Mary about the dream and Mary insists that they go to visit Sita. They pack a few things and go, leaving Dot behind so she can continue her job at the movie theatre. Sita is not happy to see them. When she lets them into the house, Sita disappears upstairs. Mary and Celestine decide to make coffee and cut the cake Mary has brought. While looking for the coffee, Mary finds a bunch of pills in the flour. Mary throws them out. Sita finally comes back downstairs and joins them, but when she finds a bug wing in her cake, she refuses to eat any more. Mary tells her about the pills they found in the flour. Sita demands they tell her where they are and she grabs them up in a fit of rage.

Mary and Sita stay for several days although Sita does not appear to be obviously ill. Mary settles well into Sita's guest room, spreading her things about and having nightmares about collecting credit due to the shop. The shop has been losing money steadily since the sugar beets have brought in large supermarkets and soon Mary will sell the shop and the land it is on so that she and Celestine can retire. One day while at Sita's, Celestine explores the basement and finds a pile of junk in the midst of all of Sita's perfect order. Within this pile, there is a letter that Sita clearly forgot to mail some years before. Celestine takes it and mails it herself. A couple of nights later, Mary and Celestine wake when they hear Sita outside yelling at Mary's dog. Mary leans out the window and throws a brick, hitting Sita on accident.

Sita Tappe. Sita wakes on the billiards' table downstairs where she has been sleeping since Mary and Celestine arrived, claiming it helps her back. Sita knows that Mary and Celestine will be there soon to collect her for the beet's festival in Argus, so she climbs off the table to get ready. Sita has kept a stash of pain pills in the toilet tank since Louis's death and she takes them out now to count them. There are not many left, so Sita decides to take them all. Sita bathes, dresses, and puts on her makeup. Sita also puts on Adelaide's necklace.

Mary Adare. Mary and Celestine arrive at Sita's to pick her up before the festival. Celestine is annoyed they have to get Sita at all, and is worried she will miss Dot's crowing as Beet Queen. When they arrive, Sita is standing on the porch. However, when they move closer, they realize she is dead and hanging by her necklace. They do not know what to do. Finally, Mary decides they should put her in the truck. They sit her in the front seat as though she is alive and begin the trip back to Argus. They are stopped just inside the city limits by the sheriff who has had a crush on Sita for years. He does not notice Sita is dead and thinks she is only being cold to him, as usual. He lets Mary go with a warning. Once downtown, Mary accidentally drives onto the parade route and is forced to follow it until they reach the fairgrounds. Once there, they leave the air conditioning on and leave Sita until after Dot's coronation.



Most-Decorated Hero. Russell is dressed in his military uniform by an orderly and placed on a float for the parade. Russell closes his eyes as the float moves along, ignoring the yells from the crowd, some of which are unkind. Russell sees Isabel calling to him on a road. Russell tries to follow, believing this is the road of death. However, a sense of irony at the situation strikes him as funny and Russell is brought back to reality.

Part 4, Chapter 13, 1972 Analysis

The first part of the chapter is in the first person point of view of Celestine. Celestine has dream about Sita and, despite Sita's coldness toward them, Celestine and Mary go to her in what they feel is a time of need. Sita seems fine, but both Mary and Celestine feel that she is ill and not far from death. Mary finds a stash of pills in Sita's flour that should warn them that something is wrong, but it does not, though it is foreshadowing of Sita's death later in the chapter. Celestine and Mary move in with Sita and take care of her. Mary accidentally hits Sita with a brick, but it does not do any permanent harm. Later, the point of view turns to Sita, describing how she takes an overdose of pain medication she has been hoarding since her husband's death in order to self medicate her mental difficulties. Sita thinks back on her life, finds that it was not as bad as she had always thought, and kills herself. This chapter is full of irony as Sita finds herself relying on the two women she attempted to hurt the most in her life and send away as often as possible. Still, as she dies, Sita is irritated with these two. This chapter also seems to parallel the chapter in which the reader sees Adelaide go into a rage for no reason. Sita and Adelaide have always had more in common than Mary and Adelaide.

The next part of the chapter is in Mary's point of view. Mary and Celestine find Sita dead and instead of wasting time calling the funeral parlor, since they know the funeral parlor Sita will want to go to is in Argus and the owners are at the festival, Mary decides to put Sita in her truck and take her there herself. Again, there is irony as Mary and Celestine drive all over town with a dead body in their truck, even riding in the parade with Sita in the front seat of the truck. Perhaps this touches on the theme of non-traditional families, as it is a very unique family that would drive around with a dead person in their truck in order to make sure that person gets to her preferred funeral parlor. Finally, Russell has a brief brush with death that afternoon while also riding in the parade, a strange parallel to Sita's ride. However, Russell's sense of the ironic keeps him from death.



Part 4, Chapter 14, 1971

Part 4, Chapter 14, 1971 Summary

Wallace Pfef. The year before, Wallace thought that if someone could make Dot's dream of becoming a beauty queen come true then she might gain some confidence and not look at the world through such jaded eyes. Wallace decides to create a festival of which Dot can be the queen. Wallace creates a five-day festival and makes up a list of girls to be nominated for queen. Wallace then has the ballots left at area banks where people could vote. Wallace collects the ballots himself and lies about Dot winning. Wallace works so hard on all of this that he drives himself nearly to exhaustion. When Wallace runs into Celestine at the post office and sees a postcard from Karl announcing his intention of coming to the festival, he is near hysterics. Wallace does not want to see Karl now. Wallace has gotten old and he does not want Karl to see him this way. The day of the festival arrives and it is Wallace's turn for the dunking booth. While sitting there, almost too tired to hold on, Wallace sees Dot coming toward him in a rage. Dot knocks him into the water with one perfect pitch.

