Bright Lights, Big City Study Guide

Bright Lights, Big City by Jay McInerney

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

Bright Lights, Big City narrates a few disastrous days in the life of an aspiring young writer in the swirling, madcap world of young, upwardly mobile Manhattan in the 1980s. The book's narrator, plagued by a failed marriage and an unnamed sense of loss and guilt, watches helplessly from the distance of a cocaine-induced haze as he proceeds to squander his prestigious job and all sense of dignity and self-respect. Under the cover of an ironic sensibility, impervious to his surroundings, he plunges deeper into an abyss of nightclubs, shallow conversation, sex and drugs.

The narrator refers to himself in the second person, which allows him to combine familiarity and distance and well reflects the story's theme of personal disintegration and alienation.

The setting alternates between the narrator's day job at a prestigious, never named Manhattan magazine with a long tradition of publishing fiction, understood to be The New Yorker, where he works in the Department of Factual Verification, and his incessant, all-night clubbing binges. The story of his marriage to Amanda, a mid-western model who has left him for a life in Paris, is told in expository flashbacks. We are also given descriptive vignettes of his time at the magazine and snippets of information about his upper-middle class, deeply suburban upbringing to explain more fully his sense of alienation and loss, which is made clear finally at the end, when we are told of the death of his mother exactly a year previous to the unfolding events.

His work in the Department of Factual Verification entails checking New Yorker journalism pieces for factual accuracy, a job that he finds repugnant and at odds with his clearly stated ambition to be a fiction writer at the magazine. After a botched attempt at verifying the facts of a story on recent French elections, he is fired, which comes more as a relief than a surprise. Compounding this shame is a comic attempt, accompanied by his mentor in misbehavior, preppy icon Tad Allagash, to exact revenge by unleashing a ferret in the magazine offices at midnight.

The sophomoric high jinks take a distinctly bleak turn, however, when he discovers that his wife is in town for a fashion show. Using his wits to gain entry to the show, he attempts to disrupt the proceedings by calling out her name as she parades down the catwalk. It is doubtful whether she hears him, and he is instead thrown out of the venue.

The low point in this narrative of dissolution comes when the narrator blanks out at an Upper East Side singles bar and ends up in Queens with a teenaged girl. He slinks out of her apartment as her parents barely look up from the television. It's not clear which is more shameful for him, to have sought comfort with someone so young, or to have ended up in the outer boroughs of the city. In fact, the theme of the social geography of New York is a constant riff, as is the idea of a loss of faith and family.

Chapter One, It's Six A. M. Do You Know Where You Are?

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The narrator opens his story in a downtown Manhattan disco, Heartbreak or Lizard Lounge, at an unspecified hour of the early morning. He addresses himself as "You" and seems bewildered to find himself in a conversation with a strange, bald and tattooed woman. He blames his situation on his friend Tad Allagash, who drags him from club to club, observing the Manhattan social climbers' rule of one drink in each place.

"Tad's mission in life is to have more fun than anyone else in New York City, and this involves a lot of moving around, since there is always the likelihood that where you aren't is more fun than where you are. You are awed by his strict refusal to acknowledge any goal higher than the pursuit of pleasure. You want to be like that. You also think he is shallow and dangerous."

This ambivalent note struck at the beginning of the book underlines the narrator's fatal attraction for the glamorous life of the rich and the comic tension that results when he fails to achieve it

We are allowed access to the narrator's internal musings on the inappropriateness as a mate of the bald woman with whom he is talking. He then attempts to speak with another woman and shares cocaine in the bathroom with one more before heading out into the morning light, frustrated in his attempts at seduction. He walks aimlessly through the streets of lower Manhattan, passing an Italian bakery in the midst of preparing bread. He ends up sitting forlornly on a pier at the edge of the water of New York Harbor, looking out at the Statue of Liberty, a large advertisement for Colgate toothpaste on the New Jersey shore, and a passing garbage barge.

Chapter One, It's Six A. M. Do You Know Where You Are? Analysis

These last three images, powerful symbols of the American way of life, juxtapose the promise of prosperity and the reality of over-consumption, and highlight the powerful role of the media in fueling the American dream. The narrator seems to imply that he is cognizant of the flawed dialectic at the heart of his obsessive behavior, but that he is unable or unwilling to exert the energy to resist the tug of his typically dysfunctional pursuit of happiness. The images also resonate as references to classics in American literature, notably F. Scott Fitzgerald's Great Gatsby, a tragic novel about the destructive lives of shallow, rich young Americans, where advertising billboards function as symbols of the wasteland of American culture in the 1920s, a decade often compared to the 1980s. McInerney, far from attempting to recreate the tragic dimensions of Fitzgerald's work, satirizes his narrator's literary pretensions, but at the same time makes use of them in a serious way to show that the tensions in American life brought about by a materialistic and status obsessed culture, have changed little.

The Italian bakery foreshadows the end of the book, and the narrator's seeming epiphany, when a craving for bread, a symbol of a simpler way of life, as well as of spiritual sustenance, suddenly overcomes him.

Chapter Two, The Department of Factual Verification

Chapter Two, The Department of Factual Verification Summary

The narrator is late for work the next morning. On his way to work, he encounters a bum in the subway, roughly of his same age, who scares him with his "long-distance" eyes. On the train, he reads the New York Post, whose headlines give him an odd pleasure with their ghastly stories. He reads a poster on a light pole with the name of a missing young woman and hears a pimp advertising peep shows at Times Square. He dreads going into work and thinks of his boss, Clara Tillinghast, with apprehension, believing that she is out to get him and wants him fired. He greets Lucio, the elevator operator, and Sally the receptionist, two more exemplars of working class New Yorkers, before entering the hallowed editorial offices, covering two floors. Here he meets fellow workers Rittenhouse, a meek long-time veteran, Yassu Wade, a more irreverent, younger colleague, and Megan Avery, a kind, nurturing woman, generous with her advice and offers of help.

He begins work on the French election story with some trepidation, knowing that his exaggerated claims of being fluent in French on his resume may mean he is in over his head. He goes back in his mind, reminiscing about the roots of his boss's antipathy towards him. He surmises that it began when he presumptuously went beyond fact checking and suggested editorial changes in a book review by a Pulitzer Prize winning author. He is not happy in the department and would much rather be editing or writing fiction. He does not have the temperament or the proper regard for factual accuracy to be a good long-term prospect, and in fact, his aversion to the primacy of facts is symbolized by his arriving late on this morning. We learn he does not own a watch.

His boss appears to inform him that the deadline for the French election piece has been rescheduled for that night. There is no way he can do a decent job, as it seems there are all sorts of inaccuracies in the article. An editor warns him that the article writer is notoriously careless about his facts. After a time in which it seems he has done little to make progress on the article, the narrator goes out to lunch and buys a counterfeit Cartier watch from a street vendor, a typical last-ditch gesture to change himself and start respecting the limitations of time he has previously disregarded. However, the watch, a shoddy imitation, breaks later that afternoon. On his return, he realizes he has forgotten to buy a soft drink for Megan his co-worker as he had promised, another sign of his selfish and faulty personality.

He calls the writer twice in the afternoon to ask about information in the piece, for example the farcical statement that the French government has taken a controlling interest in Paramount Pictures.

By seven, the office is empty and the narrator receives a call from Allagash inviting him to go out. There are two girls with him, one of them has a father who is the head of an oil company and the other is about to appear in a "major" television commercial. A modeling agency is holding a dance at Magique, another nightclub, and one of the girls has "cornered a chunk of the Gross National Product of Bolivia," Allagash informs him.

The narrator puts him off, promising to call back, and gets to work for two more hours. At ten o'clock he packs up to leave, feeling that the piece he is handing in is not satisfactory, hoping by some miracle to be saved. As he walks down the halls on his way out, he feels nostalgia, thinking of all the famous writers who have passed that way, recalling the high hopes with which he started work at the magazine, in contrast to his current feeling of impending doom as he leaves for the night.