The Passenger. A passenger arrives on the afternoon train. Father Miller has a letter in his hand from Sita Kozka, describing herself and the butcher shop her family owns. Father Miller has come to find that shop and to satisfy his curiosity about this family that might possibly be his own. Father Miller finds the shop empty and decides to go to the festival.

Part 4, Chapter 14, 1971 Analysis

Wallace tells in his own first person point of view how he decided to create the Beet Festival in order to make Dot queen, hoping that she will find confidence and be a kinder person. This touches on the theme of non-traditional families as he does it in the role of surrogate father. However, Wallace has to fix the vote, which foreshadows a time when Dot will learn what he has done. The reader must know that she is not happy since she dunks him with a perfect pitch at one point that day. This chapter also foreshadows a visit from Karl as a letter that Wallace has seen Celestine receive suggests. Wallace is not happy, and is afraid he is too old to be of much use to Karl anymore. Finally, the final part of the chapter shows in the third person point of view the arrival to Argus Father Miller, who the reader knows it is Jude Miller, the lost baby brother. This foreshadows a moment when Mary will be reunited with her baby brother.



Part 4, Chapter 15, 1972

Part 4, Chapter 15, 1972 Summary

Karl Adare. Karl has always traveled light, having little or no possessions. Lately he has desired to have things that he has left behind in the past. When Karl gets the note that Dot has been nominated for Beet Queen, he decides to drop everything and go see her, hoping that maybe he can finally put down some sort of roots. Karl drives all night and arrives the morning of the festival. Karl sleeps for a while and then makes his way to the fairground. Karl sees Sita sitting in the truck and goes to visit with her. Karl does not realize that she never speaks back. Then Karl sees Dot dunk Wallace and runs to Wallace's rescue.

The Grandstand. Celestine and Mary are sitting in the grandstand, waiting for Dot to arrive for the ceremony. While waiting, Celestine sees a priest sitting across from them and thinks they should ask him to say a blessing for Sita. Mary discourages this since Sita left the church. Finally, the princesses begin to make their way to the stage, with Dot coming up behind. While the mayor begins his speech, a plane sets up behind them in order to first reveal the name of the queen and then to seed the clouds in hopes of rain to end a drought. Wallace and Karl, both soaking wet, join Mary and Celestine in the grandstands. Wallace tells them that Dot knows he fixed the election. Suddenly, Dot leaves the stage and gets into the plane with the pilot moments before he takes off. Moments later, Dot's name is spelled out in the clouds.

Part 4, Chapter 15, 1972 Analysis

Karl comes home, thinking that he might make roots this time. Karl wants a place to call home for the first time in his life, showing a shift in his character, perhaps some growth. Karl's thoughts are with his daughter, but when he sees Wallace get dunked and not come up right away, he runs to his rescue. Celestine and Mary see the priest who is Mary's baby brother, but Mary does not recognize him, and is thinking only of Sita. When Dot arrives on the stage, she runs to a nearby plane that is there to announce her award as queen. It is a parallel of Adelaide's abandonment and all the same characters are there, including the baby brother who disappeared many years before. This seems to bring the story full circle, finishing the theme of abandonment so that they can all move on with their lives and perhaps find some happiness.



Part 4, Chapter 16, 1972

Part 4, Chapter 16, 1972 Summary

Dot. Dot has learned that Wallace fixed the nomination while she is on the float during the parade. Dot does not even want to be there because she hates the dress Mary has bought for her. When Dot learns the truth about the nomination, she finds Wallace and dunks him in the dunking booth, walking off without making sure Wallace is okay. Dot goes to the crowning ceremony but feels silly up there and decides to run off. Dot gets on the plane, but regrets it immediately. Afterward, Dot finds the stage empty with her mother standing there alone. Celestine tells her she must prepare herself for some bad news about Sita. Dot asks if her father is back and Celestine tells her he is. However, he is not at their house, but at Wallace's. That night it begins to rain for the first time in months.

Part 4, Chapter 16, 1972 Analysis

In Dot's first person point of view, the reader is allowed to see how Dot found out about the fixed contest and how she felt running off in the airplane. Unlike Adelaide, Dot is unhappy and wants to go home. The novel has come full circle, but there is also a change for the better. Touching on the theme of abandonment, Dot has not run out on her family. Dot has grown some, showing a maturity of character that Adelaide did not have and that will help Dot's life turn out differently, infusing the novel's ending with hope. There is also the happy revelation that Karl has gone home with Wallace, ending the theme of sexual obsession and perhaps suggesting some happiness in that relationship, as well.



Characters

Mary Adare

Mary Adare is abandoned by her mother when she is only eleven. While visiting a fair, Mary's mother takes a plane ride, thus leaving Mary alone with her fourteen-year-old brother and her baby brother, and never comes back. Mary waits long past a reasonable amount of time. A man takes the baby from her, telling her he is going to allow his wife to nurse the child and then will bring it back, but he never does. After this, Mary takes charge. Mary takes her older brother home, packs a few things including her mother's jewelry box, and boards a boxcar headed to North Dakota where her mother's sister lives. Once there, however, Mary's brother also abandons her, re-boarding the train for destinations unknown, leaving Mary to face their relatives alone.

Mary makes herself an important part of her Aunt Fritzie's family, making breakfast every morning for the family and helping out in their butcher shop. Mary is accepted without restraint by everyone except her cousin, Sita, who sees Mary as a competitor. Sita does not like sharing her room, sharing her clothing, and especially does not like sharing her friends. Mary, however, continues to be diligent in everything she does, eventually winning so much of her aunt and uncle's trust that when they move south for Aunt Fritzie's health, they leave the butcher shop to Mary.

Mary runs the butcher shop for the rest of the story, leaving the small house where she has lived the majority of her life only once, when there is a fire, and she must escape the workmen making repairs. Mary hears from her mother, Adelaide, a few times, once when Aunt Fritzie shows her a postcard Adelaide has sent, and once when Adelaide sends Mary a sewing machine. Mary responds cruelly to the postcard and gives the sewing machine to Sita, who was always more like Adelaide, anyway. Mary also sees Karl again, but she throws a can of oysters at his head when he accuses her of not valuing him as a part of her family. Mary never marries and never has children, so when her best friend, Celestine, gives birth to a baby girl, Mary takes to the child with a passion that Celestine sometimes finds inappropriate, and becomes a part of Celestine and Dot's unique family.

Celestine James

Celestine James is the daughter of a local farmer and his Indian wife. Celestine's parents both die when she is young so an older sister and brother raise her. Celestine is a large person, taller than most children her age, and she finds this difficult to live with at times. She develops a large voice that she uses to deal with the teasing she often endures. When the novel opens, Celestine is Sita's best friend. However, when Mary comes to town, Celestine is drawn to her because she is also without parents. This is a friendship that is destined to continue the entire course of the story.



When they are older, Celestine comes to work in the butcher shop with Mary. One night, Karl comes into the shop looking for Mary. Not finding his sister, Celestine and Karl spend a few moments together, and find that they are attracted to one another. Karl ends up living with Celestine for two months and becoming the father of her child. Celestine throws Karl out, however, when she realizes she must make the choice between Karl and Mary. Celestine has her baby alone, marrying Karl afterward only to give her child a name. It is a marriage that is on paper only. Celestine raises her daughter with Mary and another friend, Wallace.

Sita Kozka

Sita Kozka is Fritzie and Pete's daughter. Sita is more like Adelaide than Mary. Sita is concerned with her looks and manners where Mary is more concerned with sausage casings and bookkeeping. Sita is threatened by Mary because she has always been an only child, given anything she could possibly want. When Mary comes into the family, Sita is no longer the center of attention, nor is she showered with the same compassion her parents shower on Mary. When Mary steals Celestine away from Sita, it is the final straw. Sita no longer wants anything to do with either of them.

Sita moves to the city as soon as she is old enough, working in a department store as a model. Eventually, Sita consents to marry a childhood friend, a local businessman who owns a restaurant and several other businesses. Sita drives him crazy, nagging him about all the things she sees him doing wrong in the restaurant. Finally, Sita divorces him and takes the restaurant, transforming it into an exclusive restaurant that quickly goes out of business. Sita then marries Louis, the local health inspector. Louis and Sita remain happily married for many years. However, Sita's mental health begins to decline after their marriage and she is in and out of the hospital until her death.

Karl Adare

Karl is Mary's older brother. Like Mary, he too is abandoned by his mother and forced to fend for himself. Instead of remaining in Argus with Mary, Karl boards the train headed anywhere but there. On the train, he meets a man with whom he feels an instant attraction. However, when the man fails to return his boyish affection, Karl jumps from the train and breaks both ankles. An Indian woman finds Karl and cares for him until they reach a monastery, where she leaves Karl with the nuns. From there, Karl is sent back to Minneapolis to live in the same orphanage that threw the pair they were attending when his mother left. Karl is a discipline problem at the school and the priest in charge is happy to see him go when he reaches the appropriate age.

Karl becomes a traveling salesman, working for many companies over the next forty years. Karl has many affairs, most notably with Wallace Pfeiffer and Celestine James. Karl fathers Celestine's child and marries her, but Celestine makes it clear she does not want him in her life. Karl stays away from Argus after this, sending back odd and unusual gifts for his daughter as often as he can. When Karl learns that his daughter has been



nominated for Beet Queen, he makes his way back to Argus, feeling as though he would finally like to mend fences with his sister and settle down.

Wallace Pfef

Wallace Pfef is a classmate of Celestine and Mary's who has built a house not too far from Celestine. Wallace has an affair with Karl while at a farmer's conference learning about the sugar beet. When Karl falls off the bed while showing off and injures his back, Wallace stays with him, visiting him every day until he can no longer excuse his absence from the people of Argus. Wallace does not believe he will see Karl again until Karl calls him out of the blue some time later. Wallace and Karl spend two weeks together during which Wallace does everything he can to make Karl happy. Karl finds this behavior oppressive and leaves. Karl then moves in with Celestine for two months, fathering her baby, and making Wallace deeply jealous.

When Celestine goes into labor during a blizzard, Wallace finds himself delivering the baby on his brand new couch. Celestine is so grateful that she names the baby after him. Wallace quickly becomes a part of Celestine and the baby's lives, helping to raise the baby as best as he can. One night, Wallace sees Dot, by then a pre-teen, in a bathrobe he allowed Karl to borrow and is so upset by it that he does not want Dot in his house when she comes to visit that night. Wallace feels bad and spends the rest of his life trying hard not to offend Dot and to give her everything she ever wanted.