Chapter Two, The Department of Factual Verification Analysis

The narrator's inability to conform to the expectations of his job reveals one of the key themes in McInerney's book, the necessary tension between duty and pleasure, and the young apprentice's struggle to gain traction in his work while at the same time feeling the tug of youthful exuberance. Also, a deeper tension is revealed in the stark contrast between the world of empirical materialism, as exemplified by the Department of Factual Verification, and the world of romantic and allegorical reality as exemplified by the fiction pieces published in the magazine with which the narrator would rather be associated.

At the same time, there is a social reality underlying the narrator's predicament, and this is the macabre world of working class New York represented by the subway bum, the Times Square hawker, the New York Post stories, the elevator man and the receptionist. The narrator feels this world as a hell into which it is unlikely he can fall, given his advantageous position in life, but that scares him nevertheless with the prospect of its proximity and its function as a memento mori, a reminder of his own mortality.

Chapter Three, The Utility of Fiction

Chapter Three, The Utility of Fiction Summary

The narrator arrives home to his apartment, where he relaxes with the mail and reflects on his true vision of himself as a sedate, bookish man at heart with little ambitions besides enjoying the creature comforts of home. However, he finds it impossible to suppress the dread he feels being home alone. The apartment is the second one he lived in with his wife, Amanda, the apartment they moved into to make room for their wedding gifts. He reminisces about Amanda, and remembers her as a pretentious, social climbing young woman with materialistic aspirations. Her work as a model now symbolizes for him the shallowness of her intellectual life.

He considers writing, feeling that his sense of suffering would theoretically make for the stuff of great art.

"You have always wanted to be a writer...you went to parties with writers, cultivated a writerly persona. You wanted to be Dylan Thomas without the paunch, F. Scott Fitzgerald without the crack-up. You wanted to skip over the dull grind of actual creation...you wanted to go out. Amanda was the fashion model and you worked for the famous magazine. People were happy to meet you and invite you to their parties."

He sits down and tries to write a story explaining Amanda and their relationship, but finds he cannot do it. While in the midst of this attempt, his doorbell buzzes and he lets his friend Tad Allagash up to the apartment. Tad searches the apartment for cocaine and ends up licking the dust off a mirror hanging on the wall. He sees that the narrator is trying to write a story and advises him to use his wife's absence as a lure to seduce young women by inventing a fictional untimely death for her. After telephoning around to acquaintances that might have drugs to share, they head out to a nightclub, Odeon, another staple of the Manhattan dance club scene of the 1980s.

Inside Odeon, Allagash runs into a model from Amanda's agency that he knows. The narrator sits at the end of the bar and nurses a drink. Allagash approaches with the model and her friend and introduces them to the narrator. While introducing them, he invents a story about Amanda's death at the hands of terrorists in France and then excuses himself. The narrator entertains the two young women with stories about the importance of his job at the New Yorker, but finds he is tiring of the false posturing this entails.

He wonders in an aside about the roots of this need he has to please others, and believes that it comes from having moved around often as a child because of his father's lucrative corporate positions. Having often been the new child in a new school and having grown up feeling like an outsider has burdened him with an intense desire to belong and a fear of being excluded.

Then Tad, the narrator, and the two girls share some cocaine in a bathroom stall and leave for the next club, Heartbreak, a short taxicab ride away. Outside Heartbreak, a crowd of outer borough denizens waits to be let inside. Allagash speaks to the bouncers and the four are ushered magically past the gaping crowd. Inside, a group of people is discussing a new edition of Vanity Fair, the magazine. The narrator runs into an old college friend who is involved in international banking and in securing loans to corrupt South American military regimes. The narrator, in an attempt to brush off this undesirable person with ties to the ugly side of American power and wealth, invents a story of having married a social activist who has died recently in prison in her South American home country. The tale succeeds in scaring the old friend away, and he is not seen again.

Allagash and one of the girls disappear. The narrator goes searching and finds the two girls "engaged in an unnatural act" in the ladies' bathroom. Put off again by his inability to find any sort of satisfaction or emotional connection, he leaves for home.

Chapter Three, The Utility of Fiction Analysis

McInerney succeeds in finding comic elements in his character's inability to break out of the rut he is in. He seems to imply that in this sort of hell, the utilities of fiction, i.e. the ability to invent, can at least provide some advantages, although their worth is certainly dubious at best, and may do more to harm the narrator's chances of reforming himself and making himself into the person he desires to be. In this way, fiction is a double-edged sword, capable of providing a lift, but also in the end, weakening by its falsehoods.

McInerney again sounds the theme of insiders and outsiders in the social universe of New York City, with the presence of the crowds of people trying to get into the club, and the sanctioned insiders enjoying the pleasures of the establishment. The utility of fiction may also have a role in providing access to the inner sanctum, with the implied message: that successful social habits in this world entail an ability to fit the facts to one's own purposes. The narrator, McInerney's mouthpiece, does not make any moral judgments, accepting that this is the way things work, but his guilt seems to manifest in his attitude towards the old college friend and the story he makes up about his wife, the activist.

Chapter Four, A Womb With a View

Chapter Four, A Womb With a View Summary

The narrator dreams about the Coma Baby, a character from a New York Post story, and is awakened from his nightmare by a telephone call from Megan Avery, his co-worker, who does not want him to be late again. He dresses and leaves for work in a semi-awake state.

On the subway, he observes some Hasidic men, Orthodox Jews from Brooklyn, and contrasts the solidity of their worldview and religion with his own feelings of worthlessness and emptiness. There are also West Indian Rastafarian men traveling on the train. The narrator feels like he must be the only person in the public transport system that does not belong to an identifiable group.

Back at work, he enjoys light repartee with his colleagues and works during the morning verifying facts on a short piece about the annual meeting of the Polar Explorers. However, he finds himself unable to enjoy the work or the conversation with the others in his department about their respective articles.

"All of this should be wonderfully diverting, yet there is a forced quality to your laughter. You find it hard to listen to what other people are saying, or to understand the words of the article on which you are ostensibly working."

When he discovers that Clara Tillinghast is sick and unable to come into work in the morning, he feels a momentary surge of optimism and thinks of doing more work on the French election piece.

He goes out for a break and runs into Alex Hardy, a fiction editor from the magazine who has read some of his stories. Hardy takes him out for lunch to a steakhouse and reminisces about the old days on the magazine. He also offers him advice about fiction, to learn how to write about the business world, believing that fiction writing is a dead-end. They both are drunk with several martinis by the end of lunch and say goodbye on the sidewalk.

The narrator is approached by a man selling a ferret on the sidewalk and then walks across town. He observes more Hasidic men walking up and down the street, going about their business in a focused manner, and reads the sign on a bookstore, the Gotham Book Mart, "Wise Men Fish Here."

On Fifth Avenue, he stops in front of a storefront window at Saks Fifth Avenue to look at a mannequin modeled on his ex-wife and tries to remember if that is how she really looked.

Chapter Four, A Womb With a View Analysis

The dream about the Coma Baby represents the narrator's refusal to enter the adult world of responsibility and pain and loss. He instead chooses to remain in a Peter Pan land of fantasy and pleasure, reflected also in his desire of becoming a famous fiction writer, choosing to excel in a form that by definition entails an escape from the limitations of reality. Having staked himself to such a dream, he refuses to acknowledge the need of having to keep a job, and instead escapes into the New York nightlife. He gains access into some privileged sector, by dint of his alliance with Tad Allagash, and perhaps his clothes and demeanor, in which he can at least try to be someone that he is really not.

The Hasidic men on the subway and on the street, along with the Rastafarians, are representatives of a religious world view that affords them certainty and stability, "a perfect economy of belief in which pain and loss are explained in terms of a transcendental balance sheet," in the narrator's self-pitying words. He feels his own pain must cut deeper somehow, and of course, it does, for him.