Wallacette "Dot" Adare

Wallacette Darlene Adare is Karl and Celestine's daughter. Mary christens the baby Dot almost from birth because she thinks Wallacette is a stupid name. Dot is a difficult child from the very beginning, always doing the opposite of what Celestine asks of her. Mary feels a connection with the child and goes out of her way to give Dot everything she wants, conspiring with her even when it goes against everything Celestine has taught her daughter, and treating her as though she is her best friend. Mary finds a reason to live in Dot.

Dot grows up wild, fighting at school and defying her mother on a regular basis. When Wallace angers Dot, she goes out of her way to avoid him, and even dunks him in a dunking booth at a festival he has created just for her. Dot is spoiled, self-centered, and the hope of all the main characters in the novel. Dot too is a lot like Adelaide. Dot even rides off in an airplane like Adelaide, but Dot comes back.

Pete and Fritzie Kozka

Pete and Fritzie Kozka are Mary's aunt and uncle. Fritzie is Adelaide's sister, but Fritzie never approved of Adelaide, nor did they get along. Fritzie welcomes Mary into her home, teaching her everything there is to know about the butcher shop and leaving Mary to run it when health problems force Fritzie to move south to a warmer climate.



Pete also welcomes Mary into his home, perhaps finding her better company than the daughter he spoiled beyond control. After Mary arrives at their home, Pete and Fritzie advertise in the Minneapolis newspaper for information on Mary's missing brother and Adelaide, but they never receive a response. A response is made many years later, but the letter finds itself in Sita's hand, who does not tell anyone of its content. Years later, however, Celestine finds a letter Sita wrote in response to the letter and mails it, causing the subject of the letter, the missing baby brother, to come to Argus during the beet celebrations.

Adelaide Adare

Adelaide is a young, impetuous woman who has a long-term affair with a married man, going as far as giving birth to three of his children and living in a house he owns. When the married man is killed in an accident, Adelaide learns that her house is in the married man's name and she is soon to be homeless. Adelaide moves her family to Minneapolis, but soon finds herself pregnant with her third child and unable to find a way to make a good living. Adelaide steals from her landlady, causing her family to be thrown out of their apartment within days of the baby's birth. While searching for a new place to live, Adelaide takes the children to a fair to benefit orphan children. At the fair, a pilot offers plane rides to the audience. Adelaide gets into the plane and never returns. Later, Adelaide settles in Florida with the pilot, but she never really gets over the loss of her children.

Louis Tappe

Louis Tappe is Sita's second husband. When Sita and Louis meet, Louis is the state health inspector. However, he quits that job when they marry and becomes the county extension entomologist, studying the effects of different bugs on the crops grown in the area. Louis is deeply in love with Sita and spends the rest of his life caring for her. Sita's mental health begins to suffer soon after they are married and Louis becomes ill helping her through her various illnesses. Louis develops a heart problem that requires nitroglycerin pills and soon he dies from the disorder.

Russell Kashpaw

Russell Kashpaw is Celestine's half brother. Russell goes to war several times during the novel, first becoming injured in World War II, then again in the Korean War, finally suffering from a stroke just weeks before Dot's birth. Russell spends the rest of his life living on the Indian reservation with his brother, Eli. Dot gets a wheelchair as a gift from her father and Celestine makes her give it to Russell to make getting around a little easier for him. Before Russell's second set of injuries and his stroke, he works as a teller in the local bank. Mary has a crush on him, but Russell makes it clear he never intends to marry, so Mary stops pursuing him, giving up romance all together. After his second set of injuries, Russell becomes a handyman and works with Mary in the

butcher shop. They all remain good friends until Russell's stroke. Then Mary feels his repressed anger and finds it difficult to spend time with him.



Objects/Places

The House in Prairie Lake

Mary and Karl are born and raised for the early part of their lives in a house in the small farming community of Prairie Lake. The children later find out that their mother's married lover owns the house, and that he is their father.

The Boxcar

Mary and Karl hide in a boxcar in order to make the trip to Argus. Later, Karl jumps on another boxcar and has a brief encounter with a male drifter before he jumps from the train and breaks both ankles.

Garnet Necklace

Adelaide has a garnet necklace that Mr. Ober gave her. Adelaide pawns the necklace, a fact Mary does not learn until she is in North Dakota with her aunt and uncle. Sita later retrieves the necklace from the pawnbroker, has it cleaned and repaired, and wears it the day she commits suicide.

The Blue Box

Adelaide keeps the jewels Mr. Ober has given her in a blue box. Mary takes the blue box when she and Karl leave for North Dakota, but finds it empty when she arrives at her Aunt Fritzie's.

The Airplane

Adelaide takes a ride on an airplane at a fair and never returns to retrieve her children.

Cow's Diamond

Pete has a cow's diamond, the hard rounded lens inside a cow's eye that he keeps as a good luck piece. Sita once asked him to give it to her, but Pete refused. However, when Mary comes to live with them, Pete gives it to Mary.

The Face in the Ice

One icy day, Mary slides down the slide in the playground at her school and hits her face on the ground, leaving what appears to be a face in the ice at the foot of the slide.



The nuns at her school believe it to be the face of Jesus, but Mary thinks it is Karl's face. Celestine cannot see the face at all.

The Fishing Shack

Russell builds a fishing shack to be used in the winter for ice fishing. One night, while fishing, Russell has a stroke. Celestine finds him when she sneaks to the shack in order to check on him.

The Ads

Fritzie puts several ads in the Minneapolis newspapers looking for information about Adelaide and her baby boy for several months after Mary arrives on her doorstep. The woman who has taken the baby boy sees the ads and cuts them out, and responds to them nearly twenty years later.

Postcards

Adelaide sends a postcard to Fritzie asking about her children. Fritzie gives it to Mary, who sends a postcard to her mother telling her that all her children starved to death.

The Letters

A letter arrives at Mary's shop addressed to the Kozka's that she forwards to Sita. The letter is a response to an ad Fritzie placed in the Minneapolis newspapers looking for Mary's missing brother. Sita goes to see the boy, but does not talk to him. Later, Sita writes a response that lays forgotten for more than twenty years until Celestine finds it and mails it.

The Sewing Machine

Adelaide sends Mary a sewing machine many years after she leaves her children. Mary gives it to Sita, telling Sita that it was meant for her.

The Wheelchair

Karl sends Dot an electric wheelchair he won at a medical conference. Celestine forces Dot to give the wheelchair to Russell.



The Beet Queen

Wallace decides that Dot needs for one of her dreams to come true in order to give her confidence and to help her be less angry at the world, so he plans a festival to celebrate the sugar beet in Argus. Wallace arranges for there to be a queen, and rigs the contest so that Dot is voted queen.

Kozka Meats/The House of Meats

Aunt Fritzie and her husband, Pete, own a butcher shop that also handles a small selection of groceries. Mary takes it over when Aunt Fritzie's health forces her and Pete to move south and later renames it "The House of Meats".

Argus, North Dakota

Argus, North Dakota is the small town where Aunt Fritzie lives and where Mary comes to live the remainder of her life.



Social Concerns And Themes

Anthropologists have asserted that rules governing kinship ties are the basis of a society; and it is these kinship rules that are the primary focus of *The Beet Queen*. The novel depicts the gap between expected family ties and what people actually do.

The Beet Queen begins with a mother, Adelaide, abandoning her children at an orphan's fair, and flying away with a stunt pilot. The baby, Jude, is taken by a childless couple, while two other children, Mary Adare and her brother Karl, hop a freight train to seek protection from their aunt and uncle in North Dakota. Unable to accept substitutes for his mother, Karl flees their care.

For her part, Mary attempts to earn the love of her aunt and uncle, unaware that it is being freely given. For Karl, the fear of emotional rejection inspires flight from a possible love to an imagined, ideal love. Sita, Karl's cousin, uses her beauty to pursue her ideal love, while Russell Kashpaw, a native American, tries to earn love through bravery, showing off his war wounds at patriotic occasions and military parades.

While Sita, Karl, and Russell flee kinship relations but find no substitute, others in the novel use friendship and kinship ties to create and to love. Dot was abandoned by her father, Karl, but she was well-loved by her mother, Celestine James; her aunt, Mary Adare; and Wallace Pfef, her father's former lover. Unlike Mary and Karl, who are scarred by their mother's abandonment, Dot joins with those she knows love her at the end of the novel. In *The Beet Queen* relations are fated and chosen; the survivors choose, and, to a great extent, so do the victims.



Themes

Abandonment

Abandonment is a theme in the novel that begins, not with Mary and Karl, but with their mother, Adelaide. Adelaide is in love with a married man who pays for her home in exchange for being allowed to visit her as often as he can get away. When he dies, Adelaide finds herself homeless and penniless since her lover kept Adelaide's home in his name. Adelaide feels abandoned and desperate. Adelaide is also pregnant. Unable to fend for herself or her children, Adelaide abandons them just as her lover did her. Adelaide boards a plane for a ride and never returns.

Mary does the only thing she knows to do, she runs to her mother's sister in Argus, North Dakota. Mary is accepted with open arms by all but her cousin, Sita. However, Mary is also abandoned by her brother Karl, who runs away before the two of them ever make it to Aunt Fritzie's butcher shop. Mary appears to handle all of this with grace, never speaking to anyone about what has happened. However, Mary eventually finds out that her mother is alive and well. Instead of sending her mother a letter demanding answers or asking for reconciliation, Mary writes a postcard that informs Adelaide that her children starved to death. When her mother sends her a sewing machine many years later, Mary gives it to Sita, as if Sita is her mother's true daughter, the one the machine was meant for. Mary has little forgiveness in her heart for Karl, either. On their first meeting after he left her, Mary throws a can of oysters at Karl's head. Mary grows old alone, never marries, and never reaches out to another human being except for Celestine and her daughter, Dot. Perhaps it is a fear of abandonment that causes Mary to live her life this way.

Karl does not fair much better after his mother leaves him. Karl abandons Mary and lives the life of a vagabond, moving from place to place like a restless soul. Karl meets Wallace and makes him believe they could share a life together only to abandon Wallace the first chance he gets. Karl then gets involved with Celestine. Celestine throws Karl out; despite the fact that they both know she is pregnant. Celestine marries Karl after the baby is born, but it is only a marriage on paper in order to give the child a name. Karl flits in and out of their lives for the next twenty years, sending Dot unusual and useless gifts, but rarely coming for a visit. Karl does not make a life with anyone else, either.