This theme, of an essential impossibility of knowing the "other", here becomes apparent. Each person is locked in a prison of his own personality and experience, for McInerney. This alienating, inflexible sort of universe extends to caste and race, so that one's belonging to the "outer borough" crowd or the "preppy" one marks one's destiny almost as ineluctably as being a Brahmin or an untouchable in Hindu society. The undertone of smug superiority and moral relativism in the guise of comedy is one of the reasons McInerney, and his publishers, Random House, encountered such hostility from the critical establishment upon the book's publication in 1984, the height of the Wall Street boom years and of Reaganomics' "greed is good" social philosophy.

The narrator's visit to the mannequin, a comic note of genius, points to the notion also of the impossibility of ever truly knowing someone else. His wife was an enigma, and here the mannequin she has left behind symbolizes her falseness in her dealings with him. As time passes, the narrator becomes unsure of who or what she truly was for him. Time will erase all traces of her beauty, as well as his memories of her. Of course, the fact that a mannequin could stand in for his memories of his wife also says something about the lack of substance in their relationship and about his emotional and moral confusion.

Chapter Five, Les Jeux Sont Faits

Chapter Five, Les Jeux Sont Faits Summary

While standing in front of the mannequin, the narrator reminisces about meeting Amanda in Kansas City, where he had gone to work as a reporter after college, (in the footsteps of the young Ernest Hemingway, who skipped college.) The writing here becomes compact and compelling, as if based, to some extent, on some real experience.

They met at a bar. Amanda worked for a florist and was excited by his Ivy League degree and his East Coast background. Her own family life was unhappy. Her stepfather was abusive. Within a week, she had moved in with him. They visited her mother just once before moving back east. His parents reacted to Amanda with kindness and charity.

"Your mother never turned away a stray dog, or heard about the plight of children in other parts of the world without volunteering her time or reaching for her checkbook, and she greeted Amanda as if she were a refugee."

After two years of living together, he proposed marriage despite being unsure of his commitment. She was working as a model, a job which at first he did not object to, because it gave them entrée to a party world they both laughed at. Amanda often seemed distant and unknowable, "looking through the walls of the apartment building halfway across the continent to the plains, as if she had forgotten something there and couldn't quite remember what it was."

Then he recalls the day she left for Paris. She cried and told him to water the plants, and a few days later called to say she was not coming back, but staying on in Europe as her modeling career was taking off there. Finally, her lawyer called and advised him to sue her for divorce on the grounds of sexual abandonment. He refused.

He has not told anyone at work, or his own father, despite the months that have gone by. He has even refused to go home for a visit, for fear of having to reveal the truth and in the hope that she will someday come back to him. He stands in front of the mannequin a little longer, still in the throes of the trauma of the betrayal, asking himself when she became a mannequin and turned false and unknowable.

Back in the office, he tries to sober up with some instant coffee and seeks out the manuscript of the French election story on Clara's desk, but she has had it sent on to the typesetters and has asked to receive a photocopy via messenger service at her apartment. The cards have been dealt, and he does not know whether he is unhappy or relieved.

However, when Megan reminds him that he promised to bring her back a bagel for lunch, he suffers a minor breakdown, confessing that he forgot her request again and begging her forgiveness. She, along with his other co-workers, advises him to relax.

Chapter Five, Les Jeux Sont Faits Analysis

The relationship between Amanda and the narrator represents the social geography of insider and outsider, with the narrator seeking the beauty and freshness of the agricultural, iconic American Middle West, and Amanda craving an escape from her unhappy, trailer park roots in the security and status of the suburban, Ivy League East Coast. The impossibility of trying to bridge the social chasm between these two worlds also echoes McInerney's vision of class and caste affiliations as ultimately defining.

Another idea implicit here is the notion of stereotypes vs. reality, with both the narrator and Amanda carrying around images of culture and identity based on advertising, pop culture and folklore rather than on the reality of lived experience.

Chapter Six, Coma Baby Lives

Chapter Six, Coma Baby Lives Summary

Instead of going home, as his co-workers advise him, the narrator wanders down to the magazine's library and speaks with Marianne, the librarian, who is amazed that he just wants to have a conversation. They talk about old movies and the history of the magazine. Marianne recalls the exact issue that included the first four-letter vulgarity.

The narrator then goes up to an empty office and calls his wife's modeling agency and asks if she is in town, identifying himself as a photographer interested in working with her. He finds out she is booked to do a show on Thursday later that week and then calls a friend at Vogue magazine to find out the location of the show.

Back in the Department of Factual Verification, he hides in the bathroom when he sees Clara, his boss back in the office. He speaks in there with Walter Tyler, the travel editor, who also gives him some advice on writing. He then spots the Ghost, a legendary journalist who supposedly has been working on the same article for seven years, in the hallway. He leaves the building and makes his way to an Irish bar where he watches sports on television and attempts to make conversation with another patron.

It is raining when he leaves the bar. He walks downtown to a bus stop and takes a bus further downtown. The riders include a gay man with a Japanese umbrella who gets into a mild altercation with the bus driver. Back at his apartment building, the narrator discovers that he has forgotten his keys in the jacket pocket he has left at work. He asks a relative of the building superintendent to provide him a spare set of keys. On his door, he discovers a taped note from Allagash, asking him to meet a visiting female cousin at the Lion's Head, a pub frequented by writers.

He complies with the request and meets Vicky, Allagash's cousin, who turns out to be the sort of woman he has lately fantasized about, a pretty young woman of similar class background and intellectual interests as himself. They also share a secret disdain of Tad, her cousin. They spend hours walking and talking around the city.

"Standing on the corner of West Fourth Street and Seventh Avenue, you are ostensibly waiting for a cab to take Vicky back to Tad's apartment. Empty cabs keep rolling past and you and Vicky continue to talk. You have talked about work, money, Cape Cod, breakfast cereals and the Mind-Body problem. You have already written down her address and phone number in Princeton." For the first time in a long time, the narrator feels that he is happy.

Chapter Six, Coma Baby Lives Analysis

The narrator undergoes a mild breakdown at work, feeling that the foundations of his life, his marriage, his job, his health and sanity, are eroding away and that he is

powerless to fight his bad luck. Like a lost person, he circles, looking for human connection, trying various places in the offices of the New Yorker, the basement floor library, the bathrooms, to establish some human connection. Unable to stand it any longer inside, he tries the sports bar, but finds that here also he has little in common with anybody. On the bus, he establishes a level of camaraderie with the mob when they jeer at the gay man, but the gay man's parting command to the bus driver: "turn to shit," seems to sum up the narrator's feelings about his life.

However, the ties of group affiliation are working in his favor as Allagash's cousin Vicky lifts his spirits with her looks and appropriate background. "Perhaps she is the one who could make you forget your cares and woes, start eating breakfast, take up jogging." The need for human contact and love is at the root of his unhappiness, and finally he has found possible connection not in a nightclub, but through a friendship forged out of class and caste allegiance.

Chapter Seven, Pygmies, Ferrets and Dog Chow

Chapter Seven, Pygmies, Ferrets and Dog Chow Summary

The narrator wakes early, has breakfast in a diner and reports to work. His co-workers huddle around with the news that the French election piece has caused uproar in the editorial offices and he is in trouble. He is not surprised and tries to reassure them by claiming full responsibility for the errors.

"They're wondering. Could this happen to me? And you would like to reassure them, tell them it's just you. They're trying to imagine themselves in your shoes, but it would be a tough thing to do. Last night Vicky was talking about the ineffability of inner experience. She told you to imagine what it was like to be a bat. Even if you knew what sonar was and how it worked, you could never know what it feels like to have it, or what it feels like to be a small furry creature hanging upside down from the roof of a cave."

He is called into Tillinghass's office and fired after a long lecture on his failures. He retreats to the bathroom and snorts some cocaine. His co-workers advise him to fight the firing, but he seems resigned and almost relieved. He agrees to meet Megan for lunch.

Outside, he walks around the city, buys some drugs from a teenager behind the New York Public Library and wonders what to do with himself.