Finally, there is the baby. Adelaide gives birth to a baby shortly after her lover's death, but is so depressed she refuses to give the child a name. On the day that Adelaide flies off with the pilot at the fair, a man offers to take the baby home in order for his wife to feed it. Mary refuses at first, but finally relents. However, the man never brings the baby back and Mary feels as though she has abandoned her baby brother. This brother grows up in a loving family and is eventually reunited with Sita, Karl, and Mary at different points throughout the novel.



Sexual Obsession

Karl is a sexual being who learns the value of his body early in life. Before the novel is more than a few chapters long, Karl seduces an older man in order to help him through the sadness that his mother's abandonment has caused him. Karl also learns in this first encounter not to expect much when it comes to the return of affection from the men he seduces. Karl grows up quickly, using sex as a tool to get what he wants or needs. When Karl meets Wallace, he is surprised by his affection for the man, putting it down to Wallace's inexperience. However, when Karl moves in with Wallace several months later, he learns that having someone wait on him hand and foot is not something he is comfortable with and Karl leaves.

Karl has also met Celestine and the two of them have discovered a passion for each other. Again, Celestine is inexperienced, but quickly learns how to please Karl. Karl likes Celestine's rough ways and the fact that she tells him practically every day to get out of her house. However, when Karl realizes Celestine is really intent on making him leave, he finds himself devastated. Karl has feelings for Celestine, but it is his sexual obsession for her that continues to drive him, to try to make her allow him to stay. However, not even the announcement that he knows she is expecting his child will make Celestine keep Karl in her life because of the effect their relationship has on Celestine's friendship with Mary.

Wallace has become obsessed with Karl. Wallace followed a dog to Celestine's and discovers the lovers one night. Wallace watches, filled with jealousy. When Celestine's pregnancy becomes obvious, Wallace is wracked with pain. Wallace helps deliver Celestine's baby during a blizzard and becomes good friends with her daughter, Dot. However, when Wallace sees Dot in a bathrobe that Karl once wore, he becomes convinced that he can see Karl on the child's face. Wallace hurts Dot's feelings when she comes to see him that night and he sends her away. Wallace wants to forget Karl, but years later when he sees Karl again, there are still the same feelings threatening to tear him apart.

Non-Traditional Families

There are no traditional families in this novel, making unique families one of the themes. Mary and Karl had a somewhat traditional family with their mother and the frequent visits from the man they learn later he was their father. However, even this family is unique. When Adelaide leaves her children, Mary becomes the mother although Karl is older. Mary makes the decision to move them to Aunt Fritzie's, to take the train, and to steal their mother's jewel box. When they arrive in Argus, Mary becomes a member of Fritzie and Pete's family, forcing out their only child, Sita, who hates Mary and feels replaced.

Mary grows and finds herself alone after her aunt and uncle move south for Fritzie's health and Sita moves to the city. Celestine becomes her family, working with her in the shop. When Celestine becomes involved with Karl it threatens to ruin their friendship,



but Celestine chooses Mary over Karl. With the birth of Dot, Mary becomes an even more important part of Celestine's family, helping to raise the child by becoming her coconspirator. Wallace also becomes a part of Celestine's family, helping to raise Dot as a sort of surrogate father. It is an unusual family, Celestine, Wallace, Mary, and Dot, with occasional visits from Karl, but it works for them and Dot grows to be a spoiled, but normal adult.



Style

Point of View

The point of view of this novel varies from chapter to chapter and chapter section to chapter section. The chapters often begin with the name of the character who will be narrating that section and that narration is always in the first person point of view. There are also frequently sections within the chapters that are separated by another character's name are also in the first person point of view. With the exception of one, at the end of each chapter there is a separate section titled by a descriptive phrase, the name of a place, or an event. These sections are always in the third person point of view.

The way the writer sets off each change of narration makes it clear to the reader that the view will change and they are about to see events through the eyes of someone else. Sometimes this means reviewing events that took place in another part of that chapter or in another chapter entirely. However, this distinction makes the novel easy to read and easy for the reader to remember who the narrator is at any given time. The final sections of the chapter that are in third person can be a jolt to the reader who has become accustomed to the first person point of view, but this point of view also shows the reader things that other characters could not be aware of, such as the events that take place in Adelaide's life after leaving her children, and give some impartiality to events that require a slight separation between the narration and the story.

Setting

The majority of the novel takes place in Argus, North Dakota. However, the book begins in Minneapolis where Mary Adare and her brother Karl have come to live after their father dies and their mother moves them in hopes of finding a job and a good place to live. There is little money and Adelaide finds she is pregnant with no chance of a job. Soon, Adelaide can no longer handle the stress of her situation, living in such a large, heartless city, especially after her landlady discovers she has stolen from her and kicks them out. Adelaide runs away, leaving her children to deal with things on their own.

Argus is a small farm town where Fritzie, Adelaide's sister, lives with her husband, Pete, and daughter, Sita. After Adelaide gets on a plane and disappears from her children's lives, Mary and Karl hide in a boxcar and travel from Minnesota to Argus. Karl immediately re-boards the train, but Mary goes to live with Fritzie and her family. Since Sita is not interested in the butcher's shop that Fritzie and Pete run, when they are forced to move south because of Fritzie's health, Mary takes over the shop. Mary lives in Argus for the rest of her life. Argus is a farm town where they grow wheat until Wallace Pef convinces the town that growing sugar beets is a better option. Soon the town begins to grow. First, a sugar refinery plant is built and then the town begins to



grow in leaps and bounds as workers come to live there and more shops move in, bringing with them more people requiring homes. Mary hates this growth.