At midnight, he returns to the office with Allagash and a ferret they have purchased. They sign in with the night watchman as Ralph Kramden and Ed Norton, the stars of a popular 1950s television comedy, The Honeymooners. Inside Tillinghass's office, they release the ferret. The narrator is bitten on the hand and Allagash in the crotch. In the ensuing chaos, Alex Hardy, the fiction editor, knocks on the door. When they let him in, he gives them a drunken lecture on the demise of literary culture, calling the current crop of writers and editors "pygmies". When the ferret scoots out the door past him, he falls down, knocks his head and remains unconscious on the floor. The narrator places a cushion under his head and then both men flee the building.

After cleaning up their wounds back in the narrator's apartment, they head downtown in a cab. Allagash asks him about the date with Vicky, expresses surprise that it went well, but happiness that the narrator is finally getting over his failed relationship with Amanda. He explains the failure in simple terms, blaming Amanda's ambition to "get as far from red dirt and four wheel drive as she could."

Just before dawn, the narrator finds himself in another taxi with Allagash, a Jewish drug baron named Bernie, and two women. Bernie explains some of the aspects of the drug

trade; among these is the fact that anyone who learns too much is destined to end up as "dog chow." He claims the Hasidim are poised to take over the cocaine trade, at which point the conversation becomes unbearable for the narrator and he jumps out of the taxi.

Chapter Seven, Pygmies, Ferrets and Dog Chow Analysis

The narrator's belief that his co-workers could not possibly comprehend his dilemma shows how far he has fallen away from human feeling. He believes that his case is so special that it could not possibly be in their range of experience. In fact, he uses the concept of "ineffability" introduced by Vicky, to provide some faux systematic rigor to his feelings of "shabby nobility".

Ineffability means the impossibility of knowing through language, usually applied to mystical states, or "inner experience." However, ironically, the agenda of fiction has always been to somehow bridge this impossibility of knowing the "other" through words alone. Here, McInerney seems to imply that far from being an adherent of this artistic mission, the narrator in this fallen state uses fiction as just a ruse, a means of forwarding his own petty social agenda, much as he was a means for Amanda to improve her station in life.

Instead of taking up arms and using his disgrace as a means of entry to understanding, the narrator retreats to drug use behind the library, the repository of cultural wisdom which functions for him merely as a physical barrier, a surface cover for his illicit activity.

Bernie, the Jewish drug baron, represents for the narrator the forces in the world allied against his as yet undefined interests. There is a hint of Fitzgerald's work The Great Gatsby here also, with references to criminal immigrant groups taking over the economic machinery, and to the anti-Semitism and Know-nothing Nativism prevalent in earlier decades of American history.

Chapter Eight, O Couture

Chapter Eight, O Couture Summary

The narrator finds himself at the entrance to the Waldorf Astoria for the fashion show in which he hopes to see his estranged wife, Amanda. He has obtained a ticket from his friend at Vogue magazine, who owed him a favor for the time he destroyed the vintage car he had borrowed from the narrator by crashing it into a deer.

A tall woman with silver hair examines his pass while two large black men dressed as slaves stand guard inside. He makes his way to the bar and orders a drink. He steals a briefcase from a man talking to two Asian women at the bar and takes a seat in the middle of a middle row. He has plans to pose as a terrorist and pretend the briefcase conceals a bomb. He watches the models performing and makes judgments about their beauty. It is apparent that he knows a lot about the modeling business from his marriage to one. Despite his disdain for the shallowness of the modeling world, he seems to have absorbed its calculus:

"Amanda is, or was, a perfect eight: hips thirty-four, waist twenty-three, bust thirty-three. You also know her shoe, glove and ring sizes. Clara would be proud. You have all the numbers. Factoring in the cheekbones, which a photographer once described as 'neo-classical', they add up to a hundred and fifty dollars an hour."

Needing another drink, he heads back to the bar and attempts to make casual conversation with the bartender about the security arrangements for the show. He only succeeds in drawing attention to himself before going back to his seat, spilling his drink on people as he makes his way back to it.

He sees Amanda, but he is not sure if it is really her. He realizes again he does not remember accurately what she looked like. The next time he sees the model he believes to be his wife, he stands and attempts to call out her name. She stares at him with a look that carries no easily understood meaning, and turns away.

In the ruckus, security guards approach him and escort him out of the building. He imagines the men to be robots, as they speak into the microphones attached to their sleeves. Outside, the pedestrian world continues as if nothing had happened. The narrator has a premonition of the insignificance of his life and work.

Chapter Eight, O Couture Analysis

The fashion show brings together people of dubious ethnic origin, the black costumed slaves, the tall woman with strange facial features examining his ticket, and the Asian women at the bar. Here, the rabble of the world's multifarious tribes have allied themselves with the glitzy world of high fashion so that the narrator's contempt for shallow material values is joined by his fear of the "other", all under one roof.

It is the heart of his particular darkness is the love of his life, Amanda, who has turned out to be a mirage. He cannot even remember what she looks like, although he has all the facts that describe her surface appearance at his disposal.

Here are the roots of this nightmare: the narrator keeps bad faith with himself. He claims to despise the reality of empirical facts, yet it is at bottom what he hangs onto about his wife - her shape, ring, glove and shoe size and how much money this was worth in combination with a "neo-classical" bone structure. There is little mention of the destructive power of such a determination of human worth, only that the narrator has been victimized by it.

Expecting to find some fitting conclusion to the relationship, some justice, retribution and perhaps even reconciliation, he ends up with nothing but the certainty that he is incapable of changing his fate. Words, imagination, the powers of fiction or improvisation are unable to bridge the differences between people in this narrative.

Chapter Nine, Linguine and Sympathy

Chapter Nine, Linguine and Sympathy Summary

In the evening, the narrator returns to the offices of the New Yorker to collect his belongings. Megan Avery is still at work. He finds some vials of cocaine in his desk and shares some cocaine with her. While he is cleaning out the rest of the contents of the drawers, Megan tells him about the after-effects of the ferret caper.

Alex Hardy has been sent to a rehabilitation center for alcoholic writers. The ferret was discovered in the mailroom, hiding in a bag full of rejected manuscripts and bit the mailman. He and Allagash are at least in the clear.

The narrator dumps the rest of the desk's contents into the trash and invites Megan to go for lunch. In the cab, Megan invites him back to her apartment to cook him a meal. They shop for the contents of the meal, linguine and clams. She tries to teach him some of the rudiments of shopping while they walk from shop to shop. The narrator reminisces again about his years living in the same neighborhood with Amanda.

Inside her apartment, he learns the details of her life. He is impressed by the reality of her troubled past, aspirations of acting, a failed marriage, an episode of manic-depression and institutionalization in Bellevue, a teenaged son who lives with her first husband in Michigan.

He examines the books on her shelves organized according to category. There is a shelf of poetry, art books, French novels, music and opera, drama scripts, and a shelf of memoirs about life at the New Yorker magazine. One of the memoirs is inscribed to Meg. There is also a self-help book, Better Exercise for Sex.

Megan changes into clothes that are casual but not provocative. She asks about Amanda, offers to help him find a new job with references and contacts, and asks about his father. The narrator answers evasively and is intent on having sex with her. She tries to calm him down, urging him to relax. He finds some Valium in her bathroom and swallows a few pills, then passes out in her bathroom.

Chapter Nine, Linguine and Sympathy Analysis

Here the narrator is offered a reprise from his nightmare in the form of a valiant and nurturing woman who has succeeded in overcoming the obstacles and disabilities in her life to build a meaningful and worthwhile existence. She offers to mentor him and heal him, but his resistance overcomes her efforts. He is not ready to accept a different and more compassionate worldview, one that does not seek an escape from human limitations in drug use or the promises of the media-inspired version of the American dream: celebrity, riches and glamour.

The home-cooked meal represents the nurture and sustenance in simple pleasures available to common people, and the books on her shelf and other aspects of her life represent the access to understanding of the "other" offered by an imaginative and empathetic interpretation of the "facts."

Chapter Ten, Sometimes a Vague Notion

Chapter Ten, Sometimes a Vague Notion Summary

The narrator wakes up in bed in Megan's apartment. She has dressed him in pajamas and left a note on the kitchen table for him to fix himself breakfast. His clothes are in the bathroom freshly cleaned and dried. He dresses and leaves a note for her saying he is sorry once again.

Back in his apartment, a journalist named Richard Fox calls, asking for information about the New Yorker. He is writing an expose and wants some gossip. The narrator refuses to give him any. He goes out for some food and the newspaper, and when he gets back he spots his brother Michael sitting on the stoop of the building. Michael stands and starts towards him. The narrator turns and runs, dodging down a subway entrance. He takes an uptown train and loses his brother on the platform.

He gets off and walks over to Saks Fifth Avenue to the mannequin of Amanda, but it is no longer there. He is unsettled by its absence, but tells himself it is a good omen. He must be over her.

He passes a construction site with posters of the missing young woman, Mary O'Brien McCann, he keeps noticing around the city. He walks up to the Plaza Hotel and reminisces about spending a night there with Amanda when they first moved to New York, fulfilling his dream of glamour and beauty. Now, looking at the limousines at the entrance to the hotel, which remind him of carrion birds, he cannot believe his dreams were once so shallow.

He remembers a previous occasion at the hotel with his family before embarking on the Queen Elizabeth cruise ship to England for his father to take up a position there. He remembers riding the elevators with his brother Michael and torturing him with tales of hardships they would have to endure in England such as not being able to use silverware. Later, he spends some time at the Metropolitan Museum in the Egyptian wing, the only exhibit he ever goes to in the museum.

In the evening, he walks over to Allagash's apartment, but he is out. Instead, he walks over to a singles bar and has a drink. In the rush of Friday night customers later that night, the narrator is approached by an under aged girl who is searching for someone with whom to share a drug purchase. Telling himself he cannot possibly be this desperate or lacking in self-respect, he goes along.

He awakes in an apartment in Queens, in the girl's bed. He asks her what happened. She informs him that she essentially "carried him home" before he passed out in her bed. He feels "ravaged" and says he needs to leave, despite her desire for him to stay and try one more time to make love. As he leaves the apartment, the girl's parents barely look up from the cartoons they are watching on television.

He gets back to his apartment in the afternoon. He is trying to sleep on the couch when a deliveryman rings the downstairs buzzer. Instead, it is his brother Michael, who pounds on his door, demanding to be let in. When he comes in, he angrily confronts the narrator. He reminds the narrator that the next day is the anniversary of their mother's death. The surviving family members plan to spread her ashes in the lake next to their house and his father wants the narrator to come home. Michael asks him where Amanda is, and the narrator tells him she is out shopping. They sit in silence for a while and then Michael again begins to berate him for not keeping in touch. The narrator asks him to shut up. They stand. The narrator attempts to leave. Michael restrains him. The narrator punches his brother as hard as he can. His brother punches him back and knocks him to the ground.

Afterwards, stretched out on the couch, the narrator tells Michael the truth about Amanda. His brother says he is sorry that she left. The narrator confesses that he misses their mother.

Chapter Ten, Sometimes a Vague Notion Analysis

The narrator's brother represents the ties of family, human limitations and an emotional life dependent on the hard reality of the past that the narrator is attempting to deny. He flees and revisits some of the haunts in the city that are comforting to him, but that also represent a vicious cycle of self-abuse.

The mannequin is no longer there. However, the narrator is torn, confused by the meaning of its absence. Again, the fact that a hollow dummy could comfort him at any time is a sign of his confused mental state.

The Plaza Hotel has associations with his former ambitions of glory and glamour that now ring hollow, but it also has ties to his family past, the first location in the city with an emotional association to a bedrock reality that actually means something to him.

However, the visit to the Metropolitan Museum represents the tug of a viciously destructive cycle. He revisits the Egyptian wing instead of branching out in new directions. This wing, with its references to Egyptian mythology, mummies and spirits, has associations with the world of night and a culture of the glorification of death and of an after world for the elite.

Returning to the bar scene, he degrades himself even further with the teenaged girl, her drug use and her amoral family. Awakening in Queens to the sound of Tweety Bird and the Saturday morning cartoons, he has sunk about as low as he can go.

The reappearance of Michael signals the return of the life buoy of family ties. His brother literally knocks some sense into him. The pain of the punch jars his conscience and allows him to confess the shame of Amanda's leaving. Once he confesses, he also opens the floodgates to painful memories of his mother.

Chapter Eleven, The Night Shift

Chapter Eleven, The Night Shift Summary

He and Michael go to the Lion's Head for dinner. They talk about the narrator's marriage to Amanda. Michael bluntly says he never liked her because she was fake. He asks if perhaps their mother's illness might have influenced the narrator's decision to marry her. The narrator recalls his intense desire to please his mother, his dread of her impending death, and the emotional shock that seemed to follow her death.

"After the funeral it seemed as if you were wandering around your own interior looking for signs of life, finding nothing but empty rooms and white walls. You kept waiting for the onset of grief. You are beginning to suspect it arrived nine months later, disguised as your response to Amanda's departure."

They drink and talk and the differences between them seem to subside. Michael offers him work with his house renovation business. They leave after many drinks. On the way home, the narrator buys a half a gram of cocaine for sixty dollars. He says he feels he is over the compulsion but he just wants to celebrate "crossing the hump."

Back in the apartment, Michael describes his memory of their mother wearing the narrator's high school ski team jacket and raking leaves. The narrator is mildly comforted by the image. He does some cocaine. Michael falls asleep.

The narrator remembers his mother's last days. He was at home and helped her with the pain, administering shots of morphine. His mother and he talked more frankly than they ever had before. In her last moments on earth, the narrator held her hand as she continued to talk before passing away.

Chapter Eleven, The Night Shift Analysis

The night shift could imply a shift in consciousness as the narrator turns again to his family in the form of his brother for comfort and strength. It also carries the meaning of work, the hard work of reconstituting a personality that the narrator seems to want to begin. Nevertheless, there is the troubling persistence of the cocaine habit, which he is not quite ready to give up on, that leaves us wondering at the depth of his sincerity. In addition, his brother Michael, with his physically imposing body and his family values, represents a vestigial Irish Catholic working class sense of morality that the narrator has always felt aloof from, and the title of the chapter could signal the bitterness of the pill he has to swallow.

His psychological analysis of his failed marriage and the emotional trauma that resulted from it, blaming respectively his mother's illness and a delayed reaction to her death, also seems a little pat and self-serving. However, the strength of his allegiance to his mother seems to play a large role in his own understanding of himself, and it is apparent

that seeing his mother die has been a source of pain that seems to have left him floundering for moral certainty.

Chapter Twelve, How It's Going

Chapter Twelve, How It's Going Summary

The apartment seems cramped to the narrator, with his brother snoring on the sofa. He finishes the gram of cocaine and is feeling the rush of euphoria when the telephone rings. It is Allagash inviting him to a party.

The narrator leaves the apartment. With little money, he first stops at an ATM machine, but it is broken. With his last five-dollar bill, he takes a cab downtown and meets Allagash leaving a nightclub with a friend who has hired a limo. They ride further downtown.

The party is held in a converted loft. The host is an heir to a fast food fortune. Like Fitzgerald's Gatsby, he is nowhere to be seen, but great crowds of people wander the palatial halls of the loft. The narrator dances with a tall blonde woman who kisses him before heading for the bathroom.

Amanda is at the party with her new boyfriend, a Mediterranean looking man. She comes over and asks the narrator "how's it going?" The question, with its banal lack of irony or even sense of shame, sends him into a paroxysm of laughter. When he recovers, she is gone. Allagash informs him that he knows that her boyfriend is a male escort and that the girl the narrator has been dancing with is actually a transvestite. Fed up with the party, the confusion of identities, and Allagash's manner, the narrator insults Allagash, saying he and Amanda would make a good couple, and leaves, wandering the party until he finds a bedroom with a free telephone. He calls Vicky and talks to her, telling her about his mother dying and about his marriage. She is confused, but she listens, and tells him to try to get some sleep and call her back.