The setting is almost like another character in the fact that it affects the lives of the people who live there. Mary finds herself losing customers when growth begins due to the fact that the town is larger and there are now more supermarkets where people can buy their meat, though she does not think they can get it as fresh. The town affects Celestine because it defines who she is, a girl who is half white and half Indian. Wallace is also affected because his whole identity is wrapped up in the committees he chairs as a member of Argus society. The town is home and identity to each of the main characters, helping to shape the people they are and the people they will be.

Language and Meaning

The language throughout the novel is simple English. The novel is easy to read and easy to understand. Since the novel takes place between the years 1932 and 1972, most of the language is more formal than modern day language, reminding the reader that these people are living in a time that will seem almost quaint to the modern-day reader. There is little profanity and almost no slang.

Although sexual obsession is one of the themes of the novel, there is little description of actual sexual intimacy. Most of these scenes are glossed over; the description leading up to these acts ending with a simple statement or two to let the reader know the moment of intimacy is complete. There is also some violence in the novel, but it is not graphic. For example, when Mary falls off the slide and creates the face of Jesus in the ice, the description again is simple and to the point without the need for elaboration. Again, when Dot hits a young boy on the head, the description is to the point and without embellishments that might create a more graphic picture than the reader needs in order to understand the impact of Dot's actions. The writer uses as few descriptive passages as possible when describing sexual encounters and violence, keeping the focus of the novel on the overall plot rather than the events themselves.

Structure

The novel is written in sixteen chapters, each chapter divided by the name of the point of view character narrator each section of the novel and with a separate section at the end of each novel that is written in the third person and explores an event or situation that is not or cannot be covered in the larger sections within the chapter. The novel is also divided into four parts, each part covering a specific decade from the 30s to the 70s.

The novel is written mostly in exposition, each event told as though it has already happened and the narrator is simply relating it from his or her own unique perspective. Often an event is told more than once, each time told by separate characters and with their own spin on things. There is some dialogue, but this too is related as though as part of a memory rather than in real time. The novel contains one main story line that



follows the life of Mary Adare after her mother leaves her. This plot also contains the stories of the people in Mary's life, including Sita, her cousin, Celestine, her best friend, Dot, her niece, and Wallace, a family friend. Each of these characters have a subplot of their own revolving around the events in their lives, both that Mary is involved in and those that she is not. There are also two subplots that revolve around Mary's brother, Karl, who becomes a traveling salesman, their missing baby brother, and their missing mother. The subplots flow in and out of the main plot almost seamlessly and illuminate many events in Mary's life that may have seemed dull otherwise.



Quotes

"So that's how I came to Argus. I was the girl in the stiff coat." Part 1, Chapter 1, 1932, pg. 5

"Karl felt the breath from Giles's lips and tipped his mouth up to kiss him." Part 1, Chapter 1, 1932, pg. 25

"For a while I was still the girl who had caused the miracle, an attraction to customers and neighbors who stopped to touch me, holding their fingers out as if my body was filled with divine electricity. I wished it was." Part 2, Chapter 4, 1941, pg. 65

"And then, once the service began and the bishop spoke, I realized that my visit could be more than dramatic anyway. It could be dangerous. I realized that I could spoil Jude Miller's future." Part 2, Chapter 5, 1950, pg. 92

"Love stories always end here. I never had a mother to tell me what came next." Part 2, Chapter 7, 1953, pg. 128

"At first it was the name. If anyone, Celestine should have named her after me. I hated the name Wallacette and I knew it would give the girl trouble for the rest of her life." Part 3, Chapter 10, 1960, pg. 179

"One night Mary calls me up to tell me that I shouldn't bother driving in to work tomorrow. Then she waits, holding her breath on the phone, for me to ask her why not. So I ask.

'The shop's burnt down,' she answers in a satisfied tone." Part 3, Chapter 11, 1964, pg. 213

"'Honey,' she said, 'would it kill you to say yes?'

'Yes,' said Dot." Part 3, Chapter 12, 1964, pg. 260

"'We are very much like the dead,' Mary argues, 'except that we have the use of our senses.'" Part 4, Chapter 13, 1972, pg. 263

"Dot grew angrier each year, frightening us, making havoc, causing danger to herself." Part 4, Chapter 14, 1971, pg. 301

"All that held him together now was the crowd, and when the parade was finally over and they drew apart he would disperse, too, in so many pieces that not even the work of his own clever hands could shape him back the way he was." Part 4, Chapter 14, 1971, pg. 315

"I breathe in, and I think of her lying in the next room, her covers thrown back too, eyes wide open, waiting." Part 4, Chapter 16, 1972, pg. 338

Key Questions

Native American writer Leslie Marmon Silko attacked *The Beet Queen* in a 1986 review for failing to represent Native American history and causes and for being interested only in "selfreferential writing." Of the tetralogy's four novels, the action of *The Beet Queen* seems furthest afield. One good way to open up the content of the novel in a discussion is to see the characters in the book, off reservation Native Americans and whites, as an explanation of alternative kinship and friendship ties to the idea of the tribe.

Of course examining the artistry of the narrative, its gaps and jumps in time, its group of characters rather than its hero or heroine, its point of view and 304 symbolic method, are good topics to examine, but the contrast of white and off-reservation Native American lives needs to be pursued.