Wandering once again in the dawn light around the World Trade Center towers, the narrator smells the bread of a bakery. He is blessed by a hobo and then begs a tattooed man on the loading dock of the bakery for bread. He is thrown a bag of rolls, which he breaks open and begins to devour.

Chapter Twelve, How It's Going Analysis

The party in the loft seems to finally represent a turning point for the narrator, who sees that for all the glitz and glamour, he will find no real and lasting satisfaction in this scene. The transvestite is an obvious symbol of confused identity and lack of moral boundaries.

Having left this scene of empty confusion, the narrator wanders the streets in the light of a new day. The hobo blesses and forgives the narrator's sins, offering him absolution before he turns to bread, the staff of life, rejecting his wanton past.

Characters

The Narrator

Never identified by name, the narrator is the main character of this, his own, story. He shares many of the characteristics and background attributes of the writer, Jay McInerney. He is a young man, twenty-four years old, intelligent, physically average, who is the product of a typical upper-middle class, East Coast suburban upbringing and an elite, liberal arts education. We meet him in the throes of the breakup of his first marriage, suffering also from the shock of his mother's death and the seemingly impossible goal of ever becoming a fiction writer, which has always been his dream. He has fallen under the sway of a clubbing, cocaine snorting lifestyle and especially of a friend, Tad Allagash, who seems to embody this lifestyle. Therefore, he finds it difficult to hold onto his job at a prestigious Manhattan magazine, much less build an identity for himself independent of his family and his glamorous wife. He suffers from the moral confusion of the age, seeking escape and ultimate freedom in an empty world of glitzy downtown nightclubs, casual sex and drug-induced euphoria, but also finds simple pleasures in reading, listening to music and walking around the city observing people and places. His default voice is one of an ironic, educated, funny man, but he sometimes seems less than genuine when it comes to expressing emotional depth or describing how he really feels about people. Notions of status and class obsess him, although he also suffers guilt because of the way he has cut off ties with his remaining family in the suburbs of New York City, two hours away by car, especially in the last year after his mother's death.

Amanda

Amanda is the narrator's wife, of about the same age, but sharply contrasting background. She is a statuesque beauty with innocent blue eyes, corn silk hair, perfect facial features and a Midwestern directness and lack of intellectual pretensions. Her family is poor, rural, with divorced parents and an abusive, rarely present stepfather. Her mother is cold, chain-smoking, lacking in maternal care for her daughter. She has never really known love. She is not college educated. She is working in a florist shop when she first meets the narrator in Kansas City. She is also ambitious, and her job as a model becomes her ticket to a better life, even more so, eventually, than her marriage to the narrator. Her lack of definable attributes becomes for the narrator her most dominant feature, as he finds it harder and harder to remember what she looked like or to decide what she was really like as a person. In short, she is a female enigma.

Tad Allagash

Tad Allagash is the narrator's friend and guide to the nightlife of downtown New York. Of roughly the same age and background as the narrator, he is also a member of an elite

and well-connected cadre of young clubbing professionals. He works in advertising. As a white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant, he also is a representative of a dying breed of Americans who resent the inroads on their power of other immigrant groups. His main motivation in life is the pursuit of pleasure in the form of parties. However, he also has extreme recall of people and faces, a mark of an ambitious and successful networker. He is status conscious and deeply aware of social class. He seems to care for the narrator, but it is also apparent that his main concern is for his own welfare.

Vicky

Vicky is Tad Allagash's cousin, whom the narrator meets on a blind date, set up by Allagash so that he would not have to take care of her while she was in the city. She is a graduate philosophy student at Princeton, pretty, with strawberry blonde hair and an intelligent face. Her voice is seductive and raspy. She is funny and caring. She grew up in Marblehead, Massachusetts, with three sisters to match the narrator's three brothers. She expresses interesting tastes in interior decoration as they stand in front of an antique store on Bleecker Street. She and the narrator talk freely for hours. She is supportive of his dislike of work. In short, she would make an ideal mate.

Megan Avery

Megan is one of the narrator's co-workers in the Department of Factual Verification. She is older, pretty, and seems bent on saving the narrator from himself. He is always forgetting to get the things she asks for when he goes out on breaks, but despite his lack of attention, she shoulders his burdens and attempts to teach him how to survive in the big city. We learn that she has overcome difficulties in her life - unrequited ambitions of becoming an actress, institutionalization for manic-depressive episodes, and the loss of her only son in a custody battle to her first husband, who now lives with the boy in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan.

Yassu Wade

Yassu Wade is a co-worker in the Department of Factual Verification. He is half-Japanese. His father is an Air Force officer from Texas. He grew up on Air Force bases and was educated at Bennington College in Vermont. He is funny and hard working. He and the narrator share an irreverent sense of humor about their work, but Wade does not grate on their boss, as does the narrator. In fact, he is one of her favorites. His sexual orientation is impossible to decipher.

Rittenhouse

Rittenhouse is also a co-worker of the narrator's in the Department of Factual Verification. A middle-aged, fourteen-year veteran of fact checking, his personality is meek to the point of near invisibility. He watches every word and qualifies his

statements to cover himself for potential inaccuracies. He is the boss's favorite worker in the department.

Clara Tillinghass

Clara Tillinghass is the head of the Department of Factual Verification. She is an older, middle-aged woman with a hard-edged face, sharp nose and mean, bright eyes. She has it in for the narrator for his sloppy work habits.

Alex Hardy

Alex Hardy is a fiction editor at the magazine who has read some of the narrator's submissions and has taken something of an interest in him. He is tall, alcoholic and elderly. He believes the writers of today are of little value compared to the giants of twentieth century American literature, many of which have been published in the pages of the magazine, understood to be the New Yorker.

Michael

Michael is the narrator's brother. He is family oriented and physically strong, with a business renovating houses. He is loyal, hard working and possessed of moral certitude. In short, he is the opposite of his brother. He wears work boots. He is a year younger, but has appropriated the role of elder sibling. He is offended by the narrator's personal lapses.

Objects/Places

The Department of Factual Verification

The Department of Factual Verification is where the narrator works. He describes it as an open office with desks, like a "locker room for a chess team." The office of the magazine itself, the New Yorker, occupies two floors of a building in midtown Manhattan.

Odeon

Odeon is a seminal nightclub of 1980s downtown New York, and the scene of much of the nighttime activity in the book, along with other clubs such as Heartbreak and Lizard Lounge. The clubs are frequented by men and women intent on dancing and taking drugs, many times in the bathrooms.

Bolivian Marching Powder

The Bolivian Marching Powder is the nickname used by the narrator to identify cocaine, the stimulant of choice for many of the nightclub people in the book.

New York Post

The New York Post is a New York City tabloid whose sensational headlines often make comic reading and provide a backdrop for much of the action. One of the stories in the paper, the Coma Baby story, is made reference to several times.

The Plaza Hotel

The Plaza Hotel is a luxury hotel in midtown Manhattan next to Central Park. The hotel is for the narrator the epitome of luxury and glamour in the city.

The Lion's Head

The Lion's Head is a pub in lower Manhattan, often frequented by writers, especially of the Beat generation. It is the scene of several rendezvous in the story.

Ivy League

The Ivy League is a grouping of elite Eastern universities, which functions as a place and also as a mindset, signifying the status and security of East Coast, establishment society.

Watch

The narrator lacks a watch, and he buys himself an imitation luxury Cartier watch that falls apart after several hours.

Ferret

The narrator and his friend plant a live ferret in the magazine offices as revenge for the narrator's firing.

Mannequin

A mannequin, cast by the narrator's wife just before she abandoned him, stands in a Saks Fifth Avenue store window. He visits it several times to remind himself of her.

Social Sensitivity

Bright Lights, Big City is narrated by a night-weary member of the Manhattan elite who openly describes the seductive lifestyle associated with upper-class drug abuse. One is invited to join this youthful narrator in a fastpaced tour of private cocaine parties, rapid sexual encounters, and an absurd confrontation with a bald, tattooed lady who beckons from a smoke-filled nightclub. In each instance, the narra tor relates these uncommon events in a glib, shameless manner, that "matter-of-fact" tone which is at the core of the novel's controversial nature. For although most critics were amused by the evening escapades of the cocaine subculture, they were unprepared for the narrator's lack of penance for his sins. Mclnerney depicts the drug-dependent life as one of chic sophistication and comic resignation.

On the other hand, the errant narrator is subjected to a special brand of punishment which takes the form of a failed marriage, lost employment, and a nagging feeling of social alienation.

A direct cause and effect relationship between the antihero's drug habit and his inevitable downfall, however, is never concretely established. Thus, Mclnerney's casual portrayal of illicit drug activities reflects the unabashed arrogance of the 1980s cocaine elite.

Techniques

Perhaps the most outstanding feature of Bright Lights, Big City is its secondperson narrative format. Unlike the first-person narrators of more conventional novels, the central character relates his lively adventures by starting each sentence with "you" rather than "I" and remains anonymous throughout the novel. Mclnerney once admitted that he was uncertain of whether he could effectively maintain the technique throughout such a long tale. The novel had, in fact, started as a short story, which eventually became the novel's first chapter, and had then spontaneously grown. When questioned about the motive behind his use of second-person narration, Mclnerney responded that he was seriously trying to capture the "intimate you in each one of us." Indeed, it appears that his efforts have been successful, and his audiences continue to be treated to a unique reading experience largely because of this narrative innovation.

Themes

Reality versus Imagination

The narrator would rather be writing fiction than working in the Department of Factual Verification. For him, the world of material reality as signified by his job checking facts does not equal the realm of truth. He understands that fiction, with its access via the pathways of the imagination, is able at times to lead to a deeper sort of truth. This romantic notion, questioning the value of reason and utility, has led him in the story, however, into an underworld of abuse and self-destruction. He is stuck between the two modes because he has not fully developed an understanding of the uses of imagination, preferring selfish pleasure to an empathetic view of the human condition. Although he is able to voice the duality and use this theme as a means of organizing his thoughts, the understanding itself has not passed through lived experience into a sort of emotional wisdom, instead it has become stuck in a cerebral, ironic mode. It is apparent that he does not trust the uses of the imagination. Living in an age of extreme reason and efficiency, i.e. the Ronald Reagan era and laissez faire capitalistic ideology, it is difficult for the narrator to maintain and practice an empathetic approach to understanding. In this way, the book can be understood as a social critique from the point of view of an apprentice American artist pursuing a solitary mode of expression. The tension between night and day, his job and his after-hours pursuit of pleasure through a drug-induced, altered state of consciousness is the clearest statement in the book of this theme, the difficulty of accessing the imagination in a sterile world. However, other aspects of the duality could include the surface, physical appearance of people and their interior states, as reflected in his knowledge of his wife's dimensions but not her motivations.

Ineffability of Experience/Impossibility of Solidarity

A corollary to the above is the idea explicitly stated by Vicky, the Princeton graduate student in philosophy, that human interiors are essentially unknowable. It is an extension of the materialistic ethos of the age, that reason and verifiable reality are our only lights. Therefore, spiritual dimensions beyond the dualities of existence, of which our sense of human solidarity and brotherhood is one, as they can only be taken on faith, can never be understood. In the story, this idea becomes a bedrock article of understanding, underpinning the notions of class and caste divisions, even the social geography of the city itself. East Side and West Side can never meet in Midtown in this view. In the same way, men can never truly understand women, nor can blacks and whites, Christians and Jews, rich and poor ever interact except out of a shared mistrust and sense of self-preservation.

Moral Certainty versus Moral Relativism

With the breakup of his marriage and the death of his mother, the narrator flounders in an unsteady world with no known boundaries of behavior, sexuality or pleasure seeking. He longs for a more sedate existence with healthy routines and normal, home-cooked food. What he really longs for is the moral certainty of a world that no longer exists. It's the world his parents grew up in, where family, work and faith formed a trinity around which all lives revolved. There, it was understood that parents sacrificed to make better lives for their children and children were expected to bring honor to their parents. In terms of religious faith, this lost world can be seen in the references to the Hasidim and their solid certainties, and in the bakery with its bread, that symbolizes spiritual sustenance as well as home. This lost world can also still be seen in the tribalism of caste alliances with fellow preppy, establishment types, and suitable marriage partners like Vicky. It, ultimately, beckons in the form of his family, and in his memories of childhood and the powerful bonds, especially between mother and son, but also filial loyalty to his father, and solidarity with his brothers that he upholds at the end of the book. In the end, certainty is re-established as the narrator reminds us that the living owe responsibility to the dead. In this way, he renounces the moral relativism inherent in the alienated, pleasure-seeking underworld of the night.

Significant Topics

Mclnerney's generic "you" character embodies the theme of escapism in a modern-style flight from self-discovery. Through the slow debilitating effects of cocaine addiction, a nameless narrator runs from the pain of an unsatisfying existence and hides in the darkness of drug-dulled insensitivity.

At the beginning of the novel, this sadly comic character is placidly "high" on cocaine and hidden in the shadows of a dimly lit nightclub. It is nearly dawn and he is engaged in blurry conversation with a bald barhopper.

When daylight and its related sobriety threatens to appear, he quickly dons his Ray Ban sunglasses and desperately searches for one more white powder fix. Throughout the story, he repeats this drug and darkness pattern in order to allay the haunting guilt associated with a broken marriage and a dying mother. This drug-related veil also helps him at his work, where he wrestles with the boredom of an unchallenging career.

At the end of the novel, this cocaine fog is finally burned away by the bright morning sunlight and he awakens in a state of clear-eyed temperance.

In a symbolic gesture, he willingly trades his sunglasses for a piece of fresh-baked bread, similar to the kind his mother once made for him. He is thus reborn, and his flight has ended.

But regaining his former instincts and identity will involve learning "everything all over again."

Style

Point of View

The story's point of view is the second person. The narrator addresses himself as "you". This distancing device combines the intimacy of a first person narrative with the objectivity of a disinterested observer. The immediacy of the narrative is heightened by the present tense of the action. The reader watches along with the narrator with slightly bemused horror as he tells of himself undergoing real-time humiliations and tragic-comic defeats.

The distance afforded him by the use of the second person allows him the freedom to see himself through a poignant, almost tender, yet a markedly un-self pitying lens. Despite the potentially alienating effect of the second person point of view, the effect is largely comic through McInerney's deft handling of the character and his lack of self-awareness.

Setting

The setting is Manhattan in the 1980s, the era of Wall Street boom and bust, Reaganomic social and economic policies and young urban professional (yuppie) expansion into previously working class and industrial neighborhoods. The action takes place in the throbbing nightclub scene of downtown - Odeon, Heartbreak, and the Lizard Lounge, where young professionals mingle with celebrity artists, models and other "beautiful people" to dance and socialize and take cocaine. The day world is largely the world of mid-town Manhattan, a world of offices, steakhouses, Times Square, public transport, responsibility and the glare of real people with real problems and little make-up.

Language and Meaning

The language of Bright Lights, Big City is literate, hip and ironic, with references to philosophy, popular culture, movies, current events and classic American literature, particularly Fitzgerald. Like Fitzgerald, McInerney sees himself as a stylist, and his prose is deft, concise and witty. Unlike Fitzgerald, his characters operate in a comic universe where nothing really matters; therefore, no great risks are being taken. There are no real heroes, and therefore no heroism. There are no real villains, and therefore no one is really victimized. The glib surface of the language is reflective of the thematic importance of surface appearance in the lives of the main characters. At no moment does anyone break out of type and in the same way, the language is almost seamless in its concision. This work is reflective of craftsmanship, but not the artistry and instructive meaning associated with the works of Fitzgerald and other giants of modernism.