1. *The Beet Queen* contrasts voluntary relationships and formal kinship ties throughout. What conclusions could be drawn from comparing these varying types of relationship?
2. People struggle to understand love throughout their lives. What understandings of why one is loved do these characters have?
3. A tribe resembles an extended family, but it is really larger, has a history, and the ties are, perhaps, tighter. Russell Kashpaw and Celestine James are living a dual town and reservation existence. What problems of identity does this cause for them?
4. Appearance, and our concern with it, is a nagging torment to some, a source of pride and power in others, and sometimes is a matter of indifference. How do Sita, Mary, and Celestine handle this sometimes difficult attribute of living?
5. What stereotypes are suggested by characters such as Wallace Pfef, Russell Kashpaw, Mary Adare, and Celestine James? What does Erdrich do to present and modify these stereotypes?
6. Just like *Love Medicine*, *The Beet Queen* has gaps and jumps in time.

These could be easily summarized, so why does Erdrich not do this? What effects do these gaps provide to our readings of the novel?



Topics for Discussion

Discuss abandonment. What does it mean to be abandoned? In how many ways is Mary abandoned throughout the course of the novel? Do you think these acts affect her personality and the person she becomes in adulthood?

Why does Adelaide abandon her family? Do you think she is a bad mother because of this? Were her actions those of an immature person or an attempt to make things better for her children? Do you think Adelaide regretted her choice? Why did she have those angry fits later in life?

Discuss Mary. How has her life been shaped by her mother's abandonment? Do you find Mary an angry character? When does this behavior manifest itself? Why do you think Mary becomes obsessed with the occult? Why does Mary never marry? Why does Mary become so attached to Dot? Is Mary's attachment and behavior toward Dot healthy?

What has Adelaide's abandonment done to Karl? Do you think his mother leaving causes Karl to be the adult he is? Do you think Karl travels so much because he is afraid of being left again? Why do you think Karl behaves sexually the way he does? Could his bi-sexual behavior have anything to do with fear of abandonment?

Discuss Sita. Is Sita more like Adelaide than her own mother? How? Do you think Sita has the right to treat Mary the way she does? Why do you suppose Pete gives Mary the cow's diamond when he knows Sita wants it? Do you think this act was malicious or thoughtless in any way? Why or why not? Why does Sita never tell Mary about the letter regarding her baby brother? Do you think Sita is intentionally cruel toward Mary? Why does Sita go crazy?

Discuss Wallace. What is his impact on the overall development of the plot? Why do you think Karl does not want to be with Wallace, a lover who does everything he wants, but does want to be with Celestine, a lover who does not want to be with him? Do you think Wallace is overly cruel to Dot when she reminds him of Karl? Do you think Wallace is a part of Dot's life because of Karl?

Discuss family dynamics. What makes a family? Who determines what a family is? Does Celestine's family include Wallace and Mary in your opinion? Why or why not? What is the difference between a traditional family and the families depicted in this novel, including the Kozka family after Mary's arrival and Celestine's family? Is one better than the other? Why or why not?

Literary Precedents

Erdrich often imbues action with symbolic and mythic overtones. Karl buries his head in the fragrant blossoms of a tree and then tears off one of its branches to defend himself from a dog. In the process he scatters the blossoms and kills the tree. Later Mary decodes the scene by noting her irritation with Karl, whose "face glowed in the blossoms' reflected light, pink and radiant, so like the way he sat beneath our mother's stroking hand." Symbolic writing such as this, and mythic writing, especially when Erdrich is dealing with native American characters, powerfully impresses itself on her readers' imaginations.

The most important literary influence on Erdrich is clearly William Faulkner, in particular, his handling of time and narrative point of view. Erdrich uses, for the most part, multiple first person narrators in *The Beet Queen*, clustering them around a single experience or a common place. The crowning of the Beet Queen late in the novel, for example, is told from the perspectives of Wallace Pfef, Dot, Karl, and briefly, Celestine and Mary. This is similar to the multiple narrators Faulkner uses in *As I Lay Dying* (1930), where several characters describe the same events, such as Addie's dying or the crossing of the river during the burial journey.

Faulkner's thematically linked short stories also provide a useful model for Erdrich. In novels composed of short stories such as *The Unvanquished* (1938) or *Go Down, Moses* (1942) Faulkner used theme and common families instead of a continuous plot to unify the stories. Erdrich unifies the stories in *The Beet Queen* in much the same way; she thematically links stories that involve the same people over a forty-year period. Rather than link the stories in an overall plot, Erdrich uses conventional notions of causality and plot within individual stories.

When critics fault Erdrich for her lack of plot development, they mean there is no causality of action between the stories. On the other hand when she is praised for her handling of plot, the praise is really directed to the novel's separate stories, such as the reactions of Karl and Mary to being abandoned early in the novel.

Related Titles

The Beet Queen is part of a tetralogy that includes Love Medicine, 1984, linked short stories; Tracks, 1988, novel; and The Bingo Palace, 1994, novel.

Love Medicine is a mirror image of The Beet Queen in several respects. Both are part of a developing tetralogy set in the immediate environment of the North Dakota-Minnesota border. While The Beet Queen ends with Dot's awareness of those who love her, Love Medicine ends with Lipsha's discovery of his identity. His observation, "Belonging was a matter of deciding to," could apply to either novel. Both books cluster first person narrators around a place or event and connect disparate stories thematically rather than causally.

The Beet Queen, possibly because it concentrates on white characters, is less mythic and symbolic than Love Medicine. Such mythic and symbolic resonances are more natural in the world of Erdrich's native American characters than in the world of the white settlers and their descendants.



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