Structure

The main action of the narrative takes place over several days. This present tense account is interspersed, according to the narrator's recollections, with an account of his meeting and marriage to Amanda, and with memories of his childhood. In the end, once he has suffered a near total breakdown, the memories of his mother's final days also take a prominent place. The main action alternates between nights in the clubs and days either at work or wandering the city observing the life of ordinary people.

Quotes

"Tad's mission in life is to have more fun than anyone else in New York City, and this involves a lot of moving around, since there is always the likelihood that where you aren't is more fun than where you are. You are awed by his strict refusal to acknowledge any goal higher than the pursuit of pleasure. You want to be like that. You also think he is shallow and dangerous." Chapter 1, pg. 3

"You are a republic of voices tonight. Unfortunately that republic is Italy. All these voices waving their arms and screaming at one another. There's an ex cathedra riff coming down from the Vatican. Your body is the temple of the Lord and you have defiled it. It is, after all, Sunday morning, and as long as you have any brain cells left there will be a resonant patriarchal basso echoing down the marble vaults of your churchgoing childhood to remind you that this is the Lord's Day." Chapter 1, pg. 6

"In fact, you don't want to be in Fact. You'd much rather be in Fiction." Chapter 2, pg. 22

"When she heard you had a family crest she wanted to put it on the sterling, but you drew the line at your monograms and feared the sense of urgency in her new acquisitiveness. She seemed eager to provision you all at once for a lifetime. Then, within a year of this prenuptial buying spree, she was gone." Chapter 3, pg. 38

"You have always wanted to be a writer...you went to parties with writers, cultivated a writerly persona. You wanted to be Dylan Thomas without the paunch, F. Scott Fitzgerald without the crack-up. You wanted to skip over the dull grind of actual creation...you wanted to go out. Amanda was the fashion model and you worked for the famous magazine. People were happy to meet you and invite you to their parties." Chapter 3, pg. 40

"This man has a God and a History, a Community. He has a perfect economy of belief in which pain and loss are explained in terms of a transcendental balance sheet, in which everything works out in the end, and death is not really death. Wearing black wool all summer must seem like a small price to pay. He believes he is one of God's chosen whereas you feel like an integer in a random series of numbers." Chapter 4, pg. 57

"Your mother never turned away a stray dog, or heard about the plight of children in other parts of the world without volunteering her time or reaching for her checkbook, and she greeted Amanda as if she were a refugee." Chapter 5, pg. 72

"You both joked about the real models, the ones who developed ulcers over pimples and thought menopause set in at twenty-five. You both despised people who thought an invitation to X's birthday bash at Magique was an accomplishment equal to swimming the English Channel. But you went to X's birthday bash anyway, and while Amanda

circulated you snorted some of X's very good friend's private stash of pink, Peruvian flake in the upstairs lounge." Chapter 5, pg. 74

"Standing on the corner of West Fourth Street and Seventh Avenue, you are ostensibly waiting for a cab to take Vicky back to Tad's apartment. Empty cabs keep rolling past and you and Vicky continue to talk. You have talked about work, money, Cape Cod, breakfast cereals and the Mind-Body problem. You have already written down her address and phone number in Princeton." Chapter 6, pg. 97

"They're wondering. Could this happen to me? And you would like to reassure them, tell them it's just you. They're trying to imagine themselves in your shoes, but it would be a tough thing to do. Last night Vicky was talking about the ineffability of inner experience. She told you to imagine what it was like to be a bat. Even if you knew what sonar was and how it worked, you could never know what it feels like to have it, or what it feels like to be a small furry creature hanging upside down from the roof of a cave." Chapter 7, pg. 101

"Amanda is, or was, a perfect eight: hips thirty-four, waist twenty-three, bust thirty-three. You also know her shoe, glove and ring sizes. Clara would be proud. You have all the numbers. Factoring in the cheekbones, which a photographer once described as 'neo-classical', they add up to a hundred and fifty dollars an hour." Chapter 8, pg. 122

"After the funeral it seemed as if you were wandering around your own interior looking for signs of life, finding nothing but empty rooms and white walls. You kept waiting for the onset of grief. You are beginning to suspect it arrived nine months later, disguised as your response to Amanda's departure." Chapter 11, pg. 162

Adaptations

Bright Lights, Big City was adapted for the screen in 1988 by Mclnerney and director James Bridges. Critical reception of the film was mixed. Although some critics found Michael J. Fox's depiction of the book's unnamed narrator (in the film called Jamie) moving and well-acted, other critics decried the loss of the novel's quirky second person narration.

Key Questions

Mclnerney's work is strongly realistic, drawn from observed life. Because of this, it is important not to allow the details to obscure the story he has to tell. General questions for group discussions might concern Mclnerney's use (or overuse) of real-life details in his work, his depiction of the seamy underside of the bright life, and his use of the theme of redemption.

1. Mclnerney's use of a second-person "you" narration in the novel is considered one of the book's most interesting features. What effect does this way of telling a story have on you as a reader?

2. What comments does Mclnerney seem to be making in Bright Lights, Big City about relationships in the modern world?

3. What thematic purpose does the use of newspaper headlines serve?

4. What role does Amanda serve in Bright Lights, Big City7 Is her characterization consistent throughout?

5. Does the narrator's sense of distance from himself and his feelings seem psychologically accurate? What has caused this in him?

6. Mclnerney's use of humor in the novel has been lauded even by critics who didn't like the book. Where does Mclnerney find humor and how does he use it in the novel?

7. The narrator is employed as a fact-checker for a magazine which closely resembles The New Yorker. How does Mclnerney use this occupation to advance plot, themes, and characterization?

8. What does Mclnerney seem to be saying about substance abuse and its place in American society?

9. As a work of literary realism, Bright Lights, Big City may be read as a cultural document as well as a literary work. What significant details do we learn about the world Mclnerney writes about?

10. Does Mclnerney's depiction of women and their thoughts and feelings in this book seem realistic? Why or why not?

11. The end of the novel has been seen by some critics as masterful and some as farcical. How do you read the action of the narrator eating warm bread?

Topics for Discussion

Discuss the tension between duty and pleasure in the story and the way this tension manifests itself. What is the narrator's attitude towards the working world?

Discuss the role of urban geography in the symbolic structure of the story. Compare and contrast the significance of uptown vs. downtown, Manhattan vs. New Jersey/the outer boroughs.

Explain the role of gender in the story. How do sexual stereotypes and identities reflect the narrator's development? What is his view of marriage?

Discuss the role of ethnicity and group identity in the story. What does McInerney suggest about the possibilities of solidarity and a shared urban existence in a multicultural universe?

Compare the roles of fact and fiction in the story. How does the duality between the two manifest itself in the narrator's life?

What is the role of faith in the narrator's life? What is his attitude towards religion? What is his attitude towards the spiritual dimension of life?

How does the narrator react to death? Discuss the tension between life and death, the world of daylight and work and the underworld of nightclubs and drug abuse.

Literary Precedents

Upon publication, reviewers were quick to recognize basic similarities between Bright Lights, Big City and earlier pop-culture classics. For example, Mclnerney's central "you" character who took pride in his rowdy cocaine adventures is comparable to the errant youths in The Bushwacked Piano (Thomas McGuane, 1971). In the same literary vein, Bright Lights, Big City was also referred to as the Catcher in the Rye (J. D. Salinger, 1951) of the 1980s because it echoed the desperate and pathetic tone of Holden Caulfield's adolescent search for identity.

Related Titles

Like Bright Lights, Big City, Story of My Life (1988) is narrated by an observant, witty, and jaded member of Manhattan's party elite. Alison Poole's descriptions of drug use and casual sex reflect a slice of life in the present, which the novel's epigraph describes as an age of anarchy.

Drug use constitutes one of the major pastimes of Alison's crowd, and although she knows rationally that it is dangerous, she generally gets swept along with the crowd, willing to temporarily lose herself and her problems in a line of cocaine. A recurring plot element is a card with the emergency number of a drug treatment center which is transferred from character to character. At the end of the novel when Alison comes to her senses, she finally uses the card to call for help.

